

**Recollecting Turbulence:  
Catastrophe and Sacrifice in the *History of My Life* by Henry Darger**

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## Abstract

Recollecting Turbulence: Catastrophe and Sacrifice in the *History of My Life* by  
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This study of “The History of My Life” the 5,086 page autobiographical text by the outsider artist/author Henry Darger, uses non-linear modes of analysis, such as chaos and complexity theory, to explore the meaning of Darger’s epic narrative. Beginning with the idea that turbulence, seemingly chaotic, actually comes about as a compensatory restructuring of inadequate or unstable system dynamics, this study goes on to show that, as both influence and effect, turbulence is found at every level of Darger’s life and art, both in theme and structure. “My Life” is a prime example: an extended narrative describing a cataclysmic tornado, in which the text itself manifests turbulent properties of the storm it describes. Darger’s particular narrative “madness” is, in fact, an attempt to put turbulence into service as an alternative system of meaning, in contrast to failed social and religious systems of which he was the product. Henry Darger’s work provides us with the challenge of exploring new ways of finding meaning in narrative. This study uses traditional literary criticism coupled with a pattern analysis of redundancy to explore some of Darger’s primary themes.

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## **0.0 Introduction: The Mystery of the Refusing Text**

The artist and author Henry Darger has become world renowned as the iconic or quintessential “outsider” artist. His story by now is well known. After a childhood spent in institutions, he spent his adult years working in various menial jobs in hospitals, living in the same room on Chicago’s north side for nearly forty years. Upon his death it was discovered that he had produced large quantities of striking and often disturbing artwork, as well as several large manuscripts. These include diaries, journals, weather journals, books of notes, and what we will refer to as the three “literary” manuscripts: the 15,000 page “masterpiece,” *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; Further Adventures of the Vivian Girls: Chicago Crazy House*; and an autobiography, *The History of My Life*, which is the subject of this study.

*The History of My Life (My Life)*, like all of Darger’s books, is itself something of an engaging if primitive physical presence, being formed mostly of school composition and record books of different sizes, tied together with twine in eight volumes. According to the page numbering, the entire manuscript is 5,084 pages long. In truth it is actually much longer, due to the circling repetition of page numbers. I estimate the bound texts to be about 5,500 pages with perhaps as many as two thousand additional pages in loose manuscript. This study will only deal with the bound manuscript, which is structured in six parts. It begins with forty-some pages of what might be called biblical numerology functioning as a prologue. These pages are numbered and end at page 36. The numbering in the manuscript restarts under the title *The History of My Life* by “Henry Dargarius, the Brazilian.” The first

line of text reads: “In the month of April, on the 12 in the year of 1892, of what week day I never knew as I was never told, nor did I seek the information.”

What follows is the oddly plotted, repetitive, emotionally flat tale of a strange and sometimes brutal childhood followed by an adult life of mundane work, petty encounters, and occasional reflections, which includes the witnessing of an apocalyptic monstrous tornado in extreme southern Illinois. This begins on page 206, with the words: “There is none really important thing I must write which I have forgotten.” The tornado is eventually named Sweetie Pie and her story is comprised of endless descriptions of the massive death and destruction this anthropomorphic turbulence wreaked upon central Illinois, including thousand-acre wild fires, poison clouds spreading for hundreds of miles, the massive movements of men and supplies across ravaged landscapes, the bravery and suffering of men, women and children, the trials of traitors and arsonists, the musings of philosophers and eventually the trial of Sweetie Pie herself, and throughout all this, the perpetual pondering of the mysteries of such catastrophes. Although it sounds epic and exciting, the average reader would find it, in fact, barely tolerable and hardly insightful. It develops no climax and no real conclusion, but rather fizzles out nearly six thousand pages later as inauspiciously as it had begun. We are looking at the world after a rainstorm: “Then it soon began to lighten, and the rain to deminish and at ten a.m. it ceased.”

I call this the end only because it is the end of the bound text. The actual end of the story of Sweetie Pie is inconclusive, as attested by an additional, enormous pile of what Darger scholar John M. MacGregor calls “Loose manuscript [Handwritten Pages] associated in some way (unclear) with the book *The History of My Life*.”<sup>1</sup> MacGregor writes that, in

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<sup>1</sup>. The existence of these pages is based on John MacGregor’s catalogue raisonné (*In the Realms* 666 -671). I have not seen these pages and cannot state their relationship to the overall text with any accuracy.

this section, “Page numbering is wildly erratic, with the same numbers used again and again.” And we cannot even say the tale ends here, for there is yet another box, a fragment of *The History of My Life* newsprint manuscript with page numbers running from 19489 - 19625 or 1-136, plus several loose but associated pages (*In the Realms* 670).<sup>2</sup>

The pagination is continuous across the volumes although it repeats often, circling back to previous numbers or jumping ahead. There is no relationship between volume divisions and narrative divisions. Therefore, after transcription, I have determined that the bound texts can be more usefully broken down into the following five units based on distinct breaks in the narrative material. To avoid confusion I will refer to these units as “The Prologue” and Books One through Four. These five sections break down as follows:

**The Prologue**, Biblical Citations (1–36).<sup>3</sup>

**Book One**, The Autobiography (1–206): Darger’s narrative of his own life up until the time he retires. This narration spends a lot of time on some rather trivial events and manages to avoid any major introspection or reflection on the general course of his life.

**Book Two**, The Moskoestrom (206–1809): This is Darger’s narrative of his initial encounter with the great tornado. This book begins in the voice of Henry as a young boy, although he quickly becomes an adult wielding both authority and expertise. However, the section utilizes a great many eyewitness accounts of the tornado by farmer’s, farmer’s wives, railroad engineers, etc.

**Book Three**, The Inferno (1810–2950): This book contains the narrative of the Great Wheat Field Fire. At first, the fire is thought to be a result of the tornado. It is eventually found to have been set by four arsonists for reasons of jealousy over the marriage choice of a

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<sup>2</sup> It is unclear what MacGregor means by “newsprint manuscript.”

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for the excerpted text from “The Prologue.”

farmer's wife. Much of what is described here are battle scenes, strategies, and logistics. There are also discussions of dangerous clouds of smoke and of the "smoulder," the underground fire that keeps erupting to the surface in new conflagrations. Throughout this section, Henry is an adult and a master firefighter, although numerous other voices narrate events.

**Book Four**, *Sweetie Pie* (2951–5084): The narrative returns to the story of the tornado, which soon takes the name Sweetie Pie (4158) and the anthropomorphic shape of a "strangle-headed child cloud." The section alternates between eyewitness accounts of the tornado, panel discussions, and mock trials.

Throughout this study, all references to the text will be in terms of these divisions—"The Prologue" and Books One through Four as I have designated them. However, because there is no standard transcription available, all page references will be to actual manuscript pages as numbered by Darger himself.<sup>4</sup>

Most scholars consider *My Life* as two distinct narratives, one being "The Autobiography," and the other being the tale of the tornado. They are seldom treated as a continuous unit. This study will treat the entire manuscript as a unit, including "The Prologue." Darger's intentions in this respect are open to question. We may rightly believe Darger intended to write an autobiography and simply, unbeknownst to himself, went off track. It is also possible that he may have actually witnessed such a tornado. It is very likely that he had read about such a tornado, and he may have later believed he witnessed it. He may have intended to write a fiction all along and merely began the fiction after the autobiography ended. It is true that, in his concurrent diary, he states that the story of

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<sup>4</sup> In some cases, page numbers are repeated up to four times, but those instances are rare and will not affect the reader's general sense of where in the manuscript a particular reference comes from.

Sweetie Pie is fictional. But Darger does not begin to call the tornado by the name Sweetie Pie until page 4158. It is also true that he continues to inscribe the tops of the manuscript pages, albeit erratically, with some version of the heading *History of My Life* (or *My Life History*, or *Life History*) for nearly two thousand pages. The heading does become less and less frequent until its last occurrence on page 1980, but this is better than a third of the way through the total volume of the manuscript and well into Book Three, which is the story “The Inferno.” We can conclude therefore that on some level Darger was writing the same book he had begun. Perhaps it was the change of subject matter (from tornado to fire) that caused him to drop the heading. Perhaps he simply realized at this point that he was, in fact, no longer writing the same book. It isn’t possible to determine Darger’s intention. In any case most readers would conclude by page 500 that this was no longer a strictly autobiographical narrative, simply by the exaggerated, tall-tale details of the story.

So, if it is not an autobiography, or even if by a generous stretch of the definition it is, the narrative of *My Life* is unlike anything a reader might have experienced before—a story that constantly repeats itself on various levels of narrative organization. It is also writing that seems to have no real point, other than the pleasure of the writer. This leads us to the question: What can be learned from bothering to study such a work? This is the mystery I will seek to unravel, and I use the word mystery here, a decidedly unscholarly perspective, to a purpose. Mystery is the constant subject of the narrative as well as its primary quality. It is that which is both decidedly present and yet seems to withdraw from the understanding. Mystery is the attraction we feel toward this work. Indeed all witnesses to Darger’s work in its “physicality” take from the experience a sense of mystery. MacGregor brings this up over and over again: “The unconventional appearance and form of the

bindings inspire anyone who has seen the crumbling volumes with a sense of mystery” (*In the Realms* 89); and later, “Anyone with a taste for rare and unusual manuscripts is drawn to these huge and crumbling volumes with their musty air of venerable age and mystery” (*In the Realms* 92). The study of Darger and his work itself has often been referred to as the unraveling of a mystery, not only as to its meaning, but its very existence and survival. It is the mystery of an unknown artist born in Chicago at the end of the 19th century, an unknown man who had no family, few friends, and barely any past and who unexpectedly arrives in the public consciousness out of the whirlwind of anonymous modern life. There have been many other unknown and rejected writer/artists; it is only luck (or the need of certain observers) that this one emerged to the level of visibility, which in itself might be due to various currents present in the 60s and 70s, one of these being the growing consciousness and development of the category of “Outsider Art.”

It would be easy to say here that it is the observer, the reader, or the scholar who is investing the event with mystery. Yet Darger himself is complicit in the impression, as mystery seems to be a major subject of the text. In the course of *My Life*, the word mystery appears regularly, wherever an explanation is needed—from the collapse of bridges and buildings, to the strange tangled constructions of violence, to the appearance and disappearance of human records and monuments, to the motives of men and of whirlwinds: “It was all confusion commotion forces [...] glory majesty mystery and even beauty” (3121). Heroes confront it: “At the time of the explosion I felt myself drawn into something like a strange mysterious vortex” (2825). Trials and board meetings are called to discuss it: “Inquiry among local investigators indicated that no one yet can solve the incomprehensible mystery” (3251). There are intimate dialogues between learned professors and young girls in

which mystery is the central subject. We might say that mystery levels the playing field, for here the philosopher, the scientist, and the engineer are no better equipped to deal with it than the child, the farmer, or the farmer's wife, who seem to merge in common lamentation: "The heart aches at the sight, the inconvenience and strange mystery of it all" (2969). Even that most primary character of numerous episodes—Mr. Darger himself, in his multiplying guises—cannot get a handle on it: "That is a mystery never to be solved I answered" (3110).

Here I wish to recall Darger's biblical influences. Darger was a Catholic and Catholicism is based on mystery—the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the paradox of Jesus who is fully God and fully Man—but I am referring specifically to the connection between Mystery and Apocalypse, specifically to the Apocalypse of St. John for whom "the Beast" reveals itself with the word "mystery" writ upon her forehead (*King James Bible*, Revelations 17.5). Darger was as familiar with the Bible as he was with any book, and the apocalyptic tone of *My Life* may well be a local iteration of biblical apocalypse, but it is not a prophetic vision, it does not predict anything; it is happening now as we read it, we are in it, and being in it we come to understand that it will not end. This lack of ending is a crucial feature, not just of *My Life*, but also of most of Darger's works. There is a decided tendency to refuse endings and boundaries, to glue more pages together to continue the painting, to repeat and thus continue the image, and the story, as if there were some value to be had in the endlessness. That value may well be the perpetuation (the ongoing pursuit) of the aforementioned mystery. To understand Darger the scholar needs to join him in that pursuit.

Of course, in regards to *My Life*, the words "it ceased," which end the bound book, offer no closure to the larger narrative. Indeed these words may be no more than the last

contained word before the story explodes into a storm of further possibilities. One of the questions that haunt this study, then, is the use value, scholarly or otherwise, of analyzing such a text. In a partial engagement of that question I would now like to address this lack of closure as a denial of the reader's power over the text, which might reflect a more general denial of the powers which manipulated and contained Darger most of his life. In her book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart writes that the closure of the book for the reader is the change of state from *unread* to *having been read*. The latter state may not be actual; it may be hypothetical—i.e., a possibility, an abstraction—but it provides the reader with a sense of omniscience, a sense of owning intellectually what the book contains (3-36). This is precisely what Darger denies, refusing to let his text be a “text” as we expect it. Even if one does manage to read all of it, one seems to own or know very little. In fact, the reader might feel duped, tricked, frustrated, having sought a tale never really told, a resolve never offered, an experience of “reading” never fulfilled. But then the reader may well be misguided in these expectations.<sup>5</sup>

My point here is that readability becomes a central anxiety of this text. Indeed, MacGregor has said that the book may well be “all but unreadable,” and that in fact Darger “wrote them with the knowledge that they would never be read, perhaps even by himself” (*In the Realms* 92). MacGregor gives this lack of concern for a reader a psychological spin, citing “forces at work within the author, irrational drives prompting the continuation of what had become an unpublishable, and indeed, unreadable, narrative” (*In the Realms* 92).

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<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, many well-known, even canonical texts—Kafka's novels, Pascal's *Pensées*—that are unfinished fragmentary works. The resistance to closure has by no means been strictly the province of the outsider, and in the postmodern age could be considered an accepted literary style or form.

Indeed, MacGregor may be giving voice to his own frustration, but few would argue for the pleasure and readability of any of Darger's work, even his most rabid advocates.

Of course, "unreadable" as concept can be interpreted in numerous ways. Perhaps a book is unreadable because it is written in no known language or completely in arcane symbols, such as certain Renaissance alchemical manuscripts or the 15<sup>th</sup> century Voynich Manuscript.<sup>6</sup> Such is not the case with Darger, who writes in simple, if clichéd English. With Darger, however, "unreadable" has other, possibly multiple, meanings: impossible to read or to finish reading due to its vast size; unpalatable due to disturbing or transgressive subject matter; too difficult to understand or simply too boring to read or too far from literary expectations to hold a reader's interest. If we believe the "unreadable" quality is the author's intention, then we might condemn the author's arrogance or his nerve in burdening readers with such an object. The latter is unlikely, and in any case, we cannot assume either arrogance or nerve on Darger's part. Therefore, I wish to dwell a bit further on the metaphysic of the unreadable book as an idea, which calls to mind what Terrance McKenna describes as a kind of Borgesian concept: "we don't know what it says, which always carries with it the possibility that it says something that would unhinge our concepts of things or that its real message is its unreadability" (*Archaic Revival* 181). Here we come a bit closer to Darger's writing. McKenna goes on to suggest a relationship between this metaphysical concept and the structuralist idea of a limit-text. *My Life* does, however, confuse Barthes' categories of "writerly" and "readerly" texts in being both "writerly" in its demand on the

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<sup>6</sup> In 1912, the antiquarian book dealer Wilfrid M. Voynich bought a number of medieval manuscripts from the Villa Mondorogoni near Rome. Among these was an illustrated manuscript codex of 234 pages, written in an unknown script. Voynich took the MS to the United States and started a campaign to have it deciphered. Thought to have been written approximately 1420, now, almost 100 years later, the *Voynich Manuscript* still stands as probably the most elusive puzzle in the world of cryptography. For a book-length introduction, see Kennedy and Churchill, *The Voynich Manuscript*.

reader to write it, and “readerly” in its highly redundant and seemingly slavish submission to superficial conventions.<sup>7</sup> Barthes’ categories, however, assume a responsibility on the part of the writer as to the text’s proper consumption. Darger, by contrast, assumes no such responsibility. His disregard makes us look for another kind of motive, possibly defensive, with the text as disguise, a material object behind which the author hides or eludes the reader, or in which the author dissolves, perhaps taking the reader with him,<sup>8</sup> as McKenna suggests, into a confrontation that threatens the integrity of the individual, or at least the individual’s beliefs. Reading then becomes what Foucault would have called a limit-experience in textual form. Reading, and I mean literally reading all the way through, one of Darger’s “literary” works can indeed seem like a limit-experience, albeit not so much of a terror that is transcendental or transporting (in sublime terminology) but rather of a boredom that is transcendental—transcendence through utter and endless sameness, which does not destroy subjectivity but rather reduces it to a kind of impotent confinement that offers no special privilege, no joy. Instead, the reader gazes upon an ocean of endless text and feels useless, diminished, and possibly, even ridiculous.

This brings us back to the question of what this author is trying to do, or where exactly is he coming from, which in turn brings up questions of period and genre. Darger may be closest in emotional temperament to the Victorians, such as Lewis Carroll, or a latter-day surrealist like Joseph Cornell, both of whom Darger is often compared to. He may be closest in method and outlook to the Romantic, William Blake since he combines media

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<sup>7</sup> According to Barthes, the writerly or “scriptable” text is one that defies the reader’s expectations, and causes the reader to participate in the meaning of the text, i.e., to write it along with the author. The pleasure of a readerly text is in its affirmation of expectations, but the writerly text can provide a higher experience of bliss or *jouissance*. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* and *S/Z: A Lover’s Discourse*.

<sup>8</sup> I would emphasize here that Darger’s “reader” may be an imagined or potential reader. It may also be phantasm, or, merely a rhetorical device.

and casts the mind as a psychological battleground, a place of turbulence and becoming. In fact, it is hard to deny an overwhelming romanticism to Darger's life story: the toil of the solitary genius, the posthumous discovery of the mysterious work. However, postmodernism is closer to Darger's historical moment, and more applicable as a lens by which to understand him. Darger was a near contemporary of Pynchon and DeLillo, both writers of gigantic, and to many, barely readable novels, and postmodernity may be seen in the turbulent structure of his works, in his aforementioned refusal of boundaries and endings, his meta-narrative voices, his unapologetic borrowing, his sabotage of his own meaning. It is tempting to cast these effects not as failure, but as strategy, with Darger as self-effacing, hyper-humble postmodern trickster. The trick, however, is that Darger manages whatever literary coup we attribute to him in likely ignorance, or innocence, of the literary system that gives that coup meaning. We might say he does it instinctually, or by default, from the uncorrupt and unassuming standpoint of the throwaway man of the 20th century. We might also say that postmodernity happens despite intention; it is tied to contemporary scientific field concepts and non-linearity that affect all agents operating within its influence. N. Katherine Hayles writes: "a writer does not have to be post-modernist to be affected by the field concept" (*Cosmic Web* 25).<sup>9</sup> She is here referring to the "field notion of culture, a societal matrix, which consists (in Whitehead's phrase) of a 'climate of opinion' that makes some questions interesting to pursue and renders others uninteresting or irrelevant" (*Cosmic Web* 22). This climate pervades science, literature, art, media, etc.; thus the outsider writer and the professional writer are operating in the same maelstrom. My point here is that in searching for a way to read Darger, we cannot consider him as an isolated, unaffected event;

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<sup>9</sup>. Note that Whitehead's use of the term "climates of opinion" is not restricted to postmodern usage. See Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica*.

he is part of the matrix and the current of his time, and the fact that we are paying attention to him testifies to this. Much of the interest in outsiders is partly latent romanticism and partly an outgrowth of post-modernity's crisis of narrative.

All of what I have been saying is steeped in, or at least dependent on, an implied author-agent "refusing," or "daring" someone or other, and that there is a conscious agency to the decision, and this, I think is problematic in Darger's case.<sup>10</sup> Michael Bonesteel believes that Darger foresaw a reader for his work (32).<sup>11</sup> Other scholars, MacGregor and Thévoz, are less sure. MacGregor states: "Given his intense isolation, it may be that his reader had become a split-off portion of his own psyche, a second self with whom he carried on dialogues, shared his ideas and discoveries, and occasionally made jokes" (*In the Realms* 97). Thévoz believes that Darger effectively hid his work from any audience. In "The Strange Hell of Beauty. . . ." he writes that in reading or appreciating Darger, we are "rummaging around in the bedroom of a dead man, a man who seems to have done everything he could to protect himself from our intrusion" (15); thus we, the audience are in fact "committing an indiscretion" (16), looking at work intended for private consumption as if "through a keyhole" (21). This is supported in part by the fact that, as Thévoz points out, the work provides no instructions for its use (15). In fact, a large part of the perplexity we feel in front of this work is determined by our need or desire to make something out of it. Part of it is our doubt that doing so is a worthwhile project. After all, the man did not present his paintings for studio visits from gallery directors, and he did not send out manuscripts or even queries to potential publishers. Darger's radical "refusal," as I have framed it, his

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<sup>10</sup>. The status of authorial intention has been a subject of debate in literary criticism for quite some time, and is in no way a question related solely to Darger or to "outsider" authors.

<sup>11</sup>. Bonesteel bases this on Darger's relation to his landlord, whom he believes Darger entrusted his work to after death; that perhaps the landlord was the only intended reader.

difficulty as an artist, is very likely *nothing but* the anxiety of his interpreters (and I include myself here). This is not to say that Darger has no intention, only that it may not coincide with that of any hypothetical reader. Darger's refusal may be his own self-serving or self-servicing narrative technology, a process that needs no witness. There may be a perverse element to it, but that perversity is as much ours as his; it is our "peeping" interest that discovers it. The scholar in me argues that I am simply trying to understand why it stimulates me. I am drawn repeatedly into its paradoxes, its difficulties, its strangeness, the accumulation of its flaws, its perversion and its piety, as if into a vor/text, a well of attraction which may signal as much my own doubts as it does the author's designs. MacGregor says of Darger's prose: it "draws the helpless reader ever deeper into its labyrinthine densities and curiously unemotional riches" (*In the Realms* 888). This suggestion of scholarly sacrifice leads me to add this quote from Poe's narrator in the "Descent into The Maelstrom": "I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make" (135).

But I want to end this introduction in the physical world, where literature and consciousness intertwine and where we might find a reason to study a book like Darger's. I will be arguing along the lines of Alexander Argyros that literature, whose relevance may today seem faded, can be reinvigorated if critical theory begins to include a good measure of natural and anthropological knowledge. Contemporary deconstructive literary theory has already taken steps down that path, "borrowing from a certain interpretation of recent scientific discoveries to found and legitimize a view of art as a proliferating web of undecidable semiotic effects," and he goes on to claim that the textuality of artistic and

literary production has now been generalized to mean “the textuality of everything” (“Deconstruction” 34), and, conversely, we might add, the everythingness of textuality.

Argyros is one critic who is willing to highlight this relationship between the elements of literature and the elements of what we call the “natural” world. He writes:

Even at its own, largely cultural level, literature is a microcosmic representation of the natural hierarchy out of which it emerged. It is after all composed of fundamental particles (words, phonemes, graphemes, traces, marks of whatever one chooses to postulate as the microstructure of literature) whose subsequent organization yields a stratification of increasing complexity and self-reference. (“Deconstruction” 36)

Darger’s unemotional textuality might be said to reflect unemotional nature—it rolls on and on, going nowhere—and yet in it we can see the occasional organization of passages of interest, forays toward passion or big ideas, or again the great whirlwind of mystery.

And so to end this introduction I return to the realm of mystery. Inasmuch as I have claimed it is a central obsession or focus of Darger’s tale, it is also true that he never does present any resolution. In all the various tribulations, at the end of all the questions and explanations, there is nothing to conclude: “The verdict of guilty ~~to~~ against the tornado does not allow us to ~~convict~~ convict the tornado, and it does not solve the mystery. It cannot never be solved” (4162). Before this vortex and its effects, humanity stands stupefied, not even stupefied really, but rather emptied of humanity, reduced to the cartoonish and infinitely repeated rendering of clichés. If there is any sublimity to such apocalypse, it is manifest in failure, i.e., *failure as sublimity*,<sup>12</sup> a sublime lack of control over the indifferent mathematical proliferation of description that overflows normal psychic yearnings, and by which Darger, in placing the puny human into this vast oceanic landscape, diminishes both

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<sup>12</sup> The sublime experience is of course rooted in a type of failure, an inadequacy to apprehend that causes the reconfiguration of the subject in an enhanced compensatory manner.

himself and us. It is a sublimity that also, oddly, allows us to grant the unknown *écrivain brut* a certain equivalence among the historical armies of wordsmiths, by suggesting that these marginal narratives, and by extension all narratives of all unknowns, might well be mined for their complex truths, just as those of the schooled and canonized, and perhaps with more novel results, in that their flaws, and thus the many blatantly traceable patterns of their narrative flow, have not been erased or constrained by tradition, and the connection of textuality to its initiating impulse might be more evident. We can call it outsider literature, but like all the diaries and all the novels from the fringes ever written and tossed away, something like it has existed all along, as local eddies or vortices in the stream of human narrative, and it might be specifically in these eddies and vortices that we can locate and perhaps begin to unravel the mystery of human stories.<sup>13</sup>

To this end, Chapter One will examine, first, the nature of the vortex and its relationship to chaos and turbulence, historically in literature and in science. Secondly, we will examine turbulence in modern physics, and how it becomes a system for understanding numerous types of phenomena—scientific, sociological, and textual—to ask if and how turbulence figures in the production of personal and cultural narratives. Specific to Darger, how does the figure of Sweetie Pie relate to or rise out of the turbulence of Darger’s text? Thirdly, we will discuss Darger’s project in terms of the containment of turbulence, that this containment is an acknowledgement of the turbulence that lies within the phenomenal world, and which is activated *in catastrophe*. The relationship of turbulence to catastrophe is one that Darger’s writing exploits, even if it occurs unwittingly. I will place Darger’s particular vor/text in the context of the prevalent imagery of his time and suggest that

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<sup>13</sup> The increasing availability of high-speed computer programs for digitally analyzing texts is sure to bring an important new lens to literary studies.

Darger's catastrophic obsessions are not only his own but those of the culture at large, making his text less a personal idiosyncrasy than a private version of a public narrative, thus demonstrating the iteration, across both public and private expression, of like effects.

Chapter Two will examine some neurological arguments surrounding the emergence of the "self," and how these relate to hypothetical diagnoses and symptoms associated with Darger. The particular diagnoses I will discuss will be: physical trauma and pain, psychic trauma, autism and Asperger's Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Compulsive Hoarding, and Temporal Lobe Epilepsy and Hypergraphia. Each of these will be discussed in relationship to what I will call a "Compromised Self," or an anxiety over self-presence or self-constitution. We will look at the neurology and symptomatology of these diagnoses and ask how they might apply to Darger and how their effects might be found in his writing. I will suggest a working theory of narrative valence, meaning a measure of the facility with which neurochemical excitation within the open system of the brain creates a pressure for various behaviors, specifically those leading to communicable meaning and self-constitution. This pressure for behavior is matched by, or fit to, units of symbolic output coevolved precisely to facilitate the observational collapse that grounds the "self" in the concrete.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, I will be looking at language and narrative, with their various levels of organization—word, phrase, and story unit—in order to discuss Darger's narrative "choices" as being the result of pressures and systemic conflicts, themselves the result of self-maintenance, creating something like a textual limit cycle, or vortex that continues to collect material of high narrative valence, building and repeating the subject's idiom.

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<sup>14</sup> By observational collapse, I mean to draw an analogy between "selfhood" and the collapse of the wave function in quantum mechanics. In both cases it is the observation by a conscious observer that causes the collapse. The observer effectively creates what it is looking for.

Chapter Three will be an examination of the collection process, that is, how Darger's narrative assembles its materials, gathering them from their cultural repositories into a holding pattern at the edge of his artistic whirlpool. This collecting will be looked at as a further example of the same kind of observational collapse discussed in the previous chapter, and as an essential aspect of the vorticity, the emergent form that organizes fragmented chaos—collecting and controlling via bricolage and repetition. In the course of this discussion I will move from Darger's compulsive hoarding of material things to an examination of his textual hoarding: his well-known borrowing of narrative material from other authors—literary, historical, and journalistic—and his use of this same material in a highly redundant storytelling process that cannot end because an end would be counter to its function. MacGregor suggests that Darger cannot stop because to stop would mean death, i.e., the physical end of life. I will contrast this death with a more psychological non-existence or loss of self, which is the self as maintained by continuous collection of materials that define it, as discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>15</sup> This will lead us to the discussion of redundancy as an essential symptom of the ongoing patterning of the collected text. Redundancy is essentially the creation of order within chaos via repetition; it is the return to the previously stated, the return to the past for the purpose of tying that past to the present as a means of strengthening the present. It is a pattern of periodic reversal and as mentioned earlier, reversal is the foundational movement in the formation of vortices, of order, of knowing.<sup>16</sup> Applied to communication, redundancy is a strategy, related to flow and

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<sup>15</sup> A question arises here as to whether we are talking about something like a *fear* (of psychological death) or a compulsive mechanical system that only exists insofar as it continues to reproduce itself—i.e., that Darger as subject simply has no organized existence apart from that self-perpetuating process.

<sup>16</sup> By reversal I am referring to the local reversal within an overall flow, against that flow, which is how the vortex begins.

overflow, that brings about communicable meaning and allows that meaning to maintain itself against background noise and/or the larger movement of change.<sup>17</sup> Applied to the maintenance of the “self” redundancy can be seen as essential to how the self is structured in time by repeated narrative patterns that continually recapture the past (albeit with variation) and bind it to a fixed story. These can be evident in internal monologue, that talking-to-oneseelf that keeps events and ideas present and in play. When expressed outwardly as writing, the result can be hypergraphic repetitive texts like *The History of My Life*. I will examine the redundant structures of *My Life* to see how they mirror each other on various levels of organization, and whether or not this cross-scale similarity can be interpreted as a mark of the onset of turbulence in the narrative. Furthermore I will examine how that turbulence is controlled or contained by a structural “narrative” attractor that acts to defeat randomness, binding like elements together in a manner strengthened by redundancy.

Finally, Chapter Four of this study will examine how a redundant narrative, specifically the story of Sweetie Pie, works as an observation of turbulence that in turn, via its continuation, operates as both a self-constituting act and a redemptive act. The physicality that produces the text, the text that grounds Darger’s mind to self-conscious existence and his existence to the world, seeks to constitute within its creation the trace of a cathartic representation that envisions a remaking of the world. Here I will connect Darger’s text to Catholicism and ritual, demonstrating how *My Life* operates as an ongoing physical presentation of redemptive desire. I will frame redemption within the context of transcendence, i.e., as the movement from one state to another. In Darger’s case this movement will be from lack of agency and compromised selfhood, to agency and enhanced

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<sup>17</sup> It is also true of course that too much redundancy dilutes significance. The thing stated too often loses its meaning.

selfhood. Darger's primary means of accessing this transcendental/ redemptive vector is via the sublime (specifically the mathematical sublime) and the sacrificial production of image and text. Darger's sublime, brought about by catastrophic excess, creates a threshold event that enhances self-presence through the threat of annihilation. The sacrificial, brought about by the production of apocalyptic imagery, which is the result of a storm specifically rendered as a "strangled-child," produces the possibility of renewal, both of the culture at large, and, more importantly, of the author. Because Darger identifies his own self, his voice, with the tornado, through the metaphor of the tornado as tongue, I will make the case that he is in effect turning his own neurological and cultural constraints into a means of self-redemption. The strangling hands about the child's neck produce a flood of language, which, in its redundant excess, creates a vortex that combines both the destructive and the redemptive. Finally, I will contextualize this production as a fluid dynamic, one that is analogous to the fluid dynamics of the material world.

There already exist materialist—or hybrid-materialist—explanations of religious phenomenon. The Greek Atomist conception understands qualities, such as empathy or spiritual yearning, as intrinsic to, or we might say inscribed upon, the material particles of the soul. There is a medieval perspective that reads the physical world as the body of Christ and therefore capable of transfiguring itself via its natural material processes. More recently we find the Christian/material mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>18</sup> combining biological evolution with spiritual teleology. However, I am grounding the idea of redemption on the imbalance between animal need and self-consciousness, the latter being a social construct, and thus subject to moral authority. Self-consciousness must therefore deal with a various

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<sup>18</sup> See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Hymn of the Universe*.

and continuing awareness of what would or should be intolerable.<sup>19</sup> Concurrent with the evolution of narrative self-consciousness comes the evolution of thought patterning via narrative that serves to dissipate the moral crisis (the conflict between self-preservation and social mores) allowing individuals and cultures to continue. Reason and religion are two of these narrative mechanisms. Religious functions such as redemption, even as they are narrative phenomena, reflect natural phenomena and, if unconstrained, may well mirror the uncontrolled increase and repetition everywhere apparent in the material world. Darger's narratives are particularly raw and yet complete records of this process.

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<sup>19</sup> What I mean by the awareness of what should be intolerable is simply this: the needs and functions of the body are anathema to the "moral" functioning of society. Two examples of this incompatibility are: the need to procreate, which, in turn, causes lust, and the need to eat, which causes the killing of other living creatures. From a biblical perspective however, the latter is not morally problematic, as man is given dominion over animals.

## **1.0 Chapter One: Descent into the Vor/Text**

### **1.1 Within Its Attraction to Be Inevitably Absorbed**

The title of this chapter derives from an Edgar Allen Poe short story “Descent into the Maelstrom,” a tale told by one sailor to another about two brothers on a ship caught up in a vortex at sea, and the thoughts of these men as they face their probable doom. Henry Darger’s autobiography borrows heavily from this tale. In fact, he copies large sections of Poe’s prose, changing only character names and objects. I adapt the title here because a vortex of a different sort, a monstrous tornado, is both the over-riding metaphor and architecture of *The History of My Life*. As the author himself writes in his concurrent diary: “From Friday 1970 Till Monday 1971: Everything I did was the same, including writing a fictional story of a huge twister called ‘Sweetie Pie,’ and the unbelievable horror it did” (qtd. in Bonesteel 250).<sup>20</sup> In Book Four of *My Life* Darger’s twister/vortex takes the specifically anthropomorphic shape of a “strangle-headed child cloud.”

I went to the window and saw a vast cloud shaped like a little girls head turned sideways [...] Hand shaped clouds were attached to the neck as if strangling the child [...] The neck seemed to squeeze in, the tongue protruding more out [...] Where the tongue protruded there was a sort of coughing and half choking sound [...] at the same moment I perceived the strange almost human naked shaped body of the child-formed cloud was rapidly changing into an odd churning current [...] Even while I gazed the face seemed awfully contorted, the strange current acquired a monstrous velocity. (3160-3161)

Those who know Darger’s pictorial work will be familiar with the overwhelmingly numerous depictions of strangling hands encircling the throats of young girls. MacGregor has commented on this repeating image: “In all of his writings, from the beginning to the

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<sup>20</sup> It is likely that the date 1971 is a mistake and that Darger is merely referring to the span of the single weekend, Friday to Monday in 1970. However it is impossible to make a conclusive determination.

end of his life, Darger was obsessed with strangulation as a means of inflicting suffering and death on children. Hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of children mostly little girls are put to death in this way by the Glandelinians” (*In the Realms* 549). MacGregor, like other critics, believes Darger’s obsession with young girls to be emotionally linked with various missing females from his own life—his sister, whom he never knew, or his mother, who died in childbirth, or Elsie Paroubek, a child who was murdered in Chicago (1911) and whose story became one of Darger’s lifelong obsessions: both for the sensationalism surrounding the event and for the unresolved nature of the mystery. Specific to our discussion is the way Paroubek died: her body was eventually discovered in a Lockport drainage canal, but the prominent bruise marks on her neck indicated that strangulation and not drowning was the cause of death (MacGregor, *In the Realms*, 495-498).<sup>21</sup> Darger followed the story over the weeks of its unfolding, and he kept a newspaper photograph of Paroubek in his room. He eventually lost the photo, to his great consternation, and this loss found its way into his fiction in various ways, most significantly in the fact that a fictionalized version of the lost picture episode is one of the causes of the great war-storm in *The Realms* (Bonesteel 10-11). It is generally agreed that Paroubek appears in Darger’s fiction as Annie Aronberg, young hero of the Child Labor Revolution. It is also worth noting here that in an episode of *The Realms*, a character named General Henry Darger is being questioned about the loss of the photograph whereupon he admits to witnessing the murder of Annie Aronberg by another general in the Glandolinean army. The scene is a graphic rendering of the strangling and disembowelment of the girl: “Annie Aronberg habited in her nighties had been probably occupying her mind for some time by planning for victory, when

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<sup>21</sup>. The specific article appeared in the *Chicago Daily News*, Tuesday, May 9, 1911 (MacGregor, *In the Realms*, 495).

the brute seized her by the hair which was loose and flourishing a razor about her face [...] instantly he began to choke her, tearing her nightie to tatters, then with one determined sweep of his muscular arm he nearly severed her chest open with his razor” (qtd. in MacGregor, *In the Realms* 504). In a dramatic but untitled illustration for *The Realms*, Annie Aronberg’s head appears in the clouds being strangled by cloud-like arms. It is this image, reiterated decades later, that becomes the shape of the apocalyptic tornado Sweetie Pie, who, like Aronberg, and many other victims of the Glandolineans, is eviscerated, her belly opened, bursting in nightmare winds.

Here the vast bed of the lower cloud stretched from the neck seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting seeming to be water channels, bursting at the belly part suddenly into the most frenzied convulsions, heaving boiling hissing gyrating in gigantic and innumerable fierce vortices and all whirling and plunging on to the straight northeast ward as if gone mad, and with a rapidity that had the cloud been a mass of water, then with a speed water never assumes else where except in precipitous descents. Then to my shock the belly of the cloud section burst, like a big explosion, with a big loud ‘poop’ sound. (3568-3569)

Similar descriptions of the storm appear regularly in *My Life*, often using nearly identical language. The bursting of the storm’s belly can be read as an image conflating evisceration and birth trauma within the framework of an apocalyptic turbulence that is both psychological and social.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, Sweetie Pie is only one of many apocalyptic storms to be found throughout Darger’s *oeuvre*, both in his painting and writing. He was fascinated by violent weather all his life and the current of his imagination seems to flow in a manner perpetually drawn to scenes of violence and destruction, like the narrator on Poe’s ship at the lip of the

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<sup>22</sup> The bursting of the storm’s belly, and indeed various other references to explosions, etc., can also be related to anal fixations, defecation, etc. Darger himself makes this association when he writes: “Then to my shock the belly of the cloud section burst like a big explosion, with a big loud ‘poop’ sound” (3569).

maelstrom, to be “inevitably absorbed and carried down to the bottom” (280). This vector may be ominous, even inevitable, but Darger makes full use of it, enlisting its force as inoculation against what he may have seen as the catastrophe of the modern world—disaster against disaster, noise against noise, like against like—remaking his world in epic art and prose. Disregarding, for the time being, his troubled personal life, Darger lived through the catastrophes of the 20th century—the great depression, two world wars, the Holocaust, and the Atom Bomb. The writing of *My Life* (1968–1973), in fact, commences during the height of 60s unrest, an era that both the mainstream and the tabloid press of the day often touted as the breakdown of society.<sup>23</sup>

Because Darger lived what might be called a hermetic, isolated existence one may question his awareness of world events. However, Kiyoko Lerner, his landlord, remembers Darger as an avid newspaper reader; he read all the Chicago papers every day in both their morning and afternoon editions,<sup>24</sup> and this would indicate a fairly high awareness of current events. For all that, however, other than the occasional reference, Darger does not speak much to his contemporary history.<sup>25</sup> We know little of his opinions, desires or dislikes, and we cannot prove any actual intention to comment on current events via his work. We have only the salvaged leftovers (newspaper clippings, magazines, scrapbooks) of his life and his work to judge him by. And what he has left us are epic turbulent narratives that might best be described as a kind of 20th century millennialism, duly informed by biblical influences,

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<sup>23</sup>. The active tabloid press of the day (*The National Inquirer* and *The National Chronicle* among others) was full of sensational articles about the decay of society, due to rising crime rates, liberal sexuality, etc.

<sup>24</sup>. This fact comes from a personal interview with Kyoko Lerner, May, 2008.

<sup>25</sup>. That Darger was aware of the Depression is evident in this passage from pages 97–98 of *My Life*: “Sister Depaul even if she tried her best could not equal her. But if you even talked back to Mrs Nash youd get fired by Sister Refena. As there was then an awfully severe depression on, and it was utterly impossible to get a job with any place.”

as the artist himself suggests through his numerous references to the “end of time,” and the “Day of Judgment.” Indeed, throughout *My Life*, witnesses to the terrible destruction of the storms and fires claim that the events seem to be signs of the end of time:

Mankind is standing aghast. Were the hidden forces of fiery nature about to manifest themselves in a series of destructive assaults on the world. Is it really strange that a chill of apprehension should be felt by all who stopped to think of the disasterous possibilities? That the fearsome will ask ‘where is safty? That the superstition should ask “Is this the end of the world?” (2568)

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The deafening roar of the storm the shrieks and crying of the dying outside the flung debris and stones and dust outside broken trees being wildly flung against the building and the clouds of dust and darkness outside everywhere made it seem to me as if the end of the world had come and we were all in hell. (3320)

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The fact is that the dreaded day of Judgement as fortold in the Bible and prophetic visions of the pious could hardly impress us humans with more horror than the full extinction as in seventy five seconds of Chesterbrown by the blast and whirlwind of infernal forces. (3332)

There are numerous statements like these throughout *My Life*, but there is little contemplation as to why the apocalypse has come, or how humankind has strayed to bring this about.

I would like to point out that there is a difference between *My Life*, which Darger wrote in his later years, and his earlier writings, specifically *The Realms*. The great wars, floods, fires, and savage storms of *The Realms* were indeed part of a landscape of the war between good and evil—the Angelineans vs. the Glandolineans, freedom vs. slavery, spirit vs. flesh—and, in this landscape, Nature, like God, seems to be indifferent to the fate of humankind. In *My Life*, however, the tornado, Sweetie Pie, is separate from Mother

Nature—a rogue, disobedient child,<sup>26</sup> who wreaks destruction on a fundamentally decent world, a world that works with noble purpose: whose buildings are strongly and aesthetically constructed, whose bridges are the height of engineering skill, whose men and women are brave and inexhaustible. What this might reflect is a loss of faith in Divine Judgment that Darger suffers more and more in his later life. MacGregor believes that most of Darger’s work is in fact an expression of his lifelong war with God, an increasingly desperate spiritual crisis that grew more acute as he aged. For Darger, nature for functioned:

at least some of the time almost in opposition to, or at the very least independent of God. Darger could not conceive of a world in which the Christian God was not present and supposedly in control. His failure to exert that control, even in regard to natural events and forces, deeply puzzled Henry. This raised serious moral and religious issues in Darger’s mind, which plagued him for most of his life.” (*In the Realms*, 417)

And yet MacGregor comments later: “Henry could never really convince himself that natural law could totally replace divine will. Behind every disaster he saw the hand of God” (*In the Realms* 634). The problem for Darger was that this “hand of God” was not a helping hand—when facing catastrophe, humanity was basically alone.

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<sup>26</sup> An example of the separation of Mother Nature and the tornado can be seen in this allegorical conversation written on an unnumbered page appearing between 4720 and 4721:

Says old Mother Nature,  
 “Why Sweetie Pie how could you do this?”  
 “I couldnt help it it. I got caught between the storms and they caused my downward current to be too strong.”  
 “Im jealous of you Only my earthquakes can beat what you did”  
 “I could not help it and dont care. Be jealous if you wish”  
 “You spoiled your good name. See what you did”  
 “I couldnt help it if they were in my path. I cant control my self and could not change my course. That darn River, railroad and earthroad held me on the bee line course”  
 “Sweetie pie what made you take on the shape of a strangling child?”  
 “That I couldnt help either. Dont you like it?”  
 “Aw go on. It was the craziest thing you did.”  
 “Im not responsible. That was because I got caught between the storms. Couldnt help even myself. See you again Mother.”  
 “Bye Sweetie Pie. But hold your temper next time”  
 “Ill try mother Bye now”

But to return to the vortex, as we inevitably must—a great storm, a vortical storm like Sweetie Pie, figures this ambiguity as Darger may have felt it, and therefore it appears both as the central image of his story, but also in the fragments at the fringes. The Professor in Book Four explains that larger tornadoes are the result of smaller ones called air pockets, which act like seeds: “A miniture twister in the sky [which functions as] (a good seed for a tornado in the making)” (3352). In another passage a witness describes the main tornado forming out of smaller ones: “There long narrow streaks of cloud at length had spread out to a great distance and ~~in~~ entering into combination took unto themselves the gyratory of the subsided vortices and seemed to form the germ of something of another more vast vast” (3039). Sweetie Pie is this vast monster vortex but she also spawns numerous smaller vortices all around her. Thus the city is torn into “huge whirlpools of wreckage,” a “frenzied convulsion of horror gyrating to gigantic and innumerable vortices [...] all whirling and plunging and rushing on” (3043). Even people can seem to move along like small whirlpools, “The whole population were even practically precipitated along with the swirling wreckage of their homes spun around like tops as they swirled through the streets” (3071).

Darger attributes to this vortex/storm a power of attraction, of fascination upon those who witness it. The strange cloud, “instead of alarming the foolish people fascinated them” (3054). Later he writes: “Then the terror stricken fugitives saw the amazing tornado passing by and knew the cause of it all. The distant tornado did it by its strange attraction,” and the people “were stunned by the awful suddenness of the passing disaster and stood rooted to the ground” (3107). One witness admits:

It was like the sky was going berserk and where a fraction of a second before there had been a perfect calm, I felt myself drawn in a strange vortex and I had to brace myself firmly. Then I saw the “terror of the skies” coming with the speed of an express train rushing by and I was drawn by the force of its strange attracting condition. (3051–3052).

This attraction which so many of the witnesses feel upon watching the storm is, of course, a reflection of Darger’s own fascination with violent images and descriptions.

Darger’s attraction to vorticity results in much narrative destruction even as it seems to be the force that constructs his writing. His words are attracted to vorticity as an image and as a structure of repetition. A vortex is a self-organizing form that destroys form; it is both a problem and the answer to a problem. A vortex can indeed be seen as precisely this duality: centripetal and centrifugal force, attraction and repulsion arising at the edge of the system, or within a system in conflict with itself. “Describers of tornados claim the twister has two violent currents  $\bowtie$  one downward around the whirl, and a much stronger upward-pulling current which is called the sucker. The cooler downward current is called the controller” (3263). Later Darger compares the two currents to enemies/lovers: “The two currents became like two deadly enemies, or like two men lovers or women lovers contending over the situation” (3340).

And so inasmuch as Darger’s autobiography is invested in vorticity on various levels, this study will examine vorticity in its twin aspects: as organizing structure (stability), and as destructive force (instability), a duality imperfectly reflected in two associational frameworks: one being the metaphorical, the vortex in myth and literature, the other being the physical, or scientific, the vortex as material event in the material world. These two paths will intersect, combine, split, confuse and inter-influence each other. Our metaphors are the windows through which we begin to analyze the world and they influence our choice

of models—even our scientific models. Furthermore, as science comes to be seen as another form of narrative amongst many, the interdependence of different narrative systems presents a crisis within which metaphor and material fact are more easily confused, and more difficult to separate. And yet, for the time being, I will assume this can be done.

Metaphorically, in creation myths and in fiction, the vortex can be found at the birth of the world, and it is often associated with primal chaos and the abyss out of which the world arose. In their book, *Turbulent Mirror: An Illustrated Guide to Chaos Theory and the Science of Wholeness*, John Briggs and David Peat address the birth of the world out of primal chaos (19-21). They cite various world mythologies, such as the Babylonian Tiamat, the female face of chaos hidden within disorder and who gives birth to the universe. For this study of Darger, what is perhaps more important, is the presence of chaos in Christian myth:

At Christ's crucifixion "the earth shook and the rocks were split; and the tombs opened" as disorder threatened again to take over creation. But perhaps these rumblings of chaos were primarily meant to signal that a new order was on its way. Or perhaps God's continuing struggle with chaos is really an internal one since, from some perspective, the Christian creator *himself* is chaos as much as he is order. God is the whirlwind, the fiery destruction, the bringer of plagues and floods (Briggs and Peat 20-21).

Again I would recall Darger's thoughts on the ambiguous relationship between God and Nature—the inability or unwillingness of God to control a force that is, or should be, under his control.

In the above quotation vorticity (the whirlwind) is seen as an integral part of chaos. It is also a primary form of organization occurring within chaos. The whirlwind organizes chaos into discernable form and may also serve as the path back to chaos, and therefore a gateway from the organized world back to hell or oblivion, or, for that matter, God. In regards to this doorway function, the vortex can signify the negation of individual will

before the indifferent cosmic machinery—a theme close to Darger’s heart. To approach too close is to be drawn in; however, there may be no decision about the approach—the vortex may simply lie in our paths, or it may open before or beneath us unannounced. In this aspect it comes to symbolize the inevitability of death and decay, the return to nothingness, or the danger of forbidden knowledge and worldly temptation. But true to its dual nature, the vortex has a positive value as well—as much as it destroys, it can also transform; it can transport its captives to another and possible better existence, as it does in one of Darger’s favorite stories, *The Wizard of Oz*.

It is instructive here to examine briefly a few select instances of the history of the vortex in literature. In the Western tradition, one of the earliest occurrences of the vortex is in Homer’s *Odyssey*, wherein Odysseus is warned away from the whirlpool of Charybdis: “see that you be not there when she is sucking, for if you are, Neptune himself could not save you” (Book XII, 133-135). In 1308 we have the concentric descent of Dante’s *Inferno*, Cantos IV and V, a kind of deceptively static vortex of sin, the “Dolorous Abyss,” or frightful and seemingly featureless pit that bottoms out at Satan’s appetite, where the fallen angel chews his eternal dinner while whirling his three sets of wings like a windmill, creating a great, if impotent, storm. In the sixteenth century Shakespeare’s *Lear* tirades against the all-dominating turbulence of the sky and its (vortical) waterspouts:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
 Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!  
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!  
 Crack nature’s moulds, an germens spill at once,  
 That make ingrateful man! (*King Lear*, Act III, Scene ii).

In 1667 Milton has Satan brood at the edge of a “wilde Abyss, / The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave” (*Paradise Lost*, Book II, 910–911). Milton’s abyss, like Shakespeare’s storm, is chaos, that which forever underlies and threatens the organized world; it may not be a singular vortex per se, so much as the primal turbulence in which vortices form, dissolve and reform, where worlds are born to die. And in fact many pictorial depictions of chaos are vortical—concentric rings of clouds of undefined matter whirling around an empty center. In the nineteenth century Poe blends the natural and the supernatural in his fictional vortices. At the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), the “fierce breath of the whirlwind” sends the narrator’s brain reeling as the deep dark tarn at his feet closes silently over the fragments of the evil building (101). *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) pits a sea tossed traveler against a great whirlpool in much the same manner as “Descent into the Maelstrom.” Poe’s near contemporary Herman Melville creates similar situations both in *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849), and more famously in *Moby Dick* (1851), which ends as “concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight” (566). These examples show the vortex as a force of nature or the supernatural against which humanity must pit itself. In the twentieth century Jack London moves the vortex into the sphere of human economics. Chapter Ten of *The Iron Heel* (1908) is plainly entitled “The Vortex,” concerned as it is with the “vortex of the great world affairs,” which remain both unruly and mysterious, as the narrator proclaims: “I tell you we are on the verge of the unknown [...] Big things are happening secretly all around us. We can feel them. We do not know what they are, but they are there. The whole fabric of society is a-tremble with them” (430). The

world is unstable, and the capitalists of London's tale are those who will profit from the instability, who will "reap the whirlwind and make profit out of it" (435). Instability and an end of control are also found in Yeats's "Second Coming" (1919), in which history itself is portrayed as disintegrating in the reversed vortex of the gyre:

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,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
 Surely some revelation is at hand; (1-9)

In Yeats, the vortex, which is the sign of fragmentation and disorder, is tied to the possibility of transformation, or revelation, which is more in line with Darger's own biblical disposition.

These are admittedly only a few select instances of literary vortices, but I have purposely used only examples with which Darger himself might have been familiar. Darger repeats a specific quote from Shakespeare and makes recurring formulaic references to Dante and Milton in *My Life*, and he probably did read, or was at least familiar with some of these works.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned, he outright plagiarizes Poe's *Maelstrom*. It is also likely he

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<sup>27</sup> When Darger does refer to, or quote from, an author he does so repeatedly and always repeating the language. Here is an instance from Shakespeare which appears in slightly varied form four times in Book Four: "This tremendous convulsion of nature that produced this sweeping devastation with such marvelous swiftness vividly recalls "Shakes spheres lines: "The great Globe itself yea all which it inherits shall yet dissolve" (4304–4305).

He also repeats his Milton reference at least five times:

"As you well know know gentlemen many famous poets have set their imaginations to play in picturing the frights and horrors of hell.

I read the one of Miltons which is the greatest of them.

Reading that sent shivers up and down my back. But I believe these infernal regions and all its unspeakable horrors and terrors as he conceived them were not more hedious and appalling than what Ive heard and read of the experience of those hapless inhabitants upon whom the explosive force of that strangle childs "tongue" tore through Chesterbrown and other places like a mad savage hell of its own," (3332).

was familiar with Melville and may well have read Jack London, who was a popular author in Darger's time. London had written an article about the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and there are sections of *My Life* describing the movement of supply trains and aid wagons that are strikingly similar. I have found no evidence of a familiarity with Yeats, only that it fits Darger's vision and, in fact, MacGregor cites the "widening gyre" as an apt description of Darger's writing style.<sup>28</sup> It is, of course, not possible to know everything that Darger actually read, but he read avidly, and he was a detail-oriented and obsessive person and it is likely that if he came in contact with a text of interest he would read it, collect it, use it. Lastly, there is one iconic vortex that we know Darger was familiar with. This is the transformative tornado that initiates the story of Frank L. Baum's *Wizard of Oz* (1900). Darger owned all the Oz books, and he borrows liberally from them in all of his written works. It is possible that he even saw the 1939 film of *The Wizard of Oz*, with its frightening tornado scene.<sup>29</sup>

On the material/physical front, we return to the abyss albeit with a theory of matter to accompany the metaphor of creation. In Western philosophy, we can look first to the Greek Atomists. In the system of Epicurus (341–270 BCE) atoms originally fell through the infinite void with equal speeds (laminar flow), until one swerved by the tiniest amount. This was an uncaused event—no god, simply random accident. But this swerve caused collisions

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Some version of the following Dante reference appears four times alone in Book Four. "In all places the appalling scene beggars all description every where horrors beyond mention making the scene one fit for Dante to write about" (3066).

For further citations and references concerning Dante, Milton, see the section on 4<sup>th</sup> Order Redundancy in Chapter Two, also see Appendix H/5.

<sup>28</sup> See page 46 of this study for full MacGregor quotation. Also see *In the Realms*, 434-435.

<sup>29</sup> The film was immensely popular and its iconography became ubiquitous in American culture, and still is. The tornado scene especially might be viewed as traumatizing to children. It is worth noting as well, in relation to the tornado's transformational power, that once Dorothy is transported by the tornado to Oz, the film shifts from a rather bleak black and white to fanciful color. The huge flowers that Dorothy sees when she first opens the door of her house are similar to the flowers that populate the landscape of Darger's paintings.

and swirls of atoms to accumulate, and thus worlds were formed as matter coalesced in organized patterns. Lucretius famously elaborated on this theory in *De Rerum Natura* (1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE), where the formed winds, waters, in fact, matter itself flows torrential, bearing all atoms and bodies “in cones of whirlwind down the world” (Book I, 175). The contemporary champion of atomistic philosophy, Michel Serres, elaborates on the Lucretian cosmo-conception: “Turbulence deviates from equilibrium. And the beginning of the vortex is the minimal angle of declination” which leads to “the formation of flows, turbulent fluxions, fire [...] charged with the birth of everything and everyone” (*Hermes* 112-113). Serres uses the Lucretian term, *clinamen*, to designate the initial uncaused swerve or declination of the atom. The *clinamen* is un-locatable in time or space and thus untraceable. The seventeenth-century philosopher Rene Descartes combined atomistic thinking with a kind of determinism by picturing the cosmos as being architecturally constructed of vortices within vortices, as great as that in which the planets sweep around the Sun and as small as that of tiny, spinning globes of light, all of it turning in place in an interlocking clockwork mechanism, deterministic but changeable via future collisions. God may have imparted the initial quantity of motion, but God is absent from nature and nature is separate from God. Isaac Newton brought the notion of the clockwork universe into full scientific prominence and this paradigm held sway until it was amended by thermodynamics and quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century, when non-linear fluid dynamics and chaos theory, etc., bring us back to something resembling Greek atomism, albeit one based on scientific method. As Serres says: “Atomist physics is our own” (*Hermes*, 113).

## 1.2 Channeling Lucretius by Way of a Turbulent Venus

In the course of fluid dynamic, inter-systemic events, vortices come into existence at conflicted or failed boundaries; they are in fact a structural accommodation to that failure. For instance, laminar flow can be seen as participating in an organizational structure; atoms move forward in time without collision. The systemic/structural boundaries are established by the size of the channel, temperature, the volume and speed of flow and the physical laws that allow that flow to remain “laminar.” Any change, such as additional volume or speed, breaches those boundaries (i.e., the boundaries fail) and the system must accommodate that failure. A vortex begins in this accommodation (which includes both resistance and submission). One of the physical laws that provide the boundary to laminar flow fails, allowing the swerve to occur. The swerve, in resisting the failed boundary (be it increased speed or volume of flow), appears to reverse against that boundary, reversing its movement. New physical laws and new boundaries come into play, causing the swerve to continue to reverse on itself. This process continues to form an in-turning spiral, a vortex—a repeating pattern combining resistance with submission. However, in the chaotic model, unlike atomist or later stable state or deterministic models, vortices formed at systemic margins may drift or be transferred toward the center, where they may act to restructure the system in non-linear fashion (a feedback loop); thus the progress of the system can no longer be determined by a single-line, cause-and-effect unfolding of events. When the degree of change over time is not noticeably proportionate to the degree of input, i.e., the system changes in extraordinary and seemingly unpredictable ways given the observable input, then we say that the system may be approaching turbulence, it may be becoming chaotic. The sensitivity of the system to initial conditions (and this includes input at any point) need

not assume those conditions can be known.<sup>30</sup> It is from this non-linear chaos that creation occurs, new unpredictable forms arising out of old. Vortices are structures that define turbulent flow; they provide a degree of stability via their compensatory patterning. This is why Manuel De Landa, in *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, can make what at first might seem a contradictory statement:

Turbulent flow is made out of a hierarchy of eddies and vortices nested inside other eddies and vortices. This complicated organization is what allows a turbulent flow to maintain its pattern: it takes energy from its surroundings, channeling and dissipating it through this system of eddies. But the same processes that allow this form of internal order to emerge as if from nowhere, can cause external disorder. (*War* 8)

De Landa is describing the destructive nature of the organizing force in a fluid dynamic system. Weather is such a dynamic system. Tornados and hurricanes are born in the collision of air fronts; they are emergent forms of organization resulting in a vortex, which then causes disorder to the surrounding landscape, part of another system (biological, cultural, etc.).

Another feature of chaotic systems and turbulence is their self-similarity across scale, patterns that can be seen recurring on micro and macro levels of organization. Dynamic vorticity is one of these patterns, and if we accept the Serres/De Landa model, vorticity is perhaps the most important form of fundamental emergent order, a building block of the turbulent universe, responsible for the formation of atoms, the spiraling galaxies, hurricanes and tornadoes, the swirling of water down the bathtub drain, the whirl of smoke off the end of a cigarette, and even, in one of De Landa's formulations, the

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<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that these systems are, in fact, ultimately deterministic, but their input is highly complex and cannot be known with absolute certainty, and so these systems are not subject to prediction.

swarming of armies across the plains of history.<sup>31</sup> De Landa's analogy relating the self-similar nature of weather patterns with those of warring armies reminds us of the two prominent themes in Darger's work—apocalyptic battles and apocalyptic storms. The war/storm association is not unique to De Landa or Darger, of course; in fact it is common throughout human culture. In our present day we only need to remember the first Gulf war was called Desert Storm.

Indeed, vortical structures are to be seen everywhere in the material world and on every scale both as observable pattern and descriptive metaphor. In regards to the latter, the use of the fluid-dynamic metaphor illustrates the increasing vernacular appropriation of a scientific concept wherein chaos and turbulence serve as useful models for a wide range of disciplines, from the study of commodities markets, to patterns of poverty, to population movements, to epidemics of disease.<sup>32</sup>

I want to pay particular attention here to the use of the vortex figure in the title of a book by Rudolfo R. Llinas, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self*, for the reason that perhaps metaphor and science merge in a most fundamental way at the intersection of

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<sup>31</sup> De Landa bases his constructions of non-linear history precisely on this similarity across scale; thus he relates the turbulence of weather patterns to that of geo-political imbalances:

[T]he exquisite internal structure of turbulent weather phenomenon (hurricanes, for example) are an instance of order emerging out of chaos. But we are all familiar with the destruction that hurricanes can bring about in their surroundings. They are a form of spontaneously emerging order created at critical points in atmospheric flow, while at the same time they are a source of apparent disorder for other systems. We find a similar situation when we move (by analogy) to other forms of turbulence affecting warfare directly: the demographic turbulence produced by migrations, invasions or crusades, for example. Critical points in the growth of the urban masses are known to have played a role in triggering wars throughout modern history [... and] mathematical models of the outbreak of war have been created and they suggest that the onset of armed conflict is related (remarkably) to the onset of turbulence in a flowing liquid. (*War* 9)

<sup>32</sup> A brief search on Amazon.com turns up the titles: *Beyond the Trauma Vortex: The Media's Role in Healing Fear, Terror and Violence*; *Urban Vortex: South African City in Transition*; *Vortex City to Sustainable City: Out of the Vortex: Finding Order in Merger and Acquisition Chaos*; *Presidential Leadership: The Vortex of Power*; *The Reputation Vortex: Online Reputation Management*; *Inside the Tornado: Marketing Strategies from Silicon Valley's Cutting Edge*; *The Economics of Global Turbulence*.

neuroscience and psychology. Perpetual conflict between the regulatory electrochemistry of the brain and sensory input leads to emergent compensatory thought patterning whereby types or patterns of thinking (habitual, obsessional, logical, poetic, archetypal) can be seen as, a) systemic, and, b) basins of attraction (attractors) for precisely those electrochemical energy flows from which they arise. An attractor in systems theory is that shape or set of states of a dynamic system toward which that system tends to evolve. An attractor can be of three types: point, periodic (limit cycle), quasi-periodic (limit *tori*), or strange, depending on the number of states in play and whether a system is linear or chaotic. Strictly speaking, a truly linear system is closed, and such a system can only exist in abstract realms, such as those of mathematics. Most real physical systems are in fact non-linear and thus involve strange attractors. Recent studies in Jungian analysis have incorporated chaos as a means of integrating the physical and the psychological. Michael Conforti and John R. Van Eenwyk are both Jungian psychologists who draw a highly speculative analogy between psychological archetypes and the attractors in physical systems.<sup>33</sup> Archetypes, which we might also think of as communal metaphors or even as memes, are not limited to the locality of an individual brain; they are formed and maintained as a means of accommodating the constant interaction (conflict) of the individual with the social environment. Over time they pass from the margin (as individual instances) to the center (as formative causes), becoming integral image-based attractors of thought, projected back as causes that seem to pre-exist their creation as the result of systemic conflict. Visual mandala patterns, often fractal and vortical, are non-figurative holding patterns that, like Jungian archetypes are used to stabilize or focus turbulent thought. However, one does not need to be a Jungian to make

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<sup>33</sup> While speculative, this analogy is useful in pointing out a relationship between obsessional thought, the codification of obsessional imagery, and the formation of attracting patterns in the physical world.

this connection. In *I am a Strange Loop*, the mathematician Douglas Hofstadter posits that the self is a construction contained within the self-scaffolding “ethereal vortex of Godel’s elaborately constructed loop” (112), as it is enacted in the brain’s ideational processes. In other words, the self is both the projected goal *and* the experiential seat of an ongoing spiral feeding back into its own supposed origin. This double motion (centrifugal, centripetal) allows the result to appear to be the reason for the result, or to put it another way, the state of things becomes the reason for the state. There are as well neurologists today who also see the vortex as the structure of the illusion of self-consciousness. Llinas, for instance, in his aforementioned study *I of the Vortex*, outlines a conception of the self as a secondary quality (*qualia*) no different from other secondary qualities of the senses (tones, colors): “self is an invention of an intrinsic CNS as an attractor, a vortex without true existence other than as the common impetus of otherwise unrelated parts” (128). Dana Zohar, in *The Quantum Self*, suggests that the self is, in effect, a harmonic phenomenon created by the synchronic convergence of varied inputs (56–67). From this quantum mechanical approach we might further extrapolate that the self is perceived/maintained via the continuous quantum collapse of what we might call a widening gyre of inflating possibilities (of sensory information and interpretation) toward a central, if absent, axis, the single observer—a process that can be described as a vortex of observation creating an illusion of a self. Daniel Dennett, in *Consciousness Explained*, outlines what he calls a “pandemonium model” wherein the brain offers up to itself a vast quantity of possibilities (both as input from the senses and as intrinsic memory patterning) which are collapsed or focused upon in a continuous ongoing process of selection, *converging* on a version of reality that can never be determinate or absolute, but only approximate, and therefore, continuing: something like a vortex

(*Consciousness*, 227-253).<sup>34</sup> With each of the above theories of self-consciousness, the facilitator as well as the result of the process is narrative, which may be linguistic or pre-linguistic. Narrative is a means of fixing the collapse of consciousness upon a repeatable, readable, thread or filiation, which extends self-perception in time, connecting past, present, and predicted future. Argyros argues that self-consciousness is largely a communal creation. “The self-conscious mind, especially insofar as it is essentially communal or intersubjective, has the responsibility of participating in the actualization of virtuality into being” (“Deconstruction” 37). He believes that narrative and literature are two of the technologies by which this is accomplished. Literature, as a highly codified form of narrative, helped create human beings. “It was a tool in the precarious work of collapsing pure potential into concreteness. [It] allows human beings to collapse the free-play of an infinite set of possible modes of material, social, and intellectual being into concrete models” (“Deconstruction” 37). Both individual and communal narratives share this task of observing and maintaining identity.

The above speculative descriptions of neurological and literary processes are presented merely to demonstrate the existence of the vorticity model in various physical and “mental” phenomena as a form of organization. I will return to the neuroscience in more detail in the next chapter. My point here is to suggest how vorticity crosses scale from the atomic to the meteorological, and from the psychological to the narrative, and how it comes to obsess one man (Darger) as the primary figure or focus of his self-construction. Whether this pattern has been impressed upon, or self-organizes out of, Darger’s conflicted imagination will be part of the discussion, though I hope to show that this distinction is less

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<sup>34</sup> Note that this circling movement is “converging” on a moving, never fixed, “version of reality,” meaning that, as a system, it never returns to any previous state of itself as system.

relevant than it seems. The result is the creation (or iteration) of a vortex, within a vor/text, or more precisely, the trace of the vortex *in writing*. How do we make the leap from discussing vorticity in a fluid dynamic system to the vorticity in a text, which once written is static, a fixed object? I mean to describe the text, especially Darger's text, as the physical trace of a fluid dynamic in neurological, biological and environmental medium.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, I wish to show that the reading of such a text in some way reactivates or replicates the dynamic in the mental processes of the reader. This discussion will take place in greater detail in Chapter Four of this study.

The familiar term "stream of consciousness" metaphorically presents consciousness as a continuous current in which effects take place and dissipate. This metaphor is used in philosophical discourse as well; for instance when Dennett cites "downstream effects" (*Sweet Dreams* 100) in reference to qualia, we can easily imagine how the "stream of consciousness" overwhelmed with dissolute perceptions, organizes into "collections" and then "thoughts" and then "collections of thoughts" all of which hold a (repeating) pattern or shape for a period of time, thereby allowing for immediate reflection or revisitation and thus continuing the process of organization. What we call "thinking" amounts to locally reversing the flow of the stream of consciousness. These collections of thoughts, like vortices, may unravel when the attention moves to something else, or they may become stronger and more organized, or they may reappear later, further downstream. We can map this stream of consciousness onto a stream of water in which vortices are formed (by obstruction or by excess volume), and then hold their shape for a given time, then eventually unravel downstream. Briggs and Peat illustrate this by describing the flow of a river or stream disturbed by rain (47-49): the increased volume causes the river to flow faster and vortices

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<sup>35</sup> We might also look at a text as a dynamic process that mimetically mirrors nature's dynamics.

(limit cycles) form behind obstructions, such as rocks or logs; these vortices are stable and can remain in the same place for a long time. However, at a certain threshold of speed, the vortices detach and drift downstream spreading the rock's disturbing influence further away from its source. As the speed increases the downriver vortices start to unravel, or interpenetrate, into regions of choppy swirling water. The region beyond the initial formation of the vortex eventually develops so many degrees of freedom it is impossible to measure and the flow is said to be in a state of turbulence. The vortices are still there, only instead of a few they are innumerable, repeated on smaller and smaller scales: "The whole process en route to turbulence appears to involve endless divisions and subdivisions or bifurcations at smaller and smaller scales"; the authors then ask: "is it possible that true turbulence persists right down to the molecular level, or beyond?" (Briggs and Peat 49).

The notion of vortices within vortices ad infinitum suggests that systems close to turbulence will look similar to themselves at smaller and smaller and smaller scales—suggesting again that the strange attractor of turbulence is a mirror world of one scale reflecting another. (Briggs and Peat 49)

This is an apt if not perfect description of Darger's autobiography, for in it narrators appear within narrations repeating the same stories, and descriptions appear within descriptions repeating the same words, story units are retold within story units, and all this self-similarity, which seems to flow forward in narrative time, is often merely an increasingly detailed focus drawn upon a limited section of narrative time, a fractal self-similarity, if you will.

In addition, Darger's unemotional textuality could be said to reflect unemotional nature: it rolls on and on, going nowhere, and yet in it we can see the occasional organization of passages of interest, forays toward passion or big ideas. These ideational vortices, however, tend to lose focus or unravel as the text moves forward, never developing the "literary" or narrative resolution a reader might expect. Here I am reminded of Argyros's

description of narrative as a type of flow, as a river “characterized by an overall vector, the plot, itself composed of areas of local turbulence, eddies where time is reversed, rapids where it speeds ahead, and pools where it effectively stops” (“Narrative and Chaos,” 669). Argyros is being metaphorical, of course, and he is speaking of traditional literary narrative, one bound by rules set with the expectation of meaning. I am being less metaphorical when I say that Darger’s text is *not* bound by those rules to the same degree, and therefore if there are traces of physical laws that can be found in studying a text, Darger’s text provides a fitting place to begin the investigation. What the reader can take away from it then is what he or she would take away from studying any natural phenomenon—the wonder of the turbulent world and its mystery. For traditional narrative to function properly, that is, as a repeatable story, the vortices of the various narrative units must remain stable, in place, influencing events further downstream. In non-traditional narrative (the French *nouveau roman*, for example) such units may unravel and never appear again or they may repeat over and over again, but always to a downstream effect. In *My Life*, events or plot points form vortices in the narrative stream, and they are held for unduly long periods of narrative time—hundreds, even thousands of pages—they may unravel only to be repeated later, but the effect is non-linear—what happens at any point does not necessarily follow (in terms of narrative “rules”) from what came before, and plot elements (such as new characters, actions, descriptions or events) add nothing new to the “plot.” I will discuss the repetition of such ineffective plot elements in further detail in Chapter Four.

MacGregor has suggested that Darger’s refusal to close or finish the text of *My Life* had something to do with “a desperate attempt to fend off death” (*In the Realms* 434). However, I suggest it is less to keep death at bay than that the approach of death created in

Darger a desire for concentration, intensity, and therefore a “speeding” of textual production. By “speeding” I mean a densification of the writing process whereby the narrative collapses into itself; i.e., there is a pressure to *repeat* as opposed to *create*, a pressure to repeat the known, to redundantly *regain* the ground already gained, to keep writing without having more to say, or without stopping to reflect on what to say. This pressure leads to hypergraphic repetition and turbulence. In Darger’s case, the increasingly close end of his life coupled with his decreased mobility could easily cause this internal focusing of his textuality, therefore producing a more turbulent repetitive text than anything he had produced up to that point. MacGregor makes this insightful comment on the writing style of *My Life*:

The style of this late work differs fundamentally from *The Realms*. Although it may be said to possess a beginning, it has no real end, and no true narrative progression is maintained. [...] Darger arrived unconsciously at an unusual style perfectly suited to the description of the tornado, a mode of compulsive writing which might be described as ‘turning in a gyre,’ [...] he seems to circle, coming back again and again to the same events, the same images, the same questions and concerns, as though, caught in the tornado’s rotating funnel, he is spiraling wildly out of control (*In the Realms* 434-435).

Out of this turbulence arises a figure that can be seen as the teleological end of all of Darger’s work, the figure of Sweetie Pie, who could, by a liberal stretch of the imagination, be thought of as his Beatrice, the ultimate version of the icon of the strangled child that has been so prevalent throughout his work.<sup>36</sup>

Here I wish to return to the perspective from which this figure emerges from the flow, and to revisit the work of Serres, which can now provide an instructive analogy to

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<sup>36</sup> There is a way in which we can look at *My Life* as a religious autobiography, loosely modeled on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: Dante’s entrance into the woods is reflected by Darger’s return to his memory of the vortex, after which the narrative is sharply divided into three parts, the first being the encounter with the storm as “The Maelstrom.” The second one would be the resulting wild fire, “The Inferno.” The third would be the transformation of the storm into a female figure—“Sweetie Pie” a violent version of Beatrice.

Darger's Sweetie Pie. In *The Birth of Physics* (1979), *Genesis* (1982), and *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (1982), Serres develops the concept of *Aphrodite Turbulente* (or *Venus Turbulente*) as a figure for the birth of form from background noise. For Serres, noise is figured as the sea (*turba*) and the first organized form is the vortex (*turbo*), which is analogous to Venus who separates (or is separated by observation) from the sea. Once separated, she/it traverses the background less as a true entity than as desired goal—a form via objectification, the originary figure of creative potential: “Aphrodite, beautiful goddess, invisible, standing up, is born of this chaotic sea, this nautical chaos, the noise. Aphrodite, standing, her foot upon this sea, walks upon this sea” (*Genesis* 25). In *Hermes*, Serres extends the vortex figure to language itself, which rises “from rumor in a whirlwind”.<sup>37</sup> “Language is born with the birth of things and by the very same process. [...] My text, my word, my body, the collective with its agreements and struggles [...], all these are only a network of primordial elements in communication with each other” (*Hermes* 114), and it is out of this communication, as he writes, again in *Genesis*, that the poem arises in the form of the vortex. But to return to Aphrodite, Serres uses Venus/Aphrodite specifically as a figure of Eros because he is intentionally associating nascent phenomenon, bodies, things, signs—the “nascent form of language, the nascent form of Aphrodite” (*Genesis* 70)—with the erotic, with the primal curvature away from the laminar. This curvature inspires, *first*, creation (of systems, of statues, of beauty itself) and, *second*, knowledge of creation (i.e., systems of observing previously created systems in time). Scaled up from its atomic locality, from the depths of molecular chaos and into the realm of human myth, the erotic becomes associated with forbidden knowledge, and eventually intimations of the Christian Fall,

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<sup>37</sup> One is here reminded of Job 38:1: “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind” (King James version).

however that Fall is construed, be it into self-consciousness or into the awareness of lust and evil (we can read these as systems, forms of organization). Here we arrive where I (or rather Darger) have been driving all along, at the murky intersection of sexuality and violence, a conflict dissipated into religious, and/or sado-masochistic archetypes where lust and spirituality are purposefully conflated in the confusion of domination and submission, pleasure and pain. I choose to arrive here because I believe we can see Darger's Sweetie Pie as a sacrificial image of Venus Turbulente. Sweetie Pie may be destructive, even vengeful, but the image is one that can be read as sacrificial, a very public, repeated, almost ritual display of a child in the act of being murdered. This "strangle-headed child cloud," appearing amongst the noise and turbulence of double thunderstorms, or more exactly, from the turbulence of Darger's text-storm, gives shape to his obsession with the divinity of young girls and their susceptibility to violence. But more than that, he allows that susceptibility to become sacrificial and thus world renewing—the storm sacrifices the vulnerable child, which in turn sacrifices the corrupt human landscape by destroying it.<sup>38</sup>

### **1.3 The Ocean Had Something Very Unusual About It**

The title of this section (above) is spoken by the narrator of Poe's "Maelstrom" as he stares down upon the sea from a cliff side vantage point and notices the beginning of the formation of the great whirlpool out of the "angry cross dashing of water in every direction" (128). To connect this with our discussion of Serres above, I add the following: "What you see from the top of the cliff, in its sweetness, is the first born being arising out of the waters, Aphrodite who has just been born in a swirl of liquid spirals" (*Genesis* 102). Throughout *My*

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<sup>38</sup> I will be discussing Darger's redemption with greater specificity in the final chapter of this study.

*Life*, Darger's characters are often in similar situations, gazing upon chaos; however, they do not look down at the sea, they look up at the sky, where they see the maelstrom forming.

Even as far as Chicago and elsewhere gathering storm clouds acted strange, attracting the curious attention of the people, observers, and the Weather department, [...] All over Central United States strange, mysterious and funny noises were in the sky and objects appeared in the sky never seen before. (3142)

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This afternoon all of the children had their eyes directed upwards odd shaped black cloud like a head of a child some one would be strangling. The cloud connected with the neck was in convulsions as if some thing with the most uncontrollable fury was agitating it. A great many of the youngsters were afraid it was a strange cyclone and that it would take into its heart to destroy the whole city. (3203–3204)

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By a strange phenomenon they all reformed between the two storms between which came some of that chilly air which threw the reforming clouds into drastic convulsions. Evidently that formed the child headed cloud appearing to be strangled. (3329)

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An enormous volume of tornado cloud must have formed high in the air—it attained a height it has been estimated of fully thirty thousand feet of thickness, where the upper parts were taken up by the counter current and whafted across more than a hundred miles of the upper atmosphere in a direction contrary to that of other changing winds and then probably formed by this situation into a strange head shape of the head of a little girl being strangled with protruding tongue. (3558)

The above passages have been selected merely to introduce the perspective of the observers—both the observers *in* Darger's text, and the observers *of* Darger's text—and to draw a relationship between them. The latter do not look into the sea or at the sky, but rather, stand on the brink of the vast work of this artist, gazing into the massive clouds (or seas) of text, fascinated, even as the unformed nature of it instills a sense of caution. Here is a life's work consisting of dozens of notebooks, diaries, records, and the "literary" manuscripts—innocuous, unassuming, massive. Therefore, I will continue by examining Darger's writing/book as an object, contrasting two aspects of its physicality: the form of the

container (order) and the nature of the contained (the catastrophic, disorder). First we will look at the expression that occurs in the act of writing, i.e., what is being expressed or pressed out in the delimiting process of representation.

In his work on *écriture brute*—*Le langage de la rupture* (1978), *Écrits bruts* (1979), *Détournement d'écriture* (1989)—Michel Thévoz returns over and over again to the characteristic that he finds most important in this type of “raw” writing, and this is the relationship of writing to the physical expressiveness of the graphic gesture.<sup>39</sup> Regarding the design of letters and words as objects, Thévoz speculates that, as such, they arise from the common impulse of writing and drawing. In fact, Thévoz is suggesting that writing itself arises in the prelinguistic sequential presentation of signs, both figurative and non-figurative. However, what is important for Thévoz in *écrits bruts* is the preservation of the emotional or psychological tenor of the *intent* in the form of the *letter*—how the latter can be seen as the trace of the former. In such raw writing the visible edits, the reconstructions of thought, the graphic flourish, the fluidity of linguistic expression is there to be seen. Transcription to standardized typographic fonts flattens this expressivity, reducing the physical dynamism and emotive presence of writing. In contrast, the “insider” writer has interiorized the typographic mode to the point that it is already inscribed within the writer’s intention.<sup>40</sup> I emphasize this in relation to Darger specifically because, though Darger may be characterized as “outsider,” his script *cannot* be said to serve as graphic gesture to the same

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<sup>39</sup>. See especially the essay “The Sorcery of Words in the Body of the Text,” Chapter four of *Le langage de la Rupture*, reprinted in translation in *Art & Text* #27, “Art Brut: Madness and Marginalia.”

<sup>40</sup>. This is to say that the “insider” writer writes with what we might call a “typographic template” in his mind; the printed page is the paradigm toward which the hand-written page is merely a step. He or she does not see the handwritten work as final and sees no need for primary expression in the hand graphic.

degree as that of Thévoz's subjects.<sup>41</sup> Darger's penmanship shows no overly designed quality beyond mere personal uniqueness of character formation; it is regular, fluid, schooled in form and subservient to the lines of the page. One could say that typographic authority is already intrinsic to its production.

We can carry this analysis to a different level of organization and speak of the style of Darger's prose—instead of examining the conventions of letter formation we can examine the conventions of the textual units he chooses to tell his story. I will not dwell on this issue here because we will cover it in greater detail later in this study, but it is instructive within the present discussion of the container and the contained. The types of story units Darger chooses, the arrangement of adjectives, the kinds of descriptions, the borrowed events and phrases, all add up to a “style” of writing that seeks to “contain” a message or content. Critics such as Bonesteel and MacGregor have described Darger's style as flat, clichéd, and unemotional. I would add that such flat prose contains (or like a typographic font, flattens) the uncontained emotional violence and turbulence that the prose describes. Because of the representative limitations inherent in language, (i.e., that language cannot *exactly* represent the world or our thoughts)—and we might assume that this is especially true of borrowed, standardized forms of language—Darger's prose cannot be completely successful, as he himself admits:

Not the best describer even can write the faintest conception either of the magnificent of its awful spasm, or of the horror of the scene or of the wild bewildering fury which now confronts us. [...] There could be ~~written~~ written passages of their description I suppose but nevertheless they could not quat any details of their scene and their effect would be exceedingly feeble in conveying any impression of this oncoming spectacle only a mile away now. (612)

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<sup>41</sup> Thévoz's subjects might best be described as primarily visual artists. They were also all institutionalized. Therefore the field of his study is limited in ways that more contemporary definitions of “outsider art” would not be.

Precisely because such turbulence cannot be described, the attempt to do so can only continue, repeating itself, growing to greater and greater size.

This leads me to my next point, which is that Thévoz's insight above is not completely inapplicable to Darger's writing. In fact, as mentioned, the first and strongest impression one gets from Darger's writing comes precisely from its physicality, and I mean here the volume of the textuality and the appearance of the books that contain it. The expressivity Thévoz enjoys in his subjects at the level of the letter may be found in Darger at a larger organizational level, that being the sculptural physicality of the hand-made book containing an accumulation of flowing text virtually over-pouring the pages, as if imitating the wind and water and the turbulent weather phenomenon Darger loved to observe and ponder. The size of the textuality is produced by its structure, the repetitive presentation of words, phrases, and narrative units piled up in massive quantities and cycled over and over again, seemingly less to drive a narrative purpose so much as simply to perpetuate more text. We might say it is sculptural more than graphic. It is kinetic and gigantic. Great size suggests immensity, multiplicity, perpetuity; indeed what is too big, what is gigantic, as Susan Stewart reminds us, gestures toward the infinite; it is closer to nature than it is to culture: "the gigantic represents infinity, exteriority, the public, and the overly natural" (70); it is "a violator of boundary and rule; an overabundance of the natural and hence an affront to cultural systems" (73). As such the gigantic it is a sign of potential chaos—the uncontrollable and often hidden surplus of the natural world. Just as Darger's "witnesses" look to the sky and see the vortex forming, Darger's text presents the observer with a vastness, a textual abyss within which we also seek a shape, a form, anything really, by which to understand it. We might look for standard narrative forms—novel, autobiography,

confession—but these potential forms never coalesce and continue to be absorbed into a kind of narrative turbulence. Therefore, Darger’s text, in its excessive size, is not “a text” as we normally conceive of the term, as a contained unit, a statement, a story or even a history, but an ongoing torrent, taking shapes and dissolving them, bound less by rules of literature than by laws of dynamics. In *My Life*, the flow of the text, as I have described it above, is Darger’s expression and it is mirrored in the subject of the text, not solely in the image of Sweetie Pie, but in the endless descriptions of wreckage, and in the vast movements of the oceanic currents of winds and flames, armies, populations, clouds, and storms that are Darger’s subject matter.

Opposed to this graphomaniacal flow is a second physicality, no less expressive, and that is the “container,” which opposes or seeks to contain the textual torrent; this is the binding, the book. Darger is a collector, a hoarder; he brought things together based on likeness, and his texts are no different, collections of self-similar units—characters, phrases, descriptions, stories. The bound books are like the boxes in which he kept his eyeglass frames and bottle caps. MacGregor describes Darger’s books as piles of pages *stuffed* into bindings made up of wallpaper, black paper, cardboard, newspaper, rags and glue. Some are sewn together with baling twine (89-90, my emphasis). The primitive quality recalls the pre-printing-press book as a one-of-a-kind object, representing a great deal of labor and generally the possession of a single owner—in other words a book not meant for circulation and, perhaps, not even for communication. But it is not my intention here to enter into an aesthetic analysis of the books. Rather what I wish to highlight is the opposition of container and contained, book and text, the book versus the writing within it, and what we might be

able to discern from this opposition, both in terms of turbulence in Darger's production, and where this turbulence is observed.

Stewart describes the book—the collected book, the fetishized book—as an objectified authority, capable of being known, consumed, and thus granting the reader a certain omniscience in relation to it, a sense of power that is largely due to the illusion of closure the book provides, which is in turn due to the book's limited materiality, its front and back covers, its first and last pages (37-38). Stewart is extrapolating here from Derrida, who, commenting on this illusion of authority, pits the book “against the disruption of writing” (*Of Grammatology* 18). Here, Derrida distinguishes the book from the text, and that the latter, as an ongoing process, works against the former. This is pertinent in that Darger's writing does in fact seem to want to break out of the books that would contain it. “Break out” is perhaps the wrong phrase: rather it is the book's inevitable failure to contain a textual flow whose essence is already larger than the book. In the process of making the books, Darger literally tries to bind too much text together, so that the spines of the books seem on the verge of breaking. In other words the text is already too big before it is bound. In fact, *My Life* does eventually escape the boundary of the book to flow out into boxes and loose pages as chaotic text.

The tension established between dynamic flow (the catastrophic) and static sculpture is one I emphasize because it is integral to Darger's textual production, but also for the erotic tension it suggests between the covered and the exposed, the prudently contained and what Wayne Koestenbaum has called the promiscuous flow of logorrhea (286). There is indeed something lascivious about it, especially with someone like Darger, whose images undress and expose the object. Both Derrida and Stewart have commented on the potential

eroticism of the denuded text, the exposure and observation of what should remain between the sheets, or covers, as the case may be. The failure of closure in the book is also the failure to contain the eroticism of the writing, with both conditions leading to repetitious or redundant textuality. This again is mirrored in the fact that many of Darger's descriptions in *My Life* involve denuding and exposure which are always the result of turbulence: animals are skinned, little girls and nuns are undressed by the wind, bodies are sometimes turned completely inside out in a most extreme form of nudity:

We found parts of some childrens bodies – a hand, a stomach, liver hearts or lungs, scattered guts liver spleen or other entrails or an arm or leg. Six little girls were found dead with ropes twisted so tight around their necks that their tongues stuck half way out of their mouths and eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. Some of these too were gutted or ripped apart.... (4370)

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What animals remained lay dead, bodies ripped aparte twisted into horrid horried shapes, with some having their bodies wide open and entrails all completely out, lying on the ground from them.

Six per cent of the big bears had all their thick hairy skin ripped ~~complete~~ completely off and with badly smashed bodies.

Some large deers and a big bull mosse also had hairy skin ripped away and their bodies twisted and broken. (398)

Buildings are likewise eviscerated, their protective interiors spilled out into the public eye.

It was long before I could reason myself into sufficient courage to sit up and look at that horror of a wreck. All upper rooms were exposed, but all in them had been sucked out by the wind. (588–5899)

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The Super market before the disaster a tall and very large picturesque dome standing loftily ~~av~~ above the center of the structure. This dome was still left erect from the ground floor of the building despite the wild fury of the maddened storm.

But it was left only as a skeleton might stand, with its flesh gone and its iron spare-ribs exposed to the searching air. (3109)

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I saw one large building partly standing with all the exposed rooms completely denuded of all the wallpaper.

I stood in one of the streets I know not its name, formerly lined with attractive shops and gay with color and see it now with skeletons of brick houses on either side, the windows staring like sightless eyes the doors gaping like suffocated mouths the pavements heaped with all sorts of scattered debris[...]. (3359-3560)

And Sweetie Pie, the agent of all this spillage, is herself in a state of self-evisceration, her rude protruding tongue, her belly bursting, her guts spilling out in entrails of violent winds across the landscape, both destroying the landscape but also appropriating it, laying it all out for observation, for the consumption of the senses.

The formation of the Child cloud was almost perfect and even naked with slight sort of pot belly. He saw it bulge out violently. At about quarter to four he says on that Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of August the cloud belly burst open with a loud whose sound which shook the houses at Johnstontown and its neighborhood to such a degree as to alarm the inhabitants and drive them out into the street in panic.

Many (windows) windows were broken glass littered the streets as as I have since ~~seemed~~ seen walls cracked by the concussion of the air from that explosion. In one ~~in~~ instant a long wide shroud seemed to fall out and gradually increasing formed at so amazing a length and height as to strike everyone who beheld it with the most awful astonishment, bewilderment and fear. (4829)

Darger's writing, in the case of *My Life*, is a disruption (a rupture) that precedes the forms of order it disrupts: those being the conventions of the book, of literature, of storytelling itself. What I want to make plain here is that there are concurrent dynamics taking place in Darger's production of his books. They are also similar in that each pits an attempt at containment against what is already uncontainable. The first I have mentioned (per Thévoz above) is the emotion or intention driving the production of the handwritten text, which is further contained in standardized font or script; second is the intended meaning of larger grammatical and narrative units (such as descriptive words, phrases, story elements) contained by the active choice and physical use of those units; and third, the

dynamic flow of textuality contained by the limits of a book. In each case what is signified always has the potential to destroy the signifier that would tame it. What is uncontained is the turbulence out of which order (which may be the form of the container itself) emerges, but into which, order may also catastrophically collapse.<sup>42</sup> To put it another way, the catastrophic is that which can never be contained because it precedes the container; it is in fact that from which the container emerges. Chaos, which gave birth to the world of forms, is also that which underlies that world and it is into chaos that the world will eventually fall. Chaos is the ground; the vortex is the pathway. The vortex could open in the sea, in the sky, beneath our feet or before our intellect as an act of reading. And it is, in part, an effort of vision, of organizing our perception that allows us to see this possibility.

Darger's obsessions with vortices and with turbulence are, in fact, his mode of organizing reality. Though he borrows his figures, he does so because they attract him, and he uses them, imposing these figures on reality as a means of understanding. This is in large part what Darger's writing is about, but it is also what Darger's writing *is*: the eruption of turbulence upon the order of writing, a catastrophe that mirrors, or iterates, the many catastrophes that have resonated throughout Darger's life. The turbulence of sexuality becomes the turbulence of society, war, slavery, etc., which becomes the turbulence of matter itself: forms emerge which are barely able to contain the explosive potential from which they arise and these forms either break open or are recontained at higher levels of organization. In this respect, Darger's writing can be seen as a nested series of flows and containers, proliferating, expanding, and recontaining: the book and the text; the body and

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<sup>42</sup> We can fruitfully think about this dynamic in the other direction—i.e., as it moves toward expansion rather than collapse. In terms of scaling, what functions at one level as an activity of containment becomes symptomatically at the next level, the activity or process that needs to be contained. The most interesting or complex turn in this process would be when Darger tries to contain the very large in the very small—e.g., inscribing the entire whirling chaos of his project in a figure (of a vortex).

its internal fluids; the restraint that allows meaning and culture, and the uncontrolled exposure that destroys it; the story and the refusal of closure that destroys the story. Darger creates a text that proposes to mean something (if only by its existence, if only to himself). It is a grand project that gestures towards, but refuses to inhabit, any of the genres it borrows from: it is neither fully autobiography, nor epic, nor confession, nor history. The only thing it can truly be said to *be* is violent, descriptive, huge and, oddly, hidden in the physical world—a gigantic turbulent epic contained in a small rented room, on an insignificant street in a large city, waiting to open like a vortex beneath the feet, the eye, the inquisition of the curious, which will happen when the book itself is opened, examined, activated by our own interest or merely by an accident. It is what we might call a contained or hidden catastrophe. It lives latent in the book as it lives in the weather the book describes. It is a self-destructive potential within creativity reflecting the destructive chaos hidden in the depths of matter, matter that has shown it will not tolerate invasive examination. By this I refer to the potential chaos locked within the atom and the nuclear threat that was so prevalent in Darger's time.

#### **1.4 In the Depths of the Material World, Catastrophe Awaits**

Now I want to create an environmental context for the discussion of turbulence and to tie Darger's imagery and style to the culture in which he lives. To this end, I would like to propose another figure for Sweetie Pie, one that will tie together Darger's desire or longing for the "lost," his almost spiritual regard for turbulence, and the graphomaniacal giantism that we, as witnesses, face, both metaphorically and textually. I return to the idea expressed earlier, that of Sweetie Pie as an example of Serres' Venus Turbulente, and what such an

expression may reveal about Darger's concept of beauty and human order. First, we must recognize the quality of the superlative in regards to Sweetie Pie. The image of the vortex, like the book that contains it, is gigantic, catastrophic—the size of the text, as mentioned earlier, is matched by the size of the objects and events described within the text.

Throughout *My Life*, Darger makes it plain that Sweetie Pie is stronger and bigger than any form of destruction ever known, and that her size, power, and strangeness indicate that she is, in fact, a new kind of storm, wreaking a new kind of destruction: “Great as it was *it never was surpassed* [...] *its most extreme violence* flung debris [...] to a distance probably *never before attained* [producing] land and air waves of an *intensity unparalleled* in the record of tornado action” (3146); “The strange red and other other colored sunsets spoken of above were [more] *extraordinary* than that cause by the Krakatoa eruption” (3147); “‘I cant explain’ I began with doubtfulness in my voice what caused the tornado to take form [...] That *never was ever before heard of* [...] a queer *indescrivable* ~~peh~~ phenomena [...] *immeasurably violent*, with an unusual cloud burst of rain and much too loud a salvos of thunder” (3328).

The descriptions all tend to highlight the strangeness and size, but we note especially the use of adjectives indicating the uncontainable nature of the storms energy—immeasurable, indescribable, etc., words that reflect the distortion and disproportion and especially the violation of boundaries and rules—an overabundance that affronts cultural systems. Again, I refer to Stewart who states that when the gigantic consuming force (chaos) is placed at the center of local civic identity (as in the carnival, the circus, or the sideshow) it serves not only to “show” and therefore subsume oversized appetites such as lust, blood, etc., but also to promote them, i.e., the promotion of the market (73). People come to the

show to consume their sins. In addition, the presence of the gigantic functions as a reminder of the fragility of the social, in that within the social, as part of its foundational structure (i.e., that to which its existence is opposed), is the very seed that could destroy it, the chaos that lies at the heart of civilization.<sup>43</sup> From the very first sighting, Sweetie Pie is heading for the cities; in fact she seems to desire contact with the city, making a “beeline” for the heart of the city. There her destruction is visited upon the highest achievements of human engineering— buildings, bridges, etc., those constructions by which Americans find their transcendence.

In his book, *The American Technological Sublime*, David E. Nye suggests that for pluralistic technologically oriented Americans, the sublime experience of nature is transferred to the works of humankind, serving as an element of social cohesion, a shared social apprehension. Nye writes, “In a physical world that is increasingly desacralized, the [technological] sublime represents a way to reinvest the landscape and the works of men with transcendent significance” (xiii). This American sublimity often takes the form of admiration for feats of engineering and architecture, an admiration that is given voice throughout Darger’s writing in *My Life*, especially in his appreciation of size and grandeur, which as we have seen, he reflects in the size and construction of his own writing.

By setting up a series of large conflicts, Darger spins up the intensity of his scenes. Sweetie Pie, already the greatest storm known to humanity, gains stature in contrast to the superlative qualities of the buildings and structures that she destroys, which are always described by Darger as the biggest and best mankind has to offer: The Sacred Heart Convent is foremost among these:

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<sup>43</sup> For further discussion on the relationship of the gigantic to the maintenance of civilization and cultural or national identity, see Stewart 70–102, Cohen 1–62, and Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 119–147.

When one gazes at all this seemingly the work of giant ~~ham~~ hands the the amazement of it all is that these experienced builders could have had the hardihood to undertake such vast labor and the perseverance to suees succeed in bul building such a vast structure.

If the world modern world were overthrown and swept to pieces by an all embracing earthquake and tornado of this kind at the same time it would leave no ruins to compare with those of of this Convent and its territory This magnificent building was the largest ever known or the largest ever built. Its most magnificent columns were fifty feet high and 11 feet in diameter around the base. As they still be to day scattered ~~about~~ about like broomsticks thrown around by boys it would take the arm stretch of six or seven men to reach around one of them. (4948–4949)<sup>44</sup>

The same grandeur attaches to the Gleason Asylum, “which was said to be the finest Orphan Asylum in the State” (1530), and which is completely wiped off the map by Sweetie Pie: “I did for a few seconds see rich furniture. splendid draperies and rare ornaments fly through the air, then all turned and went away into complete disapperance with everything that had made the Gleason Asylum one of the richest places in all Ill” (1560); the Asylum is called “the most beautiful building in the world,” (3272) like a “palace of Heaven” (3272), built at the amazing cost of “all the millionaires in the world” (3273); and the Asylum is so spectacular that the orphans living there “refused to allow themselves to be adopted” (3274). This unlikely luxuriance of an orphan asylum is a particularly ornamental example of how Darger is purposely raising the bar in the battle of superlatives. Even the Gleason playground is beyond comparison—it is fully 275 acres and is:

in its way one of the most remarkable playgrounds upon as I dare to ~~boot~~ boast upon the earth. It had a dozen beautiful very large ~~oack~~ oak trees and five stately elms. The pay ground equipment including the seated carriage like swings are too many to describe. (3318–3319)

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<sup>44</sup> The fact that this may be a specifically Homeric measurement would indicate that Darger had borrowed it from either Homer or someone who is borrowing from Homer. In either case it shows Darger borrowing in a way that may even be unknown to himself.

The Fox River Bridge, east of Chestershire, which is destroyed by Sweetie Pie, is:

“a most astonishing and extraordinary thing” said the professor. It took the constructioners more than five years to construct that thousand foot bridge and its arched foundation of stone at the cost it is said of about 30,000,000 fifty million dollars. [...] The constructors tried to claim a gurantee that the monterous bridge was tornado proof. And after less than a minute what is left of it. Everything gone but the badly twisted frame work.” (3547)

Another iconic structure from the story is the “immense” Supermarket, considered “the greatest merchandize structure in all the ~~wrld~~-world” (3099). Indeed the greatest building is destroyed by the mightiest storm: “The largest, longest, and strongest constructed, supermarket building was torn and flung over the nearest districts of the town by the mightiest tornado on record” (3098).

These structures are exemplary works of humankind. And yet great as these works are, Sweetie Pie renders them as toys in the hands of children. Darger often writes how the storm transforms humans and human works into toys: “I looked else where and saw two whirling saucer shaped masses of wreckage swirling swiftly around with the funnel with the funnel speed as the twister tumbled the biggest houses about like toys turning them turtle into clouds of dust wreckage or every which way” (3060); “The supercargo and all other merchandize is scattered far and wide. The freight cars, flat cars, coal cars, and cattle cars are a total wreck flung about like teddy bear toys” (3226); “The Across New Jersey into the sea, I had observed the beautiful very large excursion ships tossed and tumbled about into the territory from the rivers as if they were toys roughly treated by madcap children” (4296).

One result of the conflict of super catastrophic storm (disorder) and superlative human endeavors (order) is to lift the narrative into the mythological plane, spiraling or spinning it up from the mundane to the fantastic, from particular instance to the cosmic event, from mere tragedy to catastrophic sublimity. There is as well an indication that the

more the overreaching of mankind, as evidenced in its architectural triumphalism, the greater the natural violence unleashed against it, ratcheting up the intensity. “The bigger the building the worst it gets it [...] The big ones the tornado wants” (3205); “You know yourselves from experience that the bigger the building in the path of a tornado the worst it will get it” (3889).<sup>45</sup>

This leads me to my next point. Putting aside for the moment both the technological sublime and apocalyptic interpretations of catastrophe, there is another context in which Sweetie Pie could be seen as related to an American tradition. American mythology is full of giant men and animals that serve as generally beneficent, though powerful, symbols of the taming of the land—Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill (a cowboy who, in fact, rides a tornado), Mike Fink (the Mississippi Roarer), Old Stormalong (and his giant ship, *The Courser*), and the greatly named Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett—all huge, larger than life figures that border on the absurd. My point here is to contextualize Sweetie Pie in the field of the iconic American tall tale (itself a form of giantism), which Darger was likely familiar with. Sweetie Pie may be related to this American type, but she does not perform the typically American function of figuring willful control. The opposite of this beneficent giantism is another traditional American attraction to outsized catastrophic events, an attraction that is no doubt rooted in Puritanism’s subscription to the biblical tradition of floods, plagues, etc., as a means of world renewal. In fact, scholars have located what they

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<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting here that this ongoing battle of superlatives is not just limited to architecture; it also applies to moral standards. The buildings destroyed house the highest examples of human character. “The morals of the inhabitants of the Angel Guardian Orphans were very like child saints Good. Women were the exception compared to those holy Sisters. I cannot picture the holiness and saintly morality of that asylum vividly enough. It had to be seen to to be understood” (3211). This leads us to speculate on the idea that the destruction of such structures also functions as an attack on high-mindedness or pride.

sometimes call an American School of Catastrophe (1810-1845),<sup>46</sup> and Curtis Dahl describes this school as having an almost “morbidly avid appetite for the sublime terror of huge devastation” (380). Their subject matter was supernatural cataclysm often referenced through biblical events, such as the Deluge, the Last Days of Pompeii, the destruction of the Cities of the Plain, and The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The Catastrophe School served to counter the optimism of the American Transcendentalist movement, and it could, in fact, be easily dismissed as an offshoot of Romanticism mixed with early Puritan Millennial fervor, but its narratives were never expunged from the American psyche—they can be found to this day in our contemporary genre of the apocalyptic disaster film, a genre that is absent in other national film traditions (excepting post-war Japan). Therefore, I would like to point out a local example of this catastrophe theme in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one that is particularly relevant to Darger’s state of mind. This is the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The fire took place before Darger was born but its aftermath and its place in city mythology loomed large throughout Darger’s time. In “Pyre: A Poetics of Fire and Childhood in the Art of Henry Darger,” Leisa Rundquist connects Darger’s obsession with fire to a prevailing trend in Chicago journalism: “Conflagration, though, in Darger’s art, emerges from a particular schema of historical reportage endemic to Chicago’s culture” (38–39). She describes how the “hyperbolic rhetoric and commemorative practices in Chicago’s retelling/re-burning of its Great Fire, the city’s burgeoning industry of “instant”

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<sup>46</sup> Painters and poets who are considered to be participants in this school include: Thomas Cole and Edgar Allan Poe, but including such second tier poets as James Hillhouse, James G. Percival, Sumner Lincoln Fairfield, Rufus Dawes, and the painter Ascher Durand. In this quote Dahl describes the Percival poem “The Judgment,” which can seem Dargeresque:

[A] “dark terrific storm” in a lurid sky heralds the coming of a God of Wrath whose power rains torturing flames on shelterless sinners “gasping in a world of fire” until their feeble cries are forever “Quenched in dark eternity.” The hills and mountains melt, and the whole frame of the universe falls “crisped and crackling” into the void” (382).

tragic histories, and the city's journalistic dependence on witnessing (a modality for knowing the unknowable), shape Darger's notion of historic conflagration" (60-66).

Rundquist insightfully depicts the trauma consciousness of the city and how that trauma was turned into a kind of resurrection mentality. She is, however, concerned with a particular period of Darger's output: the writing and illustrating of *The Realms*. As I've mentioned, *My Life*, written years later, has a distinctively different set of issues in play, and a far more ambiguous relation between event and cosmic intent. Here I am referring primarily to *My Life* as a post-war document, one whose writing was influenced by the paranoia and fantasy of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, much of which was driven by fears of humanity's self-destruction and the idea that there were forces locked up in the physical universe that we knew nothing about, chaotic forces that could be set free. The catastrophic turbulence locked in matter and revealed by fire is multiplied a thousand fold in the nuclear blast and its iconographic residue.

Commenting on the proliferation of a particular type of horror movie in the 50s and early 60s, Tim Dirks writes: "The real horrors of World War II, and the perceived threat of nuclear annihilation and radioactive mutancy during the resultant Cold War led to a further onslaught of disaster-related films in the 50s" (*AMC Filmsite*). In the aftermath of the Atomic Bomb attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II there came a flood of films exploiting the fear from the mutations that radioactivity could cause" (Dirks): *Godzilla* (1954); *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953); *THEM!* (1954); *IT Came From Beneath the Sea* (1955); *Tarantula* (1955); *The Deadly Mantis* (1957); *The Giant Gila Monster* (1959); *Atomic Monster: The Beast of Yucca Flats*, otherwise titled *Girl Madness* (1961). One of the more iconic of these was *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957), which tells the tale of one "Lt.

Col. Glenn Manning [who] is inadvertently exposed to a plutonium bomb blast at Camp Desert Rock. Though burned over 90% of his body, he begins to grow in size. [...] He reaches 50 feet tall before his growth is stopped. By this time he has become insane. He escapes and wreaks havoc upon Las Vegas before he is finally stopped” (Tutt, *IMDb: the Internet Movie Database*). These sorts of movies were a cathartic release for a population traumatized by their own capacity for self-destruction (a turbulence within). Often these films pitted insignificant, ordinary humans against impossibly monstrous forces. Small town fathers become manly heroes when they are asked to rise to a challenge of such world-shaking resonance. However, there was a dark side as well, as some of these films showed the same men becoming themselves monsters, willing to break moral codes to protect their families as in *Panic in the Year Zero* (1962). Immorality justified as a defense of morality is another example of chaos hidden inside order. Concurrent with the atomic monster trend was that of *film noir* (the 40s through the 50s) which addressed similar themes of compromised morality and the catastrophe within the human psyche. Some also managed to directly address the nuclear threat. *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) is described thus: “A doomed female hitchhiker pulls Mike Hammer into a deadly whirlpool of intrigue, revolving around a mysterious ‘great whatsit’” (Hitchie, *IMDb: the Internet Movie Database*).”<sup>47</sup> The whatsit is a small black suitcase, hidden in a gym locker that, once opened by the overly curious, brings about the end of the world through nuclear destruction.

I highlight these post-war visions of apocalypse to contextualize Darger’s narrative within his time and to show one possible influence upon Darger’s state of mind that was not only prevalent but also extremely popular in the contemporary culture. It is worth noting as well that the visible sign of catastrophe unleashed by this hidden turbulence is the giant, the

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giant man, the giant insect, the giant reptile, the giant cloud, etc. Viewed in this framework Darger's Sweetie Pie becomes a kind of Amazing Colossal Child, a product of nature but not akin to, or sympathetic with, nature—rather she is a freak of nature (a disruption of the natural order) whom Mother Nature takes issue with.<sup>48</sup> Sweetie Pie may not have been released by nuclear holocaust, but she is occasionally compared to it: “This was sure devastation work here. Who could think of a tornado doing this. Yet now I’ve read they have more wallop than an atom bomb, Yet here, seeing is believing” (235); “Scientist tell us that while it never will or ever did kill as many as a very severe widespread earthquake does, the average twister generates more energy than the biggest atom bomb” (681). The word holocaust also comes up in the descriptions of the terrible devastation. Sometimes the tornado itself is called a holocaust. Sometimes it is the landscape of destruction: “So by keeping the multitudes of these parents and relatives of the missing children out of the holocaust city the danger of people being killed or maimed by falling debris upon them may be avoided” (1041); The fire which threatens the Wicker Castle will, “bring on a holocaust that all hell cannot stop, and there’s no reason why we should leave those open to such a grave danger” (2177).

My point here is that while Darger may not have been referring to nuclear holocaust outright, he was aware of the atom bomb and its destructive potential. He had clippings of mushroom clouds in his collections, together with photos of tornado funnels and the smoke clouds of devastating fires.<sup>49</sup> Such images formed part of the vision of catastrophe that held his attention. Indeed they held the attention of the nation at large. An obvious example of

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<sup>48</sup>. See again Note #24, p. 27, in which Mother Nature argues with Sweetie Pie.

<sup>49</sup>. There is a folder in the archives at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, in Chicago in which numerous newspaper clippings of this nature are contained.

both the imagery and paranoia attached to the atomic threat is the infamous Daisy Ad that ran on television Sept. 8<sup>th</sup> Labor Day in 1964 (just preceding the period in which Darger was working on *My Life*). The ad featured a small girl counting daisy petals. Upon reaching the number ten the camera closes in on the pupil of her eye while a male voice counts down from ten to one, ending in a fiery atomic explosion. The little girl becomes the ultimate image of innocence threatened by the coming firestorm of nuclear holocaust. In fact, little girls were used in several television ads during this period, juxtaposed to the life destroying atomic threat. Lyndon Johnson was running for president at that time largely on the premise that his opponent Barry Goldwater would bring on precisely such a nuclear disaster. Darger did not have a television, but the Daisy Ad was so controversial that it was discussed and even condemned in almost every newspaper and news magazine in the country during the following days and weeks. And in fact it is still discussed as one of the most powerful examples of media manipulation to this day.<sup>50</sup> Darger would no doubt have read about it and we cannot completely assume that he did not see it, as it was replayed on newscasts across the country. The connection to Darger's Sweetie Pie imagery is obvious in the combination of girl child and catastrophe. Although it could not be said that this ad, or others like it, specifically influenced Darger, it is a potent example of the ubiquitous imagery with which the media was filled during the time of the writing of *My Life*. It is also worth noting that the metaphoric connection of the child and the catastrophic force is not Darger's alone. In his chapter on the atomic sublimity, Nye writes that the scientists who developed the bomb "conceived of their work in terms of virility. A successful explosion was a birth" and a

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<sup>50</sup> For a complete discussion of the context of the ad, see: "Daisy: The Complete History of an Infamous and Iconic Ad," at [conelrad.com](http://conelrad.com).

powerful weapon was a “son” that they had procreated (229). The first bombs were anthropomorphized in name: Little Boy and Fat Man.

The development of the bomb, unlike other civic events—buildings and bridges—was a hidden secret, something happening, a turbulence below the surface that would explode. Here we approach the issue of emergence, although the emergence of the bomb is not without a guiding dictate. Nye addresses the issue of the bomb’s development, almost as if it were an emergent process by many different workers doing parts of a job and not knowing even what the final product was supposed to be (230)—like cells in a body that are unaware of the body as a whole. In other words, the bomb came about as a function of the social body that was not necessarily the intention of, or visible to, the body that created it. This issue is also addressed by Lewis Mumford:

We are living among madmen. Madmen govern our affairs in the name of order and security. The chief madmen claim titles of General, Admiral, Senator, scientist, administrator, Secretary of State, even President. And the fatal symptom of the madness is this: they have been carrying through a series of acts which will lead eventually to the destruction of mankind, under the solemn conviction that they are normal, responsible people, living sane lives, and working for reasonable ends (qtd. in Nye, 231).

What is important in these views is that the bomb seems to develop as the product of numerous individual acts, despite the moral quandaries of those individuals, even with a possible lack of knowledge concerning the final result.<sup>51</sup> From just under the surface of “normal” activity, it erupts. However, the nuclear explosion has in reality always been there as the turbulence underlying cosmic creation, and it is only being released here, or

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<sup>51</sup>. The emergence of the unexpected phenomenon is further attested to by the fact that the scientists themselves were surprised, astonished even, by what they had created—the unexpected power of the explosion. It was in fact something other than their idea, something far greater than what they had anticipated. While the agents saw themselves as working within reason, the result was outside of reason—it was monstrous. Still, they felt reverence for the power, and because this power was unleashed by human endeavor, the quality and possibility of transcendence is attached, as in transcending the merely human, thus the experience of the sublime (4-10).

unleashed, by our discovery of it. It is the organizing vision (the analyzing eye) that allows the bomb to erupt, finding form in an iconic explosion. There is a certain inhuman, mechanical fatality to it, governed by “pure technique, dedicated to destructive ends” (Nye 231). Nye cites Edith Wyschougrod, who writes that such a pure technological system has led to “the creation of death worlds, a new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life simulating imagined conditions of death” (qtd. in Nye 229). I would argue that the “death-world” mentality is not solely the product of the nuclear era, but has deeper roots in the American psyche. I here call attention to the Catastrophe School, and suggest that the idea of the death world is similar to the image of the apocalypse, but it is an internalized landscape, one which a population is trained to feel lies beneath the surface of their “normal” physical world, just as the idea of apocalypse is meant to exist in the mind as warning and threat. As Nye writes: “The phenomenology of the bomb undercut any sense of stability and continuity in the life-world for the ordinary citizen” (229). In “The Nuclear Sublime” Frances Ferguson suggests that this particular destructive sublimity differs from the more traditional Old Testament forms of apocalypse in that, first, it is total and, second, it is caused by mankind directly and not through the intercession of God. We bring it on ourselves and we do not survive it (Ferguson 4-10). Again, I recall the earlier discussion of biblical apocalypse, the End of Time and the Day of Judgment referred to in various sections of *My Life*.

Both the landscape of the “death world” and the loss of stability and continuity in the life world—are all major themes of Darger’s work, as in *My Life* where characters are faced with something like “the last and eternal night [...] which was to destroy the heavens and the world together” (3091), and to bear witness is “to stand in the presence of death, death

enthroned on the fierce fury of the twister” (3560). I would reiterate here that one cannot help but feel that the bomb informs Darger’s descriptions, even if unbeknownst to himself. Darger’s main description of the tornado’s effect is that of explosion; Sweetie Pie explodes things. In the following scene we are reminded of an image so common in those years, that of the distant city destroyed by a mushroom cloud.

It did not appear to churn, though it was quivering It is difficult to describe the scene among us during the fearful rage of this convulsive shroud. Many fancied that some great explosion was occurring in the city, and we all got out of the water in a hurry, swarming up to the east bank and made a simultaneous rush to a hill with a large single cave like chamber the women and children crowded in first consternation on every face and not a word was spoken for a moment, then a murmur went up or around. (3550–3551)

This image of the distant city being exploded recurs over and over again, often with nearly the same words:

I cant describe what I saw of course but my first thought was that the end of the world would look just like that. It was just as though as all that part of southwestern Chesterbrown was being blown up by all the dynamite in the world.

First of all a great pillar of cloud extended way up into the high black canopy of cloud almost still retaining the shape of the childs head turned sideways, but much more monstrous in size and came roaring through the southwestern part of the city.

As we went to other and bigger windows the awful cloud began to roar up alongside of us

There was a louder roar and with it all the houses of the city within our view seemd to gather up and rush along before that most powerful wind Every house big or small came roaring past When the wreckage wave passed by us and seemed ~~like~~ like to form into a huge cloud of onward rushing wreckage. (3244)

Here I will introduce the idea of repetition, which we will address later in Chapter Three.

The above paragraph is repeated in slightly variant form over the next eight hundred pages.

I cant describe what I saw but my first thought was that the end of the world would look look just ~~like~~ look like that. It was just as though as the city within our sight was being blown up and in all directions by all the dynamite in the world. (4197–4198)

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I cant describe what I saw, of course by but my first thought that if what would be if the end of the world would look like that coming wind hell, a and it looked like below the shroud all the earth there was being blown up by all the explosives of all kinds in the world at one time. (4520)

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I cant describe what I saw of course to save my life but I do believe it looked like the world coming to an end without any of the fire. Even all the various explosives in the world could not look like that if all were exploding at once. It even looked like a big mountain as large as Mt Pikes Peak was being blow up by all the dynamite in all the world added by guncotton and T and T. (4711–4712)

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I cant describe what I saw as the storm overwhelmed the structure but my first thought was that the end of the world look just like that It was just as though all the supermarket had been first blown up by all the dynamite and high explosives in the world and then sent swirling away everywhere by the most mightiest wind the world has ever seen. (4861–4862)

Not only is the image of the exploding city a prominent and repeated one, but several times the cloud of the storm that destroys the city(s) is described as a mushroom cloud:

Then the disaster was to come. The cloud which was soon to shape like the head of a strangled child emerged from an enormous cloud in the shape of a giant blue black mushroom and its outer edges, even though there was no sun showed a strange beautiful amber tint. (3215)

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It may be noted here that in all of the many subsequent tornado horrors which many died in, the clouds of the unspeakable terror especially the part black in color and of greatest density boiled out in great balloon or mushroom shape clouds with numerous rolling convolutions worthy to attract any ones attention dissipating above like a gigantic nimbus cloud. (3366)

There are other clues or suggestions of nuclear holocaust that can be found in *My Life*. The great wildfire episode of Book Three may be a reflection of the firestorms which accompany nuclear explosions. Darger explains the rapid spread of the wild fire as being due to numerous smaller rhizomatic eruptions unleashed by the explosion of a large munitions dump. Interestingly, the first nuclear trials were covered up in the press by explaining them

as accidental explosions of munitions dumps. In addition, at the beginning of Book Four, Darger repeatedly elaborates on the heat of the tornado, the fact that people were burned to a crisp by the hot winds, winds which started fires everywhere. The tornado is often described as a “whirlwind of real hot fire” (3154), or a “revolving cloud of fire, rushing forward swaying and roaring” (3156). One woman’s husband was “caught by the tornado blown a great distance and terribly burned by the heat of the wind” (3155), a heat that “shriveled and set fire to nearly everything it touched” (3155). Numerous people are burned to a crisp or otherwise die from the heat. Many could not swallow or speak due to the fact their throats were burned by the wind. The roads were littered with charred corpses.

The groans and cries of the dying for whom right away nothing could be done was horrible. I saw a young woman an being burned to death by the hot tornado wind with a living babe in her arms. It seemed as if the whole world was going to pieces before the storm. (3157)

Such hot winds are in fact not a part of the tornado phenomenon. They are however a result of the nuclear blast. In this sense Darger is giving Sweetie Pie the power of an atomic bomb. In similar fashion he spends numerous pages of Book Three, “The Inferno,” on poisonous clouds and toxic smoke that cover hundreds of miles causing severe sickness in far off cities.

“I still hear news that the distress caused by all the smoke enveloping all those northeastern towns, which prevailed everywhere is still most terrible” said Kaliko “There is a feeling of despair every where. The fugitive people can scarcely keep life together, and many have died poisoned by the smoke fumes. [...] The reports which came from all parts of Northeast and west Ill as well from Chicago, together with the talk of those attending the refugees convinced me that the state of affairs over the smoke and fumes was more serious than the authorities of the refugee cities and towns were inclined to admit [...]. (2456-2457)

This passage echoes the original real-life assumption propagated by authorities that there was no danger from nuclear fallout or radioactivity from atomic bomb blasts. The following

passage illustrates the panic and madness that accompanied not only the approach of the smoke, but the potential unlivable quality of the affected cities.

Fresh terror continually shook the nervous population of all the sorely tried cities northward. The panic of the previous day had not subsided because of the smog and smoke darkened skies and the strange colors of the smoke and the multitude of the semicrazed citizens were still rushing up and down the streets, and up and down the beaches of the Lake and along the ship landing places in a useless lookout for sake vessels to bear them away from all the smoke smug and unnatural “hot weather” when a bright glow appeared for southward in the direction of the smoulder. To be seen that far shows how bright the gears of the smoulders was. The [...] effect of this new evidence that it seemed the two big cities were being rapidly rendered unfit for human habitation upon the people weak with constant strain and mentally unbalanced for the time was extraordinary [...] Many appreciated to drive completely insane muttering and moaning and wandering about moaning weeping and crying out in a heart breaking monotone. (2685–2686)

And finally Darger returns over and over again to the fascination this terror holds for its witnesses. He even uses the term sublimity in the following quote:

the skies were filled with rolling and whirling clouds that were fiery red Many feared that the smoke would engulf them all and and the terror that ensued was pitiful. The spectacle was so appalling that the whole populace could not appreciate the sublimity of it. (2679–2680)

Descriptions of atomic bomb blasts often concentrated on the exotic colors of the clouds and sky, effects so extreme and startling that atomic bomb watching actually became a recreational pastime, before its dangers were fully known.

There are other clues that could be examined, but it is, of course, all speculation. As mentioned, Darger did not specifically address issues of nuclear annihilation. But I contend that he would have been relentlessly exposed to these facts and fears in the period preceding and during the writing of *My Life* and it is highly unlikely such issues did not color his imagery. (See Fig. 21 for the inclusion of a mushroom cloud in one of Darger’s paintings.)

By concentrating on the atomic bomb in the above section, I do not wish to ignore the influence of other, more local, events, on Darger's imagery and state of mind, some of which are: the Tri-State tornado of 1944, which MacGregor suggests is the primary source of the Sweetie Pie storm; the 1965 Palm Sunday outbreak of 47 tornados across the Midwest; the 1967 tornado that passed through the city of Chicago; and not least, the social eruptions of the 1960s as mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, especially the Westside (Chicago) riots of 1966, 1968, the Chicago Convention riots of 1968.<sup>52</sup> Add to these riots in Paris (1968), Detroit (1967, 1968), Los Angeles, Watts (1965), the assassinations of JFK (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King (1968), Robert Kennedy (1968), the Kent State shootings (1970), and the highly publicized disaster of Altamont (1969). There were other rather gruesome news stories of extreme national prominence. Richard Speck murdered eight nurses on the Southside of Chicago in 1966, in what was called the first Mass Murder, and the Manson Family murders occurred in 1969.<sup>53</sup> The breakdown of society was a common subject in the press of those years. Paul Auster made this comment in the NY Times, concerning the 2008 anniversary of the 1968 Columbia student riots: "There were half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, Martin Luther King had just been assassinated, cities were burning across America, and the world seemed headed for an apocalyptic breakdown" (*NYT* 23, April, 2008).

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<sup>52</sup>. Stuck in the pages of the manuscript of *My Life* is a newspaper clipping of riots in Grand Rapids MI, and Detroit.

<sup>53</sup>. Speck's victims were stabbed and strangled, a method of killing little girls that Darger often describes. The Manson story was always accompanied by Manson's belief in the coming of Helter Skelter, an apocalyptic race war, that would end society as we knew it.

My intention here is to connect this catastrophe “zeitgeist” to my previous discussion of turbulence. If the bomb was a demonstration of matter erupting from the inside, the 60s would have been a demonstration of society erupting from the inside, and an indication that all forms of order were susceptible to turbulence. Indeed, given the events surrounding Darger’s later years, an archetype of catastrophe may have seemed needed, thus informing his imagery. While such a statement may seem applicable to any writer of the period, I contend that it is especially true for Darger given the particularities of his life and his neurological state. My intention is not to make a claim for Darger’s *My Life* as a commentary on the state of mankind in the 1960s, but rather as an interpretation (an iteration) of a prevalent theme extant throughout his lifetime and especially in those later years—that catastrophe is omnipresent, it can arise out of the ordered world, be it material or social, it is in fact hidden within all order, it is foundational, it is always there. When it manifests, it represents the triumph of chaos, or, if not the triumph, at least the cyclical return of chaos throughout history. History is a cultural construct as is literature. We write history to make the chaos of events seem to have meaning, to give it order. Inasmuch as narrative and literature are language-based forms establishing meaning in the flow of events, chaos and catastrophe will lie within these forms of order as well, and they show themselves when the narrative forms and institutions are broken. I have made the point (following Derrida, Stewart, Thévoz), that writing is itself a disruption that is contained, made meaningful by the book. Hypergraphia (endless obsessional writing like Darger’s) is, in a sense, a failure of the book, a failure of meaning, of control. But I want to emphasize that writing is also initially a means of control, giving form to the unformed turbulence of “thought” or undefined emotion. If hypergraphia is a failure of one type of control (the

eruption of turbulence *as writing*), it is still an effort at another level of control: the containment of emotion in definitive imagery and the construction and maintenance of the self as ongoing narrative. Therefore, the final point I wish to make is that what Darger has given us is a fossil (concrete) record of writing as chaos *and* as identity—i.e., the destructive and generative possibilities of chaos coexist with the ongoing attempt to maintain a self. Considering this, it is telling, if not inevitable, that Darger's central image is the vortex of Sweetie Pie, the Venus Turbulente, and that his ongoing effort to capture or define this image also determines the shape of the text itself—the vor/text. Sweetie Pie forms at the level of Darger's observing eye, the autobiographical observation of his own life within the context of the world around him. This observation is organized through the medium of textuality, itself equivalent to other material productions. The vor/text is the emergent threshold, or place of passage—a means of transcendence via the eruption of turbulence in the material/textual world.

This chapter has attempted first to address the imagery of the vortex in western literature and science, as well as how this imagery relates to Darger's Sweetie Pie. Secondly, I have constructed a series of opposing states, alternating between the contained and the container or turbulence and order: emotion and the letter that would express it, writing and the book that would define it, catastrophe and the prose that would describe it, energy and the matter that holds or controls it, and finally, social turbulence and the culture that would seek to neutralize that turbulence in serviceable form. In each case what is contained (catastrophe, turbulence) not only precedes, but it perpetually threatens to destroy that which would contain it. And thirdly, I have pointed out that the form that links the two states (order and disorder), the threshold between them, is the vortex. The next chapter will examine how

turbulence and self-construction are related, how they engender “writing” and how that writing, like a vortex, can be seen to actively collect pre-existing forms about it.

## 2.0 Chapter Two: The Drive to Excess: Neurological/Postmodern Dislocations of Self

*Who am I? A vortex*  
—Michel Serres (*Physics* 37)

If we are to analyze Darger’s written narratives (specifically *My Life*) for patterns also found in physical systems, which is the foundation of this study, it is necessary to have an idea of “self” and narrative *as* physical systems. To this end I will consider narrative and self to be integrally related and interdependent, meaning that the self is largely a narrative creation, a function of storytelling that is directly dependent on language capability. The relationship of narrative to personal identity is one that has received much attention from cognitive theorists. It is important here to note that narrative, normally thought of as a means of organizing the past, is, in fact, a structure projected on present experience, locating or suggesting a subject as central to that experience. The neurologists Young and Saver, citing both Mark Turner and Jerome S. Bruner write: “narrative organizes not just memory, but the whole of human experience, not just the life stories of the past, but all of one’s life as it unfolds” (75). Bruner himself states that the experience of life takes on meaning, “when we interact with it as an ongoing story, as our story” (qtd. in Young and Saver 75). To state it another way: “the bringing of narrative to experience enables a sense of self founded on a series of *recollections*—to be without one’s stories is to be without knowledge of one’s life” (Young and Saver 74, my emphasis). I will return to this statement later in a discussion of “knowing” and “not knowing.”

This relationship between the structuring of consciousness in story and the reproductions of those stories as representations operates both at the cultural level and at that of the individual subject. In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie suggests that, while

identity exists as narrative, as a telling of our self's story, we learn to self-narrate from outside, from narrations outside of ourselves, and we apply that system to ourselves (17).<sup>54</sup> The production of narrative and other forms of human storytelling (folklore, literature) can be considered *a pressured act* (i.e., needed, necessary) arising or organizing out of the interplay of intricate individual neurological systems with environmental systems— meteorological, geological, biological, cultural. The ability to create narrative collapses disordered perception (the surplus, or chaos, of neurological excitation), into a version of reality and at the same time toward a *center of narrative gravity*, a “self” that experiences that reality, a self that is, *by narrative*, extended in time, into the past and the future. This “extended self” is a highly useful tool for survival, and therefore becomes increasingly selected for in the evolutionary process. The advantages of the “extended self” are as follows: firstly, the ability to predict; secondly, the concurrent construction and maintenance of the “perceiving entity,” that which predicts and reacts to prediction—a self, or identity; and thirdly, the stability of the self or identity in time.<sup>55</sup> This leads us to the attraction of

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<sup>54</sup> Currie calls this the “exterior” self. For this self, identity is relational, it inheres in the relations between a person and things (i.e., it is structured by the differences between person and other) and is therefore not “within,” and, inasmuch as identity is a telling of our self's story, we learn how to self-narrate from outside, from other stories. Therefore the narrative structures dominant in the cultural environment become important to the person's self-telling. The self as a function of narrative is additionally compromised in the sense that cultural narratives are compromised.

<sup>55</sup> The following definitions should be considered with the acknowledgment that, while it may be possible to list these features hierarchically, it might not be possible to chronologically place them on a cause-and-effect line.

*Prediction (real and speculative):* The neurologist Rudolpho R. Llinas (as do many others) states that the human mind has evolved toward the purpose of prediction—to be able to guess what will happen at a future moment given a set of circumstances both past and present. Prediction is a linear-based process. The basic function of narrative then is that of creating a semi-stable map or model of experience for use in prediction, a model that requires cognizance and maintenance of a temporal continuum, which in turn serves as the core of self-consciousness, i.e., consciousness of a “self,” that is continuous in time. Argyros, like Llinas, believes that narrative arises as a biological function whose key survival advantage is its ability to handle “counterfactual speculation.” He goes on to note that, according to the anthropologist Peter J. Wilson, the central feature of Darwinian evolution is the gradual development of a brain capable of projecting itself into linear time, especially the past and the future. This counterfactual speculation is equivalent to the creation of “*possible*” worlds, or fictions (stories), which function as *alternative futures and pasts* (“Narrative and Chaos” 663–664).

literature, with literature being a fixing of iconic or significant narratives as culturally and individually relevant. Mark Taylor (borrowing heavily for Nietzsche) puts it this way:

[T]he centered self appears to be more a literary creation than a literal fact. “The ‘subject,’” in other words, “is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what is there.” As the product of the literary imagination, the self assumes the form of a fictive text. From this perspective, “The ‘subject’ is only a fiction.” [...] Insofar as the self is a function of narrative, it can also be understood to be a “narrative function.” (45)<sup>56</sup>

In this chapter, I will establish a context for the physical basis of narrative, by which I do not mean simply the oral and written existence of narrative signs, marks or artifacts (i.e., words on pages bound in books which are themselves forms of organization based on culturally prescribed limits, plots, bindings, covers, etc.); I will be referring to narrative’s “coming into being” as a material phenomenon, the result of local neurological and environmental states. In other words, the generation of the self-narrative is a meeting place between external cultural and internal neurological systems. A large part of my analysis will

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In a similar vein, Young and Saver write, “Narrative framing of the past allows predictions of the future; generating imaginary narratives allows the individual to safely (through internal fictions) explore the varied consequences of multitudinous response options” (78). The predictive quality of the brain is that it is always engaged in limiting, or collapsing, the “possible” into the “probable.” We might expand this predictive function into a kind of “play” the mind continues to engage, a narrative screen saver or default mode into which the mind will fall, as if maintaining the self in downtime.

*Identity.* Identity is the perception of limit—the limit between one entity and another, one group and another—and these perceptions have value within an existing a system of limits. Narrative creates the limits by which identity is composed or defined and by which it may be maintained. For instance cultural identity is established in narratives of myth, literature, history, etc. Similar narratives take place within the individual in the form of individual myths and personal history. One of the first things a child is taught is how to construct narratives of “self”, and then to use these to place him/herself within the larger social construction of identity. This leads to my next point: the individual extended self (as opposed to core self) is in large measure a cultural construct that occurs in relation to various pressures, many of which are felt, transferred, or communicated via language.

*Stability.* Narrative, because it can be physically reproduced and thus communicated, serves survival success by stabilizing the individual and cultural identity. This is due to the development of memory as both a brain function, and a social function with narrative as a *material form* of memory. Predictability and stability are related in that the order of life is related to the stability of identity and causation. What exists now is because of the past and will influence the future. Young and Saver ask: “We come to see our lives as understandable because of their apparent integration, logic, even order: our narratives and their consequent memories tell us that our lives were so” (Young and Saver 79).

<sup>56</sup> Taylor is quoting here from Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*.

consider the concept of the self, especially, but not exclusively, as a compromised locality, based in part on cultural fragmentation and neurological abnormalities. I will be claiming, as well, that this locality is never fixed, that it is constantly shifting, and that narrative is the ongoing process of locating a center, or what we might call “centering.” For Darger, this centering process comes into being and is maintained in the form of a narrative vortex, an identity structure serving as a primary organizational form by which his existence is organized, and more importantly, by which his subjectivity obtains a ground, a location, or more precisely, the suggestion of a center. For Darger, this organizational act becomes identified with, or in relation to, the vortical storm of Sweetie Pie.<sup>57</sup>

The “self,” the feeling of a central experiencer, the “I” or *cogito* is grounded in a complex hierarchy of organizations that can be described from different perspectives as either organic or psychic—again, “something added and invented and projected behind what is there” (Taylor 45). Thus the self may be seen as a governing structure projected *onto or behind* what is really a number of neurological systemic fragments. V.S. Ramachandran suggests that there are at least six or seven distinct “selves,” each a function of separate brain structures (*A Brief Tour* 96-99). For our purposes I will be defining this “self” somewhat more simplistically, as constituted from two directions: 1) from the cultural milieu in which the self is a learned thing; and, 2) from the neurological substrate, those physical mechanics, arrived at through evolutionary selection, in which a sense of selfhood is a biologically advantageous trait. I begin this discussion, briefly, with an overview of the cultural milieu, which, as I have previously mentioned, especially in regards to the writing of *My Life*, is a postmodern milieu dominated by decentered fragmentation, indeterminacy,

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<sup>57</sup> I will look at this identification more closely in Chapter Four.

and an anxiety about the relativity of knowledge and its relationship to communication and self-constitution.

## 2.1 Culture and Self-Narrative

In Chapter One, I mentioned that Darger's literary era, especially with the writing of *My Life*, was the postmodern,<sup>58</sup> coinciding with the growth of mass media, the aftermath of two world wars, and the ever-present threat of possible total annihilation, and that it is perhaps here that we can look for clues to Darger's peculiar narrative structure and content. According to Lyotard, the primary distinguishing characteristic of the postmodern condition is the failure or impotence of meta-narratives: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). David Harvey, writing in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, agrees, pointing out that all descriptions of the postmodern condition have one thing in common, and that is a rejection or distrust of metanarratives, which he defines as, "totalizing discourses" or, "large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application" (45). To put it another way, metanarratives are those narratives used to legitimate knowledge in a particular historical era; they are those "accepted" truths that structure all other truths.<sup>59</sup> Such metanarratives include mythologies, religions, histories, and the dominant, accepted science of the time. Metanarratives are tools for creating the limits or boundaries out of which stable identities are formed—religious

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<sup>58</sup> The postmodern era is generally thought to begin in the 50s, after the catastrophe of WWII and coinciding with the rise of mass media.

<sup>59</sup> The boundary between metanarrative and other types of narrative is itself porous. For instance the absolute materiality upon which this study is based is in itself a metanarrative developing out of contemporary science. Science, Lyotard claims in *The Postmodern Condition*, "has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative" (7). We need only look at the debates surrounding evolution vs. creationism, to see this equivocation process taking place, even between science and narrative, with science as a type of narrative, but *only* one type.

groups, nations, ethnicities, etc. They dominate by marginalizing any and all challenging alternatives to peripheral significance, and they hold their position through their re-presentation, or what Dennett calls clout, or fame, within the storytelling community.<sup>60</sup> This dominance, for our purposes, will be considered equivalent to redundancy,<sup>61</sup> i.e., the presence of certain systemic structures repeated for the purpose of crowding out alternatives. Among other factors, the postmodern condition is characterized by the speed and reach of media and global communication, by which alternate narratives become both present and vastly pluralized; and capable of challenging accepted truth within seconds. We might speculate that, as a consequence of metanarrative decline, competing alternatives will multiply in what we could call a power vacuum or state of equivocation. To put it another way, alternative narratives operate in a state of increasing equivocation with the once dominant metanarratives, and they gain significance in this respect, though none gain dominance. Lyotard states that, as such, modern identity exists at the intersection of many dispersed and increasingly equivocal narrative elements: “One is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. Each of these messages has *less a claim on*

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<sup>60</sup> Dennett believes that “fame” or the “global availability” of a particular information organizing pattern is what we experience as a conscious state (*Sweet Dreams* 136-143), i.e., we are conscious of maintaining, or holding, a pattern, and the length of time that pattern is maintained is what Dennett calls its “fame.” Fame arises in the brain when a particular pattern becomes the shared intentional object of large numbers of “processing demons,” the electro/chemical patterns that participate in or in some manner reflect the dominating pattern, which is most relevant to current bio-chemical “needs” of other parts of the brain and body.

If the ubiquity or redundancy of such patterns in the brain continues to self-organize, or self-sustain until their importance runs out, the fame fades, and the pattern “unravels.” For the period of its dominance, however, we can say that the valence of the ubiquitous pattern is high, facilitating its combination with other patterns. In a revised version of this theory, Dennett suggests that perhaps a better word to describe this “global availability” would be “clout,” a word that suggests political power as opposed to entertainment value (although the latter certainly comes into play).

<sup>61</sup> I will be examining redundancy and self-construction in depth in the next chapter.

*knowledge*, or the meta-knowledge of the meta-narrative” (15, my emphasis).<sup>62</sup> My point here is to relate this breakdown of metanarrative dominance to a concurrent and increasing porosity of the self. Both are directly related to the aforementioned postmodern anxiety about knowledge—what is known, what can be known, the actual ability to know—and this anxiety reflects back upon on the concept of a knower, an agent or central “self” who knows. Thus cultural and individual identities (knowers and their knowledge) are compromised in tandem. As Harvey notes, the postmodern involves a certain plasticity of the self, a self that is not a fixed “thing,” so much as a fluid position. Harvey, citing Jonathan Raban, describes postmodern personal identity as “rendered soft, fluid, endlessly open” to the exercise of the will and the imagination” (5).<sup>63</sup> In this manner the self becomes something that is both constantly sought and constantly reconstituted as needed. Taylor takes this fluidity, this porosity of the self somewhat further, at least rhetorically, when he claims that one of the symptoms of postmodernity is the actual “disappearance of the self,” or self-presence, which he sees as the inevitable outcome of the disappearance of God—the ground of all presence (36).<sup>64</sup> God, of course, is another, perhaps the ultimate metanarrative,

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<sup>62</sup> The rapid increase in information, both in volume and transfer rate, threatens the knowledge base on which culture is formed by challenging it. Increasing information thus can be seen as equivalent to decreasing knowledge, a decrease in what can be known as stable in time. It is this dilution of knowledge that dilutes identity, both cultural and individual.

<sup>63</sup> Raban’s *Soft City* is an account of London life in the 1970s. We can detect in Raban’s formulation a tone of creativity and optimism. Indeed, mutability of the self is often seen as a “freedom.” This freedom seems to be enhanced by postmodernity; indeed, in the lack of dominant metanarratives dictating what one can be, one can be anything, we “make ourselves” in the postmodern world. Some may see in Raban’s “fluidity,” a sign of creeping cultural schizophrenia.

<sup>64</sup> According to Taylor, the other three symptoms of the postmodern are: the Death of God, The End of History, and the Closure of the Book.

and the end of God trickles down to affect each individual in their own self-constitution as the center of their own experience.<sup>65</sup>

My point is that even this “ground of being” is *taught*, maintained in a complex web of systems that have evolved precisely for that purpose, and in fact, the idea of a self changes with every age along with the metanarratives of that age. We can see this self-mutability, even in extremely local (personal) situations, as the idea one has of oneself changes merely with a change of environment, e.g., clothing, other people, etc. Thus the self is mutable in its position within the field or fabric that allows or promotes it, what Lyotard calls a “fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever” (4). This is the field of the postmodern condition and I will return to this discussion later in this chapter. For now, I wish to concentrate on how each individual self is maintained and reconstituted within the physical body’s architecture. Lyotard has suggested that each of us is always located at a “nodal point” or points of specific communications circuits, and he goes on to claim that, “No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (15). The power of the individual to shape those messages lies in what we like to call our “imagination” or “will.” But these are words for the effects of a strictly physical, primarily neurological, architecture, and it is to this architecture I now wish to turn and where another set of decentralizing agents may be found operating.

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<sup>65</sup> Even while acknowledging that the self is primarily a cultural product, a shifting node in a constantly changing web of relationships, it is difficult to dispense with the idea of an absolute self (soul), the “self-in-itself.”

## 2.1 Neurology and the Narration of Self

Many suffer from the incurable disease of writing, and it becomes chronic in their sick minds. —Juvenal, (*Satires* 7.51)

In Chapter One, I began to suggest a background for looking at Darger’s text as the trace left by vortical organization of recursive strings or spirals of narrative units emerging within an ongoing undirected, nearly turbulent narrative. Here, I again emphasize that, in order to study a narrative/literary text, as the trace or residue of a dynamic flow, we must think of textual production in terms of its relation to physical laws—neurological events producing words on a page.<sup>66</sup> In the perspective of the contemporary physical sciences—physics, neurology, or biology—the mental events most associated with the “self,” i.e., our subjective “feelings” or emotions, may be seen as evolutionarily beneficial—the product of bifurcating physical paths within a field of selection pressures. Thus feelings and emotions, though highly complex to the point of being “mysterious,” are still physical events that will, under the right analytical lens, reveal elements of physical patterns.<sup>67</sup> To look at feelings, emotions or *qualia* in this manner can seem counter-intuitive or even offensive to many.<sup>68</sup> Neurologists themselves find it necessary to integrate their scientific knowledge with their “humanity.” Ramachandran provides us with an example of such a statement:

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<sup>66</sup> Of course a materialist view of the spirit or psyche is not the product of any new science, but, in the West at least, can be traced back to the Greek atomists (discussed earlier) for whom all cognitive processes were corporeal processes, and the soul was but a finer kind of matter self-organizing within the “system” of the individual. However, the Greeks would not have used the terminology of systems theory.

<sup>67</sup> This in itself is an assumption in that the self is the product of a cultural organization, and not an *a priori* given.

<sup>68</sup> *Qualia* is defined as the “feeling of the qualities” of things, in other words, that it is “like something” to experience these qualities. Primary examples are the emotions that are felt in the experience of certain colors or sounds. Neurologists often speculate that the feeling of self itself is a *qualia*; it is a feeling of what it is like to have a feeling—i.e., it is like something to experience phenomena uniquely.

Even though it is common knowledge, it never ceases to amaze me that all the richness of mental life—all our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our ambitions, our love lives, our religious sentiments and even what each of us regards as his or her own intimate private self—is simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in our heads, in our brains. There is nothing else. (*A Brief Tour* 3)

In a similar statement the neurologist Antonio Damasio comments on the physicality of qualities:

I do not see emotions and feelings as the intangible and vaporous qualities that many presume them to be. Their subject matter is concrete, and they can be related to specific systems in the body and brain, no less so than vision or speech. [...] Finally it is important to realize that defining emotion and feeling as concrete, cognitively and neurally, does not diminish their loveliness or horror, or their status in poetry or music. (164)

The neuroscientist Alice Flaherty is perhaps most diplomatic in her embrace of a materialistic approach to the study of self-expression; specifically referring to the act of writing, she states:

My belief that I write because I love to is not inconsistent with my belief that I do so because my brain is in a particular state. Yet the pain of the mind-body problem—the question of how mental states such as experiences, beliefs, and desires can relate to brain states such as neuronal membrane potentials, receptor densities, and wiring diagrams—does not vanish as quickly as the problem itself. However logically consistent it may be to believe that I write both because I choose to and because I am a chain of molecular interactions, to think them at the same time hurts—perhaps for the same reason it hurts that light is at once a wave and a particle. (39)

Flaherty has been engaged in the study of the neurological roots of creative narrative, which she attributes to “the neurobiology of mood” and what she calls the “limbic drive to write” (33). Debates about the relationships between language, narrative, neurology and self, are far from resolved, but my point here is that there is much evidence to indicate that the physicality of the “feeling of self” and the physical technology of narrative (storytelling) are coevolved and interdependent. The obvious place to look for this interdependency is in the creation of long-term, repeatable memory. The most important technology of memory

transmission comes into being with the advent of writing, which allows the fixing of both cultural and individual memory in a form that can be transmitted across generations with far less noise than aural or image-based technologies.<sup>69</sup> Written narration is a more stable record of self-maintenance in which we see individual memory binding itself to public memory in an interdependent stabilizing process. It is endlessly repeatable through print, thus augmenting its potential redundancy and its capability of infiltrating larger and longer-term narrative frames, again, achieving what Dennett calls clout. The end effect, of course, is to counteract noise and chaos by maintaining stable patterns of meaning and identity over time.<sup>70</sup>

One form of individual memory rendered in concrete narrative is autobiography. Autobiography is a public form (as opposed to private diaries or journals) of individual “self-telling” or “self-knowing” set in some semi-permanent media. Young and Saver suggest that “autobiography,” as a narrative art form, imposes a narrative structure and thus coherence on our lives, and exists in the form that it does as a consequence of how our brains function: “To desire narrative reflects a kind of fundamental desire for life and self that finds its source in our neurological make-up. [...] Autobiography imposes narrative’s form on the consciousness of an “I’s” experience, and exists as a consequence of how the “I’s” brain organizes experience” (80). Autobiography may turn life into art but it could also be said that life *is already* art, in that the perception of life is already a constant organization and reorganization of the phenomenal world.

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<sup>69</sup>. This may be debatable. Noise is the irrelevant static, the distracting signals that interfere with the reading/processing of information. Of course, what is information at one level of reading can seem as noise at another level of reading.

<sup>70</sup>. In information theory noise is that which interferes with the transmission of a message. Noise can be created by chaos and can be considered a manifestation of chaos in the communication system.

The gist of the present discussion is to demonstrate that narrative is biologically based; there has been a “pressure” to select for it; the resultant physical organs selected and evolved to produce narrative are just that—physical organs. Increasing evidence shows that the self (which we are considering a product of narrative) can be radically altered by physical abnormalities, be they congenital, or the result of violation. Lobotomies were a formerly common technique of altering the psychology of an individual by excising parts of the brain. These generally resulted in severe emotional flattening and loss of personality. Today we are more likely to use mood-altering drugs—chemicals that change the balance of neurotransmitters. The use of these drugs may result in personality changes (either subtle or severe) bringing about increased or decreased abilities to narrate the self. In other words, physical alterations of the brain can result in “*disnarrativa*,” i.e., states of impairment experienced by individuals with discrete localized damage in those regions of the neural network that serve human narrative. A patient’s ability to tell stories or to conceive of themselves in story form may be radically altered, thus: “Defects in fictive self-narrative construction destabilize and distort the human personality” (Young and Saver 77). We can extrapolate thus that a person can become unlike himself or herself, or for that matter, like somebody else. At the extreme, “Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narrative [...] have lost themselves” (Young and Saver 78). The neurologist Oliver Sacks has done extensive studies on the effects of neurological alteration, presenting cases in which minor physical change in the brain can alter the personality. Sacks writes: “the whole affective basis of life can be undercut by neurological damage” (*Mars* 288). In addition, disturbances of identity do not necessarily have to be directly brain-based; trauma in other parts of the body can produce inappropriate narrative response. One such example would be the

phenomenon of the “ghost limb,” whereby people who have lost limbs still “feel” them and the feeling of the presence of that limb can influence their narrative construction of reality. Other forms of physical and psychological trauma can also cause “real” memories of a false past.

### **2.1.2 Darger and Neurological Abnormality**

This brings us back to the subject at hand, the case of Henry Darger. Darger has generally been considered an “outsider” artist and that designation often carries with it an assumption of psychological/social abnormality—of being outside normal social structures. This assumption is also a prejudice based on various economic and cultural ideas of what an artist should be and the role they should play in society. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the “outsider artists” studied by Prinzhorn (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*), MacGregor (*The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*) and Thévoz (*Art Brut*), etc., were, in fact, institutionalized. Darger was as well—as a child he was diagnosed as being “feeble minded,” a general-purpose diagnosis of as yet undefined mental “deficiencies.” Feeble-mindedness *per se* no longer exists as a diagnosis, and there has been much speculation on what Darger’s actual mental condition might have been. MacGregor examines such diagnostic problems in an appendix to his study (*In the Realms*, “Appendix A, On the Problem of Diagnosis” 656-665), acknowledging the difficulty of making any diagnosis without the presence of the patient, and with virtually no witnesses to the patient’s behavior. MacGregor does, however, believe some diagnosis can be made simply on the *abundance* of material left by Darger which, as he states, looked at objectively, would far *exceed* any collection of psychoanalytical interviews.

Some of the possible diagnoses entertained have been: mental retardation, Williams Syndrome, Tourettes Syndrome and Multiple Personality Disorder, chronic psychosis, and schizophrenia. There has also been speculation that Darger was the subject of extreme abuse and even satanic cult rituals. MacGregor mentions these possibilities mostly to dismiss them. He leans instead toward Asperger's Syndrome, a condition at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum: "It is this diagnosis which now informs my view of Darger's unusual but not unknown mental state. It is, significantly, a diagnosis which accounts not only for his disabilities, but also, and dramatically, for a number of his astonishing talents and abilities" (659). There is indeed much evidence in Darger's life and work to consider such a diagnosis, but I will not commit to, nor limit my present discussion to Asperger's. As mentioned, the point of this chapter is to establish what I will call a compromised self, an insecure or porous subject—an unfixed center around which the excessive and redundant narrative of *My Life* circles, like a low-pressure area in the formation of a storm.

To that end, I will examine five possible syndromes or diagnoses and the neurological conditions that may underlie them and may (speculatively) have affected Darger and his narrative output. It is not my intention to make a diagnosis, as this is, posthumously (barring autopsy), impossible, but to point out possible physical causes for the eccentricities of Darger's textual production, and to establish a physical foundation for those eccentricities. Neither is it my intention to present a full analysis of these conditions in relation to Darger, as each would be a lengthy study on its own. I wish only to highlight the reasonable connections that can be made between the physiological state of Darger's body/brain and the writing of *My Life*, its structure and obsessional themes. Nor do I wish to state that such physical causes, if they exist, are the sole reason for Darger's eccentric

output, and so it also needs to be reemphasized that Darger, as a writer, is not operating autonomously—he is reacting to, and in concert with, the (postmodern) culture in which his writing takes place: i.e., the systems of economics, information, cultural maintenance and defense.<sup>71</sup> In addition, I wish to emphasize that the neurological conditions below are presented less as examples of unique abnormalities in self-construction than as positions on a fluid continuum of self-construction, a continuum shared by *all humans* as they struggle to locate and define themselves against cultural and neurological pressures of dissolution and fragmentation.<sup>72</sup> Though I may be accused here of reductionism, it is my position that, in this case, such reductionism will provide a useful key for understanding the text. All individuals are subject to physiological facts that determine their subjectivity and their ability to communicate. These facts also determine how they “feel” themselves as well as how they are perceived, or “felt” by others. In the end, in terms of the result, i.e., narrative (specifically Darger’s *My Life*) it is not really possible to separate neurology from environment. We will see this over and over again in Darger’s narration of his conditions, especially in relation to pain, trauma, and the various public narratives with which he engages, and also in the relationship of hypergraphia and abnormal collecting compulsions to industrial and commercial consumerism. I have also left out the obvious possibility of “old age” as a neurological abnormality. Darger was in his early 70s at the time of writing

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<sup>71</sup> If postmodernity presents, or rather, is, a crisis of knowledge impacting self-constitution, we might say that neurological conditions can present a similar crisis on the level of the self. As Lyotard writes: “A self does not amount to much; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (15).

<sup>72</sup> There is a divide in Darger studies over the issue of Darger’s mental condition, his awareness of his artistic intentions, the self-consciousness about being an artist, and how the peculiarities of his output (high redundancy, the over simplicity of character and theme, etc.) are related to any neurological abnormalities. The tendency among contemporary critics is toward normalization, to see Darger as a self-conscious artist and to view the aforementioned peculiarities as being on the continuum of those integral to all artistic pursuits over the ages and cultures. It is not necessarily my intention to disagree with this view but rather to assume that all creativity is neurologically bound and related to self-construction as physical event.

*My Life*, and it is true that some of the eccentricities of the text—repetition compulsion, drifting storytelling, obsessional imagery—could be at least partially due to his age. Old age is often accompanied by a decline in the sharpness of the senses, which may impact self-constitution.<sup>73</sup> There is also a marked decline in memory causing a grasping after facts and a subsequent tenacity manifest as repeating patterns. I would suggest however, that obsessive and repetitive behaviors were evident long before Darger's advanced age.

Given the above cautionary note, I will develop an overview of how each of these five possible neurological conditions can result in either compromised subjectivity and/or excessive narrative output. I will discuss them in the following order: Physical trauma or pain; Psychological trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); Asperger's Syndrome/Autism; Compulsive Hoarding Disorder (CH), often an effect of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, (OCD); and, finally, Hypergraphia, often an effect of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE). Each of these diagnoses has a neurological (physical) basis that affects behavior, sometimes in profound ways. I will define the disorder/syndrome and give the (often speculative) neurological basis for it. I will then analyze the ways in which Darger may manifest those symptoms, either in his behavior or in his writing. Lastly, I will show how each condition allows for the generation of excess in Darger's writing and life. My goal is to link an "anxiety of self" to the generation of excess narrative, and it is, in turn, that excess that will lead to the emphasis upon the vortex as both sign and structure of self-telling.

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<sup>73</sup> There are, of course, ample exceptions to this generalization about old age. However, the phenomenon of mental decline is very often noted across cultures.

## **2.2 The Unmaking of Self: *Speculative Diagnoses #1, Physical Trauma/Pain***

I begin with the simplest diagnosis of what would have affected Darger's sense of self and his generation of text—that diagnosis is the presence of physical pain, both as a complaint of the author and as a subject of his writing. If we go strictly by what is written in his biography and concurrent diaries, we know that Darger was in a state of chronic pain (or at least he was obsessed with it) throughout his life. In “The Autobiography” he remembers various pains he lived with as a child, and he is evidently in a state of permanent chronic pain when he is writing. Pain shows up in numerous ways throughout the catastrophic books, as evidenced in the descriptions of torn up and wounded bodies, in the screams of victims, and in the general landscape of evisceration.

### **2.2.1 The Neurology of Pain**

As a physical phenomenon the experience of pain is familiar to all, whereas what it feels like to be autistic or to suffer from OCD is essentially unfamiliar to most people. Pain is generally thought to exist as a warning that something is systematically amiss, thus, the neurology of pain might seem obvious in that we know it results from the physical violation of the body, or from some other disturbance of its internal systems. I will here address the various systems of control that come into play and that are part of the pain system. In regard to pain avoidance, Ronald Melzack and Patrick Wall have suggested a “gate-control theory,” in which a mechanism in the spinal cord controls the flow of neuronal stimuli from the body's peripheries to the brain, where pain is registered (Glucklich, 52-53). One of these control mechanisms is the release of endorphins. Thus the nature and intensity of pain depends in some part on a decision (a bifurcation path taken) in the brain and not solely on

peripheral stimulation. The underlying psychological and even philosophical implications are far-reaching; such controls seem to imply that our experiences are shaped in significant ways by “central,” and perhaps genetically built-in structures. In other words, experience is more than simple input; it also relies on center biasing (synthesis, interpretation, and inhibition), by what Melzack calls the neuromatrix—an anatomical network that consists of neural loops that read incoming impulses according to characteristic patterns or “neurosignatures.”<sup>74</sup> The neuromatrix is critical in its body-self identification function, coordinating input and output in such a way that we have the experience of owning our own body, which of course is significant in that it allows us to function as a unity, as a center for the experience of the world.

### 2.2.2 Symptomatology of Pain

Pain of course can be brief or long-term and the effects are psychologically different. Ariel Glucklich differentiates between acute and chronic pain and that chronic is the type of pain most often sought by and associated with religious feelings, being related to a state or a status of existence such as punishment, trial, etc. (51).<sup>75</sup> Glucklich says: “Chronic pain sufferers deal with a range of issues that never occur to patients of acute pain, and in fact, their very identity becomes linked to their pain” (52). I am going to address specifically

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<sup>74</sup> These neural loops exist between the thalamus and the cortex as well as the cortex and limbic system. The system is hardwired inasmuch as it is anatomically genetic, but it is also soft-wired, possessing a plasticity, or flexibility for changing synaptic connections according to learning.

<sup>75</sup> In this sense chronic pain is related to what Simone Weil would call affliction, the long-term suffering of the body that is often viewed as a punishment. “It is quite a different thing from suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery” (*Waiting for God* 117).

chronic pain in that, like other neurologically-based conditions, it can have an effect on personality and especially on the structure and conceptualization of self.<sup>76</sup>

Elaine Scarry, in her study *The Body in Pain*, addresses the issue of representing pain in language, an attempt at representation that must fail because it “is an effort to conceptualize a subjective experience that has no external objective features, [...] [pain] has no referent content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (5). This leads Scarry to conclude that pain is in fact *language-destroying*, as she has written previously: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). If extreme pain temporarily destroys (for the individual sufferer) language’s ability to mean or even to exist, we might extrapolate that along with this destruction of language comes a destruction of narrative and of the self, and indeed Scarry comes to a similar conclusion: “Prolonged and unremitting pain has the effect of destroying the victim’s ability to communicate and finally shatters his or her entire world, including even the self” (42). Considering chronic pain as a form of affliction, Simone Weil addresses the loss of self in this statement: “Affliction is anonymous before all things; it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. [...] Its victims] will never believe anymore that they are anyone. (*Waiting for God* 125)

In addition, the problem of pain is bound up with the problem of power, of agency, and of will, and these in turn are bound up with the self, via what Scarry calls the “language of agency” (11-13). Because the devastating experience of pain can lead to a disempowered silence, the sufferer is sometimes driven to find or borrow a language that regains some of

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<sup>76</sup> I will discuss pain in a spiritual framework in more depth in Chapter Five.

that lost agency. This language can take the form of “fictional analogues, perhaps whole paragraphs of words, that can be borrowed when the real-life crisis of silence comes” (10). What Scarry hints at here is something that I will discuss later—that the subject finds forms for the containment of meaning by borrowing stories to *represent* pain, as opposed to *describing* it. Darger’s continual borrowing of, and from, catastrophic narratives might be considered a good example of precisely this attempt to regain agency.

### 2.2.3 Darger and Pain

Indeed, it may well be that Darger’s life is dominated by pain at the time of writing *My Life*, but his pain is not limited to his immediate experience, it is also a prominent part of his remembered experience. Pain is manifest throughout the text of *My Life*, in terms of: 1) SUBJECT MATTER; 2) METAPHOR OF MOTION; and 3) generator of LENGTH.

1) AS SUBJECT MATTER: We find numerous references to his pains in “The Autobiography” section of *My Life*, especially toward the end.

One morning when us boys were in what is called the “playroom” Johnnie Johnson known as the most bad of the boys teased or tormented me.

At that time I was suffering from a very severe tootache The pain and his torment of me roused me to an awful fury. (45)

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After I worked there for three and a half years, it happened because ∅ violent pains of a bum leg I was forced to quit and retire, and am retired yet. Even before then during Christmas and New Years of the years before my leg me severe pain, especially at night. Though it don’t bother me so much now, I always need the walking stick to go out with. I am on Social Security and yet get only enough to barely live on. (105-106)

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Now to go back to my ill nature and character. I did not and will not bear things going wrong. I wont stand for the slightest pain anywhere, though most of my pains were very severe, and I want everything under any conditions to come my way.

If things went wrong during any kind of work I do, Ill say I lose my temper terribly and say things the saints and all the angels would be ashamed of me for.

For what I had said in the past, for my severe face pains when I was employed at St Josephs Hospital Im surprised yet relieved, that one of them did not strike me for it. (116-117)

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What did you say? I am being a saint? Ha. Ha. I am one, and a very sorry Saint I am. Ha Ha, How can I be a saint when I wont stand for trials, bad luck, pains in my knees or otherwise.

I am afraid I was a sort of devil if I may call my self one, during the bad pain of my knee at night I had forgot to mention that in the early part of September 1917 I was drafted into the army, when the United States entered the latest part of World war 1 one. (158)

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To go back to my cross of suffering I would not bear I firmly believe There is no one not even you my reader who would Im sure. who would put up with such pains, my past severe toothaches, face pains, and side pains and other things I don't find time to mention here.

The knee pain at night I must confess and am not ashamed to tell of it. I actually shook my fist towards heaven.

I did not mean it for God though, though I felt like it.

What sin it was if it was one I do not know for sure but when I told it in confession the priest was disturbed admonished me, and gave me a severe or long prayer penance to recite. Yet the severe knee pain drove me to yet while working on the first floor at St Josephs Hospital, in the main ward, or rooms, I never found any patients who put up with any severe pains ei either.

Then why should I and people who do suffer are usually crabby or hard to get along with.

Yet despite that pain even bothering me severely in the morning I went to and stayed through three Holy Masses, a week on Thursday Saturday and Sunday.

And also to work on the working day. Yet I stood it.

Would you have done it? (159-161)

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Though were they small ones I have committed sins because of these trials disappointments and things going wrong or not running smoothly and especially all sorts of childhood pains and miseries. I was very <sup>Dangerous</sup> (dangerous) if teased

For my part to go back to my working time at St Josephs hospital with your granted permission, I had had toothaches very bad ones, and once severe

pains where teeth had been pulled, that would not stop day or night. but much worse at night.

The pain was on both sides in the upper jaws You I suppose would have been ashamed of me because of the terrible language and blasphemous words I said constantly during this pain. (165-166)

Darger's attention to pain can be also detected in his diaries, which are roughly concurrent to the writing of *My Life*: such as this entry dated March 29, 1968: "Tantrums over tangles, and tied knots slipping in twine. Threaten to throw ball at sacred image because of this difficulty. Leg pain still continues because of my ill humor. Yet today go to five masses. Sure I not a saint—maybe a sorry one" (Bonesteel 250)

It is telling to note that Darger's pain is never due to an action he engaged; it is rather always visited upon him, and sometimes mysteriously. We see this in his continual confusion about the sources of pain—the inability to locate such sources leaving him and his doctors baffled. In addition, while he does not come out and say his pains are punitive—he does seem to believe that there is some kind of cosmic injustice involved.<sup>77</sup>

2) AS METAPHOR OF MOTION: Another place we can see pain in Darger's writing is in the descriptive language he uses—verbs, adverbs, adjectives—much of it based upon wild or uncontrollable motion: the constant whirling, flying, swirling, screaming, howling of the tornado, the shuddering and throbbing of victims and landscapes, all of which is very much like pain translated into noise and motion. That pain opens the senses to a chaotic motion is evident in the results of the McGill Pain Questionnaire (MPG) which records the language used to represent pain and which show a similarity across cultures (Glucklich 74–77). Asked to describe their pain, patients responded with lists of words such as: flickering, throbbing,

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<sup>77</sup>. We might also look at the obvious violence Darger's enacted on those fictional characters whom he most cherished (innocent children) as a example of Scarry's concept of "taking control," i.e., I will take control of the pain I suffer by inflicting it on the one I love.

shooting, pricking, drilling, pinching, gnawing, tugging, burning, stinging, splitting, tiring, suffocating, terrifying, punishing, blinding, intense, radiating, piercing, squeezing, freezing, nagging, and torturing. Glucklich refers us to the “Book of Job” as a canonical western description of pain: being penetrated by arrows, being torn apart, being gnashed with teeth, broken in two, being seized by the neck and dashed to pieces, being burst open, being tossed on a storm having his skin turn black and fall off (45). Such words and metaphors are a large part of the Dargerian vocabulary.<sup>78</sup>

3) AS GENERATOR OF LENGTH: Referring back to the gate-control theory of pain management mentioned earlier, we might postulate that, for Darger, writing itself is a form of gate control for the chronic pain he suffered throughout his life, and this might explain the apparent obsessive length of the works, as well as the obsessive completeness of the worlds those works contain. Darger’s five- and ten-thousand page manuscripts may be a symptom of his pain, then, both as a diversion and as a safety valve, moving the mind away from the oppressive corporeality. Citing Scarry again, the power of pain is its ability to unmake worlds. Conversely, the struggle to make worlds can function as acts of overcoming pain, thus the imagination comes into play. It is also true that, as mentioned, the imagination, unable to contain or to truly describe pain, may well go into a kind of overdrive. As with the phantom limb, the absence of the actual limb interferes with what would be normal feedback (a signal that the act has taken place) and so the messages to move the limb become more frequent and stronger. In the case of chronic pain, the self itself is shattered or dislocated, the need to locate it through narration is then over-done leading to logorrhea or hypergraphia.

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<sup>78</sup>. In addition, Kenneth Mah has found that the words used to describe orgasm are similar to those describing pain—shuddering, quivering, shooting, throbbing, spreading, flooding (Glucklich 46)—and from this relationship we might make further speculations on the fascination with pain as part of, or an alternative to, sexuality. In terms of Darger’s descriptions of torn bodies it is also possible to associate his wound fascination with his pain and sexuality, a topic I will address in Chapter Four.

### 2.3 **The Absence at the Center of Experience:** *Speculative Syndrome #2, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

One diagnosis that has been suggested for Darger, though not much investigated, is the possibility of trauma, which has been defined as an experience that is either so violent or so disturbing that it causes a crisis of representation, specifically in memory. Trauma studies came into being primarily through the interviews of holocaust victims, but they also include, retrospectively, what is today called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, a term that arose from the study of veterans and soldiers.<sup>79</sup> PTSD refers to a complex of symptoms that are the result of experiencing physical and psychological trauma, and that can last throughout one's life. These symptoms can include a failure of attention, or memory, and even a change in the personality of the traumatized victim.

Trauma can be of the physical or psychological basis. In this section I will specifically be addressing psychological trauma, the type that might be induced by childhood abuse (physical or sexual), or that which is associated with traumatic loss.<sup>80</sup> As the study of trauma proceeds and the definition has grown increasingly complicated, contested and/or expanded, to the point of including secondary or vicarious trauma such as that experienced by “the reader or viewer of stories or films about traumatic situations” (Kaplan 39). This kind of vicarious trauma can be due to empathetic over-arousal etc., and in fact it is a symptom that is even reported among therapists who deal with traumatized patients.

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<sup>79</sup>. PTSD is the latest preferred term among others, including: Neurasthenia, War Neurosis, Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue, etc.

<sup>80</sup>. It is important to note, however, that psychological trauma is still a matter of an altered physical substrate.

### 2.3.1 Neurology of PTSD

The neurological foundation for PTSD lies in the way traumatic memories are thought to be registered in a different part of the brain and that the re-experiencing of such memories is much more similar to the re-living of them. In other words, trauma is more likely to be remembered in a *non-narrative manner* similar to muscular or purely emotional memory, or a learned physical reaction. Traumatic non-narrative remembering may be caused by radical changes in the brain chemistry at the time of trauma and the subsequent recording of the memory. The altered perception of time that takes place in an accident or in a particularly frightening situation is commonly understood. Such altered temporal perception is partly due to increased attention, but it is also caused by a change in neurotransmitter concentrations (along with other chemicals, such as adrenalin). These changes may be proportionate to the stimulus, and radical traumatic events can cause radical degrees of change in the brain chemistry. Many theorists today believe that the traumatic experience bypasses the hippocampus (the area of the brain where memory imprints itself, becoming “narrativized”), establishing patterns directly in the amygdala, (the area of the brain more associated with primal physical and emotional memory). This resultant “memory” is thus available to sensory stimulation but *not to the narrative faculties*. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart suggest that the extreme nature of traumatic experience cannot be assimilated to available patterns or “models of experience,” and since it must register somewhere, it registers immediately *as physical memory* (170). Martin Hoffman believes that trauma involves emotional as opposed to “conscious” memory, the

latter requiring cortical processing (LeDoux 38).<sup>81</sup> My point here is that trauma creates physical affects that change both the nature of, and the access to, memory and the narratability of self-hood via memory.

### 2.3.2 Symptomatology of PTSD

If traumatic memory is non-narrative, then how does it affect narrative? Roger Luckhurst suggests that trauma causes a “nagging sense of a gap that structures memory by its absence”; it is an “abyssal vanishing,” or what Ann Scott calls a “radical unthinkable,” (Luckhurst 37). This terrifying discontinuity or intermittency at the core of the subject is similar to what Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart call the “black hole” at the center of experience. This absence, or lack of ground, compels narrativization, i.e., it demands that stories be told, yet without an originary story to serve as ground for the telling. One might say this gap functions like a “low-pressure” area, drawing additional narration toward it, narration that will inevitably fail to manifest the absent memory, and so this narration will continue to spiral around the absence in a shape (which we might call vortical) that *seems to manifest* even as it also conceals the absence. This shape of revealing/concealing can be said to be the engine of traumatic narrative production. Indeed, studies of trauma victims have shown a marked tendency of the storyteller to avoid, or “cover up” the unsaid by circling repeatedly around it, generating extraneous excess at the margins. Thus the trauma-driven

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<sup>81</sup>. LeDoux also argues that in some human cases, the victim is conscious of trauma and that two circuits can be created at the same time: one in which the cortex is bypassed, and another in a circuit that includes the cortex. In this case the trauma does find its way into memory. Martin Hoffman, who bases his research on that of LeDoux, speculates that signals born of traumatic stimuli “are linked synaptically to sensory images (e.g., sounds sights, smells of blood in battle) that reach the amygdala about the same time [...] because these images are salient and powerful enough to bypass the cortex and take a quick route through the thalamus” (Kaplan 37). As a result, Hoffman says, “the sensory images become the conditioned stimulus (CS) component of a powerful CS-Thalamus-Amygdala circuit [which, according to LeDoux] may be the ‘neural’ basis of PTSD” (Kaplan 37–38).

narrative may announce itself by its repetitiveness, its overabundance—the excess being the sign of the absence. We can extrapolate then, that self-narrative, the construction of the self in time, especially as it involves memory, will be distorted by trauma.

Up till now I have been speaking of trauma as an individual experience and the disorder of a single neurological system. However, I also wish to make the point that trauma and PTSD can also be carried culturally.<sup>82</sup> In fact, David Becker suggests that trauma cannot be understood in the context of the individual only: “Trauma can only be understood with reference to the specific contexts in which it occurs” (qtd. in Kaplan 39). One is not just looking at an individual who has suffered but at what surrounds that person’s suffering—his or her environment, specific institutions involved, the state of the community, its politics, and how experience is defined in these surrounding narratives.<sup>83</sup> In addition, I would add that these prevalent cultural narratives, or again, to use Dennett’s terminology, the “fame” or “clout” of prevalent memes in the culture, affect not only the individual’s perception and experience of trauma, but also the models that individual has available for narrativizing the event.<sup>84</sup> This can have bizarre effects upon both individual and cultural memory. By way of illustration I cite Luckhurst’s studies on the relationship between the cultural zeitgeist and the personal narratives of trauma sufferers, especially in relation to science fiction narratives

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<sup>82</sup> I suggest the distinction that cultural trauma is memetic, cultural forgetting, whereas individual trauma is neurological. This also suggests that the transmission of memes is part of a cultural nervous system including mass media and community gossip.

<sup>83</sup> Becker believes “that in each different social context people should create their own definition of trauma within a framework, in which the basic focus is not so much on the symptom of a person but on the sequential development of the traumatic situation” (qtd. Kaplan 39).

<sup>84</sup> Today we see an openness and even the encouragement for patients to narrativize trauma, especially in the case of child abuse, which previously would have had very limited models.

such as the alien abduction stories that proliferated in the 80s and 90s.<sup>85</sup> Luckhurst believes that such genre-appropriation facilitates the resurrection of the absent memory, but it is not the memory itself. And, as we have seen, the memory itself may not be registered in the brain—it is not accessible and so any adoption of narrative will continue to circle around it and repeat itself. The absence at the center of experience gives birth to unclosed narratives, stories that cannot end, tales that are never really told, although the attempt at telling is retold and distorted over time.

### 2.3.3 Darger and PTSD

PTSD is a diagnosis that would not have existed in Darger's day, although the circumstances of Darger's life are replete with opportunities for trauma. I will address three of the most likely possibilities. The first is DEATH and loss, specifically the traumatic losses of both Darger's mother and sister, later his father, and then his only friend, William Schloeder. Secondly, there is the possibility of childhood SEXUAL ABUSE. His early years as a street urchin could have brought him into contact with various unsavory characters and made him subject to such abuse. Thirdly, there is the possibility of INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE he may have suffered, especially in the Lincoln Asylum for feeble-minded children, as that institution, in fact, came under investigation on charges of inmate abuse.

1) DEATH: The first traumatic events of Darger's life, the loss of his mother and sister, are also the first events mentioned in *My Life*. These events, however, are given very

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<sup>85</sup> Luckhurst has found a correlation between alien abduction stories and childhood sexual trauma. He believes that the presence and social validation of alien abduction stories allows trauma victims to use them as a means of narrativizing their own gap in memory: "So it is that abduction becomes an unforeseen 'explanation' of trauma, and people begin to describe their life experience through this etiology, fully convinced of its efficacy precisely *because* of its generic nature." Luckhurst's analysis is based on the phenomenon, in the 80s and 90s, of memory retrieval, which led to the claim of False Memory Syndrome, both coinciding with "The emergence of sexual abuse as the model of traumatic forgetting" (33), causing a great deal of focused attention in society.

little elaboration. As *My Life* begins, Darger announces in effect his lack of knowledge about his own birth, which is made temporally equivalent to his mother's death, all of it taking place in a limbo-like "no-time": "In the month of April, on the 12, in the year of 1892, of what week day I never knew, as I was never told, nor did I seek the information. Also I do not remember the day my mother died, or who adopted my baby sister" (1). After this, he almost never brings mother and sister up again. There is a significant gap in Darger's history, involving the complete absence of memories, thoughts, overt fantasies, or even questions, about his mother. MacGregor suggests that Darger's failure to remember anything about her death, or about his sister's disappearance, may be due to his possible absence from the scene (i.e., he was away). It may, of course, also be due to the traumatic nature of these losses, and MacGregor does make this connection: "So traumatic were these two losses that Henry possessed no memories of his mother, or of his life at home with her prior to her death. Strikingly, he does not seem, even in later life, to have known his mother's name" (33). Some years later (1905), Darger's father dies: "While back at the home I received a severe shock. I got the bad news that my father died at the St Augustine home. I did not cry or weep however. I had that kind of deep sorrow, that bad as you feel I could not" (62). Although the statement is somewhat ambiguous, it does suggest that Darger is unable to access or remember anything more than "deep sorrow." Whatever subtlety of emotion Darger might or should have felt at his father's death was turned into anger, and in a rare reflective passage Darger admits this. As was the case with his mother, once the death is recorded, Darger does not speak of his father again in the narrative. The other death that affects Darger is the loss of this friend William Schloeder.

When in San Antonio three years my fried Whillie died on the 5 of May. (I forgot the year) of the Asian Flue and since that happened I am all alone.

I never paled with any one since. Where I worked I could not get off to go to his funeral. Afterwards I never could find out where his sister went for she went somewhere not leaving any known address. I believe she went to Mexico where she intended to go anyway. (125-126)

Darger seems to give this event slightly more emotional room. Schroeder died somewhat later, in a more mature and settled part of Darger's life, and this is perhaps the reason for his ability to reflect on his sadness, even if it is in a rather abrupt manner.

2) SEXUAL ABUSE: In the case of possible sexual traumas Darger acknowledges nothing, and nothing can be specifically pointed to, although we can detect a vague or suggestive undercurrent to certain events. In one such case, Darger relates a childhood experience in which he had apparently befriended a much older man. "I used to go and see a night watchman in a six story factory building a short distance from where we lived" (36-37). The nature of this friendship cannot be known. MacGregor speculates that: "Though this may have been an innocent friendship, it suggests that certain unmet needs were leading Henry to seek friends in less than ideal situations. He appears to have been aware of possible danger from people he encountered on the street" (*In the Realms* 38). The people Darger might have encountered in his particular neighborhood would not be participants in middle class family life. It was, in fact, a neighborhood rapidly declining into transience.

MacGregor's portrait of Darger's childhood neighborhood is working class bordering on commercial (33). However, during Darger's time there—the turn of the century—Madison Street, from West Halsted to the Chicago River, just over a block away from Darger's home, was known as the Main Stem, a skid row area of pawn shops, cheap lodgings, and brothels,

which would have attracted “unsavory” characters (Hoch and Slayton 29-34).<sup>86</sup> Despite the transience and poverty, Hoch and Slayton point out that another attraction of these rooming-house districts was the relatively open sexuality, which included homosexuality and prostitution (20-24).<sup>87</sup> The point here is that ample opportunity existed for traumatic sexual encounters in Darger’s early unsupervised childhood on the streets.

3) INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE: A third possibility of trauma exists in Darger’s habitation in various “institutions.” The first of these institutions was the Newsboys home to which he was sent at 8 years of age. Secondly, and more importantly, is the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, where Henry lived from 1904-1909 from approximately 12-17 years of age. We might assume that Darger’s internment at this institution would have been a traumatic experience by modern standards. But Darger does not mention any kind of abuse and, in fact, he seems to have romanticized his life there to the point of wishing he could return:

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<sup>86</sup> Hoch and Slayton write that between 1880 and 1920 the United States saw a massive and constant migration of transient workers. Chicago was the center of much of this migration and by the turn of the century, the Main Stem had become the largest of the three major transient districts in Chicago, with its SROs, lodging and rooming houses, and labor exchanges. It was the “primary lodging house and service district for homeless and nearly homeless men and women in Chicago.” Another study, *Skid Row* by William McSheehy, describes how numerous dormitories and cubicle hotels were being built in this area in the 1880s and 1890s (35). Darger was born in 1892.

In *Citizen Hobo*, Todd Depastino writes that, “In 1908 one researcher estimated that between 40,000 and 60,000 men took shelter in the neighborhood’s 200 to 300 lodging houses and hotels. [...] On West Madison Street in Chicago, reported one observer, ‘there are few people on the sidewalks who are not hobos, and the saloons and sidewalks are overflowing with them’” (76). The transient housing was accompanied by a great number of liquor stores, bars, and other businesses catering to this population, including brothels. Women were known to turn to prostitution as a supplement to low shop girl or factory wages.

We know that Darger was aware of this environment because in one incident he reports being followed by a man: “An old man who had the appearance of what we call now a skidrow bum appeared as if he wanted to kidnap me” (70). Darger felt threatened enough by this man that he felt the need to run away from him and throw stones to protect himself.

<sup>87</sup> For more information on the Main Stem also see: Frank O. Beck, *Hoboemia*, and Nels Anderson’s *On Hobos and Homelessness* and Anderson’s “The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man.”

I can't say whether I was actually sorry I ran away from the State farm or not but now I believe I was a sort of fool to have done so.

My life was like in a sort of Heaven there. Do you think I might be fool enough to run away from heaven & if I get there? Besides for doing it the third time the officials of the state farm would not take me back" (75-76).

MacGregor, however, gives us a more objective picture of the environment at the Lincoln Asylum while Henry was there:

On January 14, 1908, as a result of a series of tragic events involving some of the children confined in the Lincoln Asylum, a Special Investigating Committee of the State of Illinois General Assembly was constituted to hold formal hearings concerning conditions in this state institution. The results of these hearings were published as a report of the Special Investigating Committee. It contains over one thousand pages of testimony, with the verbatim accounts of forty-two witnesses. On the basis of this truly terrifying portrayal of the reality of life at the asylum, it is now possible to establish far more elaborate, detailed, and specific connections between Henry's existence there and its later disguised portrayal. (*In the Realms* 50-51)

MacGregor makes the following comment on the oddity of Darger's sentiment: "What is missing entirely from Henry's account of his life in the asylum is the slightest sign of human warmth or concern from an adult" (*In the Realms* 51). Indeed there is a curious absence or deferral throughout the narrative of *My Life* when it comes to particularly emotional or telling incidents. It should be noted here that such avoidance is one of the hallmarks of the trauma narrative—a tendency to remember events as being other than what they were, and/or a tendency for the narrative to circle around the thing that it cannot say.

Given the three possible conditions for trauma above (death, sex, and institutionalization), we can now consider *My Life* within the traumatic context. Throughout *My Life*, Darger avoids speaking about what looms behind the scenes, what would, especially in the context of autobiography, seem to be of primary importance, the precise reason people write autobiographies, as emotional histories. Darger largely avoids any kind

of introspection, as most of the *My Life* is given over to trivial incidents, descriptions of fires, storms, and arguments with coworkers. He occasionally circles around larger issues (interpersonal ethics and violence to children are two examples), but never really talks about them in an analytical way. I have already mentioned the lack of any kind of reflection or even memory concerning the death of his parents and the disappearance of his sister. But we can see a similar kind of avoidance at work in numerous other passages or events that he recounts. In addition, we might look at the overall “catastrophic” tale being told in *My Life* as a borrowing from the public dialogue (atomic bomb threat/World War paranoia), which is used to narrativize that which cannot be said.<sup>88</sup>

This brings me to the main point I wish to discuss in relation to trauma and *My Life*, and in fact all of Darger’s work—the focus on violence, turbulence, fearful scenarios, catastrophe, and destruction. *The Realms* itself is a world of perpetual war, and natural upheaval. *My Life*, at least in “The Autobiography,” is different. Human violence is confined to the realm of Darger’s life; he witnesses fights and he participates in them.<sup>89</sup> This subject matter is of no small importance. Darger does acknowledge his own violence: he occasionally mentions events or acts that he perpetrated and that might seem to require a bit more reflection. Early in “The Autobiography” he writes:

During my yo youngest days before I went to school, and *not knowing any better* I hated baby kids, those though who were old enough to stand or walk. It was caused I believe because I had no brother, and lost my sister by adoption. *I never knew* or seen her, or knew her name

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<sup>88</sup> Darger’s borrowing of other public narratives of the time—the Great Chicago Fire, the ’63 tornado outbreak, the ’67 tornado on Chicago’s Southside—also play a large role in his choice of narrative models. Along with the prevalence of the atomic threat and World War paranoia of his day, these apocalyptic narratives were prominent in the media and would have provided him with a ready-made structure in which to *enact* his missing memory.

<sup>89</sup> He spends several paragraphs describing a particularly violent fight between the janitor and another man at school (47–48). He also mentions several times how he was involved in fights, always ones that he apparently won.

I would as I wrote before shove them down, and once foolishly threw with my fingers ashes in the eyes of a little girl by the name of Francis Gillow.

And her mother and two grown brothers ~~w~~ had. been very good to me, and the boys often came to see me.

And *Not thinking* I would do such a mean deed as that?

My father had to foot or pay the doctors bill. Her mother scolded me from her open window but did not punish me.

But she told me that my father will sure have to pay plenty in the bill.

The night of the same day, my father coming up the steps said to me, reproachfully “what if she had died?”

*I had so forgotten* the incident, that *I did not comprehend* what he was saying. But what I had done *I did not know* any better anyhow. (7-9 my emphasis)

Another time, again, not knowing any better, he starts a rather major fire.

Once *not knowing* any better I put lots of newspaper beside the stove near the wall and set it on fire I got my ears boxed good and proper. I got it good once again from my father, when he thought from my action that I was going to do it again. (10-11 my emphasis)

In another episode, Darger talks of cutting one of his teachers with a knife but this seems to have very little effect on him.

Once in school for some kind of cutting up a teacher boxed my ears, and my father had to pay the doctors bill for what I did to her. I slashed her on face and arm with my long knife. I must say also when I was aroused I was dangerous.

At least when going to school after that my father would not let me take my knife, or any other weapon with me.

Outside of that it was all right. (117–118)

The situation of a boy stabbing his teacher would seem to generate, if not the possibility of trauma, at least some kind of introspection, especially when remembered years later, but Darger dismisses the incident in a way that makes it seem barely significant. His main point in bringing up the story is to discuss its historical, not its emotional, effect. It is precisely in these instances, when “The Autobiography” would seem to demand atonement or reflection, that the narrative fails; it fails to engage the violence, or more importantly, the reason for the

violence, leading to an alternative, adopted or copied fantasy narrative that does in some respects address the issue, albeit in the guise of the amplified violence of nature.

Another aspect of the manifestation of trauma in narrative is the slippage or lack of fixed position in time and space, both of which, especially in Darger, seem endlessly elastic and fluid. The narrative of *My Life* seems to have no particular fidelity to either. There is often no specific, fixed location/time where things seem to be happening. I have already mentioned the numerous times Darger “forgets” and reverses into another location or time frame. Darger begins Book Two, “The Maelstrom,” with just such a statement of forgetting, or unknowing, that he seeks to rectify. We could say that the general not-knowing that pervades so much of Darger’s biography seeks to resolve itself in this final narrative act of his life, the story of Sweetie Pie. Of course, the story of Sweetie Pie is nothing if not catastrophic, and it is a catastrophe that Darger at first claims to have been present for: “There is one really important thing I must write which I have forgotten. I was in my late teens when this came about” (206). He approaches the telling of this tale as an important memory—so important, apparently, that it was *forgotten*—and we therefore need to go back in time *because* the story *needs* to be told.<sup>90</sup> However, approaching the memory perpetuates

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<sup>90</sup> He makes this statement out of the blue as if he had simply run out of time to put it off. He admits to having forgotten it; the forgetting of it is the impetus to begin the telling of it. Yet Darger doesn’t really tell this story, he goes into a diversion. He continues by saying, “Even when a young child up to my older age now I am unusually interested nay really crazy about thunderstorms In fact I love to see them come and am exce excited to the extreme over them and the fantastic formation of thunder clouds” (206). He is, in this statement, returning to his youth to reiterate his fascination with storm turbulence, which also functions to segue to the “memory.” He then returns to his stated intention, “Now I will come to what I intend to write. When in Northern Missouri I had been watching the unusually black clouds of a coming storm late in April on a day very warm for that time of year” (207). We have been given a place and a time but the narrative does not stay in Northern Missouri, or in April, for very long. It quickly elides to another tornado in August, and then elides again to what he calls a “second tornado.” If the August tornado is in fact the second tornado, it seems it both did and did not hit any place. He then thinks as if on the same day back to when he was a boy, displacing the story for a fourth time and further into the past. We are now in March of 1906. At this point Darger is careful to claim that he had witnesses to the event, and in fact witnesses will be important to Darger’s narration throughout; all the stories are told through the eyes of witnesses.

the slippage; there is a continued inability to pinpoint an event, even in fictional time, and the inability leads to the circling, the piling up of borrowed or incidental narrative as an act of, or manifestation of, traumatic avoidance.

What follows becomes a large, circulating construction of witnessed events, in which the boy, Henry Darger, is no longer present, and multiplying alternative versions of Darger take his place. As mentioned, much of *My Life* reads as a succession of witnesses to a catastrophic event, an event that seems to remain one or two “voices” displaced from the author’s experience. The witnesses’ stories are, in effect, borrowed from the public sphere in the manner previously suggested by Luckhurst. Many of the descriptions, characters, scenarios, etc., are likely borrowed from newspaper accounts and books. If I am correct, Darger is using the public discourse to create his own story, and it is a discourse specific to his time. I point out again that Darger is writing his autobiography, when in 1967 a devastating tornado passes through the far Southside of Chicago. This becomes, in effect, the story Darger forgot to tell and that needs to be told, as it is cast back to the past. There is

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Fortunately this twister and what was called a fire tornadoe which I again seen a year later in August hit no towns or other places.

It destroyed farm property however.

The second one I did see hit no place either. I could not recollect at first what was transpiring when one day in spring of 1906 when a boy I was walking down a railroad bed towards the tor town of (I cant pronounce its french name) in the extreme Southern part of Illinois.

It had been very unusually warm for that late part of March. and during the night there had been a steady heavy drizzle rain. No lightning and thunder though.

Fortunately though I had a few witnesses of what I was about to observe. All the rest of the day up to then the sun never came out from the dark clouds though now it was not raining any more. (209-210)

Later Darger will change the date yet again, to August 15th and the Feast of the Assumption, and in fact his age will change as well. All this slippery textual grounding may well be put to Darger’s inexperience as a writer, to his naiveté, or even to his declining memory due to old age. But for a man who obsessively collected facts, it is odd to see the main event of the narrative, one that he claims is very important, so easily and rapidly displaced. But this type of slippery vagueness is common to all of Darger’s writing. In *My Life* we see the scene of the story move from city to city, most of them fictional but some factual, and many of which seem to be mere versions of the same city (Chesterbrown, Chestershire, Murphysboro, LaSalle).

an additional allure to this apocalyptic narrative that is not Darger's alone, it is in effect a manifestation of a general public hysteria, a trend, a popular entertainment, which included the nuclear paranoia that pervaded the 50s and 60s as well as the perception of social disintegration. In other words, Darger might be transposing/transferring his absent private, traumatic memory into a public event, a ready-made container that has been already narrated in the public sphere,<sup>91</sup> providing an easy, generic, and culturally available tale by which Darger could pattern his own life's story.

#### **2.4 Without Other, Without Self.** *Speculative Diagnosis #3: Autism/Asperger's Syndrome*

Probably the single most important and likely posthumous diagnosis we might make in regard to Darger is that of Asperger's Syndrome. I have already mentioned that this is the diagnosis settled on by Darger scholar John MacGregor, and he makes a good case for this diagnosis in the appendix of his book. Some think of Asperger's as a high-functioning form of autism and others tend to see it as a separate syndrome. I will treat it here as a form of autism, both because, in Darger's case, the diagnosis is speculative, and because autism, in its broadest context allows for a greater analytical lens. One of the primary traits of autism is an inability to empathize with an exterior world, a world that is perceived, but not engaged, by the subject, a world that must appear chaotic and wanting order. Other major symptoms are: social isolation, a lack of empathy, and an obsession with physical order and repetition.

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<sup>91</sup>. I would point out one further similarity between Luckhurst's theory and Darger's narrative. The standard alien abduction scene, as described by Luckhurst, mirrors in some ways Darger's standard tornado witnessing scene: an incomprehensible (a radical unthinkable) destructive force that descends from the sky, or alternatively explodes from within the physical universe.

### 2.4.1 Neurology of Autism

Various theories have been proposed to explain autism, and, in fact, the definition of autism itself is constantly in play; it tends to accrue and shed specifics as time and research demand. It is also the case that autism often does not occur alone and may be found in combination with various other disorders including: dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or Tourette's Syndrome. Autism itself has not even been considered as a single disorder but rather a range of disorders, referred to as the autism spectrum. Early theories of autism accepted that it was psychogenic and likely caused by either a lack of maternal bonding, disastrous early experiences of rejection, or the experience of extreme threat (placing autism in a complex including trauma, abuse, etc.) These theories have proven insupportable. It is now generally accepted that biochemical and neuroanatomical abnormalities in brain development are responsible for the various symptoms of autism, but few models have been empirically validated. Sidonie Smith has attributed autism to a brain state in which "neurons do not fire properly, and so the network does not transmit information in an effective form to an appropriate destination. Interruptions in internal processing units at the cellular level generate interruptions in the processing of exterior information at the level of consciousness" (96). Some recent studies have focused on abnormal development of the left cerebral hemisphere, as the syndrome is comprised of impairments that are typically associated with the left hemisphere, such as language abilities and social cognizance. Left-hemisphere abnormalities may then lead to overcompensation by right-hemisphere abilities that are more object-related, involving visual and spacial relationships, pattern recognition, repetition and number.

Another hypothesis is that autism is related to dysfunction of the limbic system, of the medial temporal lobe (amygdala, hippocampus, entorhinal cortex) and related limbic structures, such as the orbital prefrontal cortex,<sup>92</sup> structures that are involved in the recognition of affective significance and social perceptions. More recent neurological investigation suggests that autism is the result of a dysfunction (or lack) of what are called “mirror neurons,” which are essential to the development of empathy.<sup>93</sup> Ramachandran and Oberman write: “Because mirror neurons appear to be involved in social interaction, dysfunctions of this neural system could explain some of the primary symptoms of autism, including isolation and absence of empathy” (“Broken Mirrors” 64). They go on to speculate that, “mirror neurons may enable humans to see themselves as others see them, which may be an essential ability for self-awareness and introspection” (“Broken Mirrors” 65).<sup>94</sup> A dysfunction or abnormality in another type of neuron may also be involved in autism; spindle cells are long networking cells in the brain that connect various, possibly specialized, areas, such as those associated with deep emotion, higher reason and/or abstract

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<sup>92</sup>. The hippocampus is important to long-term memory and spatial navigation. The amygdala is critical for social perception, such as recognition of faces and facial expressions, the recognition of the affective significance of stimuli and the perception of body movements and gaze direction, and for certain cognitive abilities that are likely to be important for social perception [especially the] recall of event sequences. Lesions of the hippocampus and amygdala in monkeys have been shown to cause severe cognitive and social impairments that in turn can lead to self-stimulatory behaviors, which may manifest as object-oriented physical stimulation.

<sup>93</sup>. Mirror neurons are a system within the brain that allow the subject to (unconsciously) mimic a “feeling” or “emotion” that he or she witnesses in another, the same brain areas will light up, thus creating “like” feelings in the mind of the subject. In other words, if the subject sees a person cut their finger and the subsequent reaction of pain, the subject will experience a vicarious reaction to the pain as well. Mirror neurons are therefore essential to the development of empathy.

<sup>94</sup>. People with autism show reduced mirror neuron activity in the inferior frontal gyrus, a part of the brain’s premotor cortex, perhaps explaining their inability to assess the intentions of others. Dysfunctions of mirror neurons in the insula and anterior cingulate cortex may cause related symptoms, such as the absence of empathy, and defects in the angular gyrus may result in language difficulties. People with autism also have structural changes in the cerebellum and brain stem (“Broken Mirrors” 65).

thinking. They are also important for the creation of abstract relations, which are often problematic in autistic subjects.

#### 2.4.2 Symptomatology of Autism

Autism is commonly described as resulting from a brain defect that disallows the evaluation of the subject's own thought or the subject's ability to perceive clearly what might be going on in the mind of another. Persons diagnosed as autistic are often found to be oblivious not only to social cues, but also to the cause and effect sequencing that lends coherence to normal experience. They tend thus to experience life as an incoherent series of unconnected events. Such seriously compromised communication skills may cause violent or self-abusive behavior; but more often it manifests as an intense preoccupation or fixation combined with social withdrawal or remoteness. The autistic child may inhabit a self-conjured and extremely rich world of imprisoned thought and feeling.<sup>95</sup> They may also possess what are known as "islands of ability," that may be isolated from the rest of the mind and which can possibly evolve into spectacular, so-called, "savant" abilities (Sacks, *Mars* 250). One way to read such abilities is as mental compensation, the diverting of unmanageable pressures into other organizational systems of highly specialized behaviors.<sup>96</sup> In addition to the general conditions described above, three aspects of autism spectrum disorders will be important to the discussion of Darger's narrative drive. These are: 1) LACK OF THEORY OF MIND; 2) THIRD PERSON SUBJECTIVITY, and; 3) EXPERIENCE AS REPLAY.

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<sup>95</sup>. Many high-functioning autistic people describe a great fondness for, almost addiction to, alternative or imaginary worlds such as those of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, or worlds they imagine themselves (Sacks, *Mars* 276n).

<sup>96</sup>. One of these is the often noted rage-for-order displayed by many autistics leading to obsessive collection and organization which will be discussed in the next chapter. These savant qualities combined with the autistic's social remoteness, may grant the individual an otherworldliness that borders on the religious.

1) LACK OF THEORY OF MIND: Autistic people, it is often suggested, have no true concept of, or feeling for, other minds, or, by extension, even their own. They are said to have no “theory of mind” (hence ToM), and therefore do not understand other individuals as subjects. It is therefore possible that the autistic patient may have no true sense of self in the way that neurotypical people define it. In fact, it is questionable whether autistics understand themselves as subjects, i.e., whether they have true subjectivity.<sup>97</sup> This may be a matter of degree, but what we can say is that there is a crisis of subjectivity in the autism/Asperger’s patient. If indeed autism/Asperger’s is a continuum disorder, it may well be possible that a person’s position on this continuum varies in the course of their life, so that, over time, one might emerge from, and be submerged into autistic symptoms. MacGregor believes that Darger did move along this continuum when he claims that, in Darger’s later years: “Only in the final months of his life, when he entered St. Augustine’s Home for the Aged, and was no longer writing, was the final struggle finally abandoned as he yielded to all but complete isolation and autism” (*In the Realms* 73). Thevoz as well claims that Darger’s creativity was an attempt make virtue out of necessity, “rather than withdraw into autism” (“The Strange Hell” 19).

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<sup>97</sup> Uta Frith, in her 1993 *Scientific American* article, states: “The autistic child has a mind that is unlikely to develop self-consciousness” (“Autism” 114). There is however debate on this question. Asperger’s patients can often “tell us of their experiences, their inner feelings and states,” and thus with “Asperger’s syndrome there is self-consciousness and at least some power to introspect and report” (Sacks, *Mars* 247). There is also an ability to interact with other people. The autistic/Asperger’s patient and author Temple Grandin believes that her mind does, in fact, lack normal subjectivity (see Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, or Sacks *Mars*). There is, however, empathetic variation and the autistic may not be completely devoid of sympathy. Sacks says that Temple Grandin can feel, she can have sympathy for what is physical or physiological—for an animal’s pain or terror—but she lacks empathy for people’s states of mind and perspectives. At the level of the sensori-motor, the concrete, the unmediated, the animal, she has no difficulty. This is not to say she cannot objectively recognize emotion, but they must be outsized, clichéd, strong, universal emotions (Sacks *Mars* 259). Perhaps they elicit the most easily recognized gestures in others. Note that this is a matter of recognition, however, and not of mutual empathetic feeling.

2) THIRD PERSON EXPERIENCE: Directly related to this compromised subjectivity is a tendency of the autistic to define him/herself in the third-person, most often referring to themselves by name (their own or that of another). If the autistic understands only the interactions of objects, it would follow that they must objectify themselves as well in order to understand themselves and their interactions with the world. Writing about the autobiography of Donna Williams, *Nobody, Nowhere*, Sidonie Smith tells us that Williams actually experienced the world by creating characters (alters) that acted according to prescribed, or rather, described, personality traits—in other words, by imitating models.<sup>98</sup> In a similar vein, Temple Grandin writes that she learned to draw by *pretending* she was a draftsman: “I didn’t have to learn to draw or design, I pretended I was David—I appropriated him, drawing and all” (qtd. in Sacks, *Mars* 266). Extending this kind of self-characterization begins to allow one to form a story of oneself. Smith, following Bernard Rimland, emphasizes the importance of a life-narrative to “normality; she writes that, for the autistic, “getting a life narrative is tantamount to getting out of autistic subjectivity” (106). The unknowable subject becomes knowable via the label and the consequent narrative.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Early in her life Williams created the models or alters, Carol and Willie, as ways of behaving. Donna Williams writes: “Donna didn’t interact; her characters did” (qtd. in Smith, “Material Selves” 86). They acted as fictional versions of herself, though neither was a true self, only an approximation of an aspect of that self. It was only when introduced to a more accurate model, i.e., the label of “autistic” person, that Williams finds an acceptable alter, one that actually acts like her. Smith believes that Williams’s ability to claim a label allows her to move from “mad” subjectivity to autistic subjectivity, giving her a model to focus on that the society corroborates (103-106). It is also a model that will grow richer and more complicated, if only because the research into autism will continue to refine and expand upon it, thus giving Williams a more complex definition. Along with autistic subjectivity comes a biographical script, a self-narrative. For Williams, “The diagnosis establishes a limit of the narratability that enables her to remember her way out of the limit of the diagnosis into a kind of virtual normality” (103).

<sup>99</sup> Temple Grandin as well documents her coming into selfhood, as a process of labeling an object, then learning to understand this object as her “self.” This comes across in the title of her first book: *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*, in which she describes the emergence of a self through the understanding of her diagnosis, i.e., finding a self in the diagnosis.

3) EXPERIENCE AS REPLAY: Despite lack of ToM and its consequent lack of empathetic response, the Asperger's patient is often able to function socially by collecting and categorizing human behavior as a code of cause-and-effect relationships, which they can imitate. Creating an effect by generating the cause allows them to function to a degree in the social world. The ability to do this depends on a facility of memory that is highly developed in its wholeness and sequencing capabilities. Temple Grandin has said that she learned to behave in the social world by building up a library of "videotapes" of observed behavior that she could play in her mind over and over again and correlate with new experience, thus providing her with a means of predicting the behavior of others.<sup>100</sup> One quality of this form of memory is its dependence on sequence.<sup>101</sup> I call attention to the lack of modification in

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<sup>100</sup>. Sidonie Smith writes: "What we are told by high-functioning autistics who have been able to speak reflexively and to communicate with the world is that they in part imitate life through a kind of mechanical or rote mimesis of "scripts." The mimicry goes beyond words as autistics watch others for markers of appropriate performances of selfhood, developing scripts for everyday living through a personal glossary of appropriate responses" (97). Grandin has said: "My mind is like a CD-ROM in a computer—like a quick access videotape," by which she "computes" the intentions of others. But to re-establish a point, the tape has to be played in its entirety, from the beginning, as she was unable to pick up or enter the tape from a midpoint. Grandin herself relates this to what she calls "sequencing difficulties" problems arranging material in narrative cause and effect structures. In other words, sequence could not be invented but had to be recalled (re-collected, re-sequenced) as no one part could be separated from another. Sacks claims this is exactly how Grandin's memory works; it played itself over in her mind with an "unwavering quality," and "virtually with no modification." This points to what is often labeled in the autistic, a "rigidity" of thought. Sacks calls it, "prodigious in its detail and pathological in its fixity, more akin to a computer record than to anything else" (282). Sacks recalls the case of an autistic boy who had an entire television show in his head and could replay it with characters voices, gestures, etc., but the story always had to be retold from the beginning, like a tape that must be rewound to make sense.

<sup>101</sup>. Grandin explains this through use of the computer analogy, cutting and pasting or re-mixing, she sees the elements of her thought as concrete and visual images to be reordered or associated in different ways, moving from one tape to another to create a source of variance:

"My imagination works like the computer graphics programs that created the lifelike dinosaurs in Jurassic Park. When I do an equipment simulation in my imagination or work on an engineering problem, it is like seeing it on a video tape in my mind. I can view it from any angle, placing myself above or below the equipment and rotating it at the same time [...] I can create new images all the time by taking many little parts of images I have in the video library in my mind. [...] I retrieve bits and pieces from my memory and combine them into a new whole (*Thinking in Pictures* 21).

the playback process to raise the question of creativity in what seems to be a flow of mechanical repetition.<sup>102</sup> We could say that the autistic moves thus from mere memory retrieval to the creative process by *excess* repetition and the resultant propagation of turbulence.

### 2.4.3 Darger and Autism/Asperger's Syndrome

Evidence of autistic disposition is not hard to find in Darger's life and texts: the simplified moral purpose, the flatness of the characters, the mania for a complete world, the substitution of number for depth, the obsessive listing of irrelevant detail, the otherworldliness of the stories, the constant repetitions of similar events and human types. As MacGregor observes, "A certain stylistic rigidity is occasionally obvious in *The Realms*, as is the obsessive or pedantic involvement with systemization, repetition of content, and the making of lists" (*In the Realms* 664). We could add to this Darger's general obsession with certain physical shapes—circles and spheres, etc.—that find form in violent images such as the strangled child and the tornado. Another characteristic of Darger's work that might point to autism would be his attraction to fantasy worlds, not only his life-long interest in fantasy literature such as Frank Baum's Oz books, but more importantly, the fantastic world creations that Darger himself obsessively pursued. It is possible to go into greater depth on a

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She writes, "When I recall something I have learned, I replay the video in my imagination" (*Thinking* 24). She claims to be able to let the videos free associate, that is let the image sum, so that each video memory triggers another in an associative fashion. Association is how her mind wanders off a subject to another allowing for creativity. This visual aspect of Grandin's thought is important in that it translates language.

When I read, I translate written words into color movies or a simply store a photo of the written page to be read later. When I retrieve the material, I see a photocopy of the page in my imagination. I can then read it like a TelePromTer [...] To pull information out of my memory, I have to replay the video. Pulling facts up quickly is sometimes difficult because I have to play bits of different videos until I find the right tape. This takes time. (*Thinking* 31)

<sup>102</sup> Of course, this is what I am saying that "normal" people do. "Normal" people are not that different from autistics or from robots.

number of particularities of behavior in Darger that could be signs of autism, but I will restrict my analysis to the three inter-related effects discussed earlier, and their significance to Darger's life and work.

LACK OF THEORY OF MIND: Oliver Sacks writes that Temple Grandin's understanding of literature, and stories in general, was limited. While she was inclined to understand simple, strong, universal emotions: "There is a failure to emphasize with the characters, to follow the intricate play of motive and intention" (*Mars* 259). Darger's relationship to his own source material seems to demonstrate a lack of empathy or emotional subtlety. Little understanding of human relationships comes across and he seems to appreciate the literature he is familiar with, either on the basis of what has been said about it by others, or on the physical level of description: numbers, movements, the dynamics of battles, the facts of storms. If he does relate to the emotional impact of his reading, it is merely by repeating code, what he probably gleans from secondary sources, if not within the reading itself. For instance, in his references to Milton he never says anything about why he likes the author, or even if he does: "I do know many of our best poet poets and historians and also Religious persons set their imagination to play in pictures and descriptions of Hell, especially Dantes Inferno. I believe Milton could have been one of them. But I do firmly believe and there are many of them of the same opinion" (4779-4780).

The lack of ToM and the resultant lack of empathy would have an obvious effect on the ability to represent characters with any kind of emotional depth, which would in turn affect the ability to render subtle or complex narratives. As mentioned, *My Life* is organized around numerous eyewitness accounts of a devastating storm, accounts that are traumatic, or should be. The amount of destruction, the quantities of the dead, the human misery, should

elicit a range of emotional response from the witnesses. But most of them react with simple clichéd responses of surprise, wonder, or horror. The anthropomorphic Sweetie Pie herself should be cause for emotional response, yet, when discussing the image of Sweetie Pie, not a single character remarks on the emotional impact of the shape, or even on any symbolic quality. All anyone can ask is how the shape came to be, and the explanations are always scientific ones, as if an equation can be called upon to account for the storm's impact. It is also true that Darger's characters have no real personalities; they are flat and lacking depth. What emotions they have are those he might copy to them from other sources. They appear merely as functional operators or signs in the story, existing primarily to make a statement or to perform an action, and not as complex characters.

Both MacGregor and Bonesteel have remarked on this flatness and emotional vacuity. MacGregor writes: "When faced with the task of portraying human suffering in a world decimated by war and natural catastrophes, Darger sometimes appears bizarrely inept and unsure of how to proceed. Describing human responses to tragedy, he occasionally relied on naive clichés in place of feeling, depending upon the opinions of others" (114-115).<sup>103</sup> Bonesteel, commenting on the flatness of *The Realms'* main characters, the Vivian Girls, writes: "The sensibilities of his heroines and heroes [...] are all pure of heart and brave beyond belief," a trait that Bonesteel suggests may be the product of his clichéd sources (25). This is likely true, but Darger always had the option to modify those characteristics to add depth. He did not. Bonesteel continues: "There is little individualization in depictions of the seven Vivian Girls—just as there is not a lot of individualized characterization of stock personalities in the writing" (29). This emotional simplicity carries over to Darger's self-

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<sup>103</sup>. In one instance in *The Realms*, Darger cites William James, repeating his statement that people faced with tragedy do not act in a theatrical manner. (*In the Realms* 114)

representation, as he often depicts himself as having little subtlety of emotion, reacting in a black and white manner to a world of right and wrong: “Im the sort of person that if any one refuses to do any favors for me do not expect one from me either” (126). Such an attitude goes along with his stubbornness: “always was and still am Self willed and also determined that at all costs even at the expense of Sin that all things shall come my way at no matter what might try to interfere or stand in my way” (107). In fact, Darger has only a few types of reactions to events, anger being primary among them. He never says he feels sorry for a person or that he “understands” a person. He is occasionally generous but there is no indication that his generosity is based on empathy; it is rather one of adhering to a social code that he has learned.

THIRD PERSON EXPERIENCE: Both Donna Williams and Temple Grandin were able to develop scripts that included a current diagnosis of their condition, one that both identified them and their interaction with society and one that they could identify with, because it actually seemed to describe the way they behaved. In contrast, the diagnoses available to Darger were pejorative—crazy, feeble-minded—especially “crazy”, which he shares with Donna Williams.

In her prescence in the living room, I let out a big whopper of a poop, and as I said nothing she or most of them there did not know who it was. The oldest one there said, “it might have been ‘crazy’” meaning me.

She said “if he is crazy” he does not know any better. John Manley who sat across from me said to me truthfully “it was you?” (28)

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Yet for other strange things I really did I was thought of and called ‘crazy’ Before that and yet for other strange things I really did I was looked on as ‘Crazy’ and also called crazy.

Especially for the strange way, I threw with my left hand like pretending it was snowing.

Had I known that, I only would have done it where I was not seen.

It caused Mrs Gannon her son and Otto Zink and others there ~~w~~ who saw (b)me do it, to think I was either feeble minded, or actually Crazy.

In fact I made far better advance in my school lessons than any of them did. (38–39)

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I do not remember the length of time or years I remained there in the Mission of our Ladys home but one part of the last year I was still there I was taken several times to be examined by a doctor, who on the second time I came, said my heart was not in the right place.

Where was it supposed to be? In my belly? Yet I did not receive any kind of medicine or any kind of treatment what ever. Yet his office sure had an awful medicine smell.

I did not know it at the time, but now I know I was taken to the doctor to find out if I was really feeble minded or crazy. He said nothing about that especially in my presence.

Had I known what was going to be done with me I surely would have ran away. (41-42)

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Sometime how or other for a time Sister Roe finding out I came from the home of Feeble minded children thought I was still crazy.... (70)

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The whole hospital full of persons soon knew. I was then called crazy. I had I believe more brains ~~that~~ than all combined. (70)

What is obvious in the above quotes is not only his awareness of the label “crazy” but that the designation came to be something Darger distrusted. It is also obvious that he believed he did not deserve it. He knew these were negative labels because the results of their application were negative—leading to institutionalization and violence. However, Darger’s search for a positive label is tenuous. The closest he comes is calling himself an artist in his autobiography, a label he creates and lives in but never fully adopts. “I do wish I could be back working there [at the St. Augustine home] again. To make matters worse now Im an artist, been one of years, and cannot hardly stand on my feet because of my knee to paint on the top of the long picture” (162-164). “Sorry saint” is another self-applied label. “What did you say? I am being a saint? Ha-Ha. I am one, and a very sorry Saint I am. Ha Ha, How can I be a saint when I wont stand for trials, bad luck, pains in my (km), knees or otherwise”

(158). *My Life* has only a single reference to himself as Sorry Saint, but his diary has several. Perhaps Darger feels he failed in these labeled roles, as is certainly true of the self-deprecating “Sorry Saint” label. Or, perhaps such roles were simply not attractive enough to cause him to perpetuate them. Therefore, Darger constructs his memory museum in a different manner, not having a category into which he could define himself, he places himself into the fictions he writes as a number of different characters.

Bonesteel has made note of the various Dargers that appear in *The Realms*:

There are many Henry Dargers written into the Realms. He takes the roles of Captain Henry Darger, enlisted into the Angelinian National Guard, and later promoted to Colonel and then general; Henry Darger, war correspondent; and Hendro Dargar, Head Supreme person of the Gemini Society of Master Spies. There are also mentions of other Dargers: Attorney General Darger, General Henry Darger Monterey, Captain Winslow Darger, and his real-life uncle, Augustine Darger, plus Glandelinian versions such as Frederick Darger and general Judas Darger. Sometimes it seems these are different roles played by the same character, sometimes not.” (20)

*My Life* too has several different Dargers: from the author, “Henry Joseph Darger (D Argarius in Brazilian),” to Mr. Darger, the head of the LaSalle Relief Committee, to Henry Darger master firefighter. There is a “Henry Jose Dargerous<sup>(Darger for short)</sup>,” and a “Mr Henry Joseph Darger chief official in this territory.” Sometimes these alternative Mr. Dargers are Colonels or Generals or incidental figures passing through the narrative. Among those who told vivid stories of the horrors of the ever-increasing smoulders were three persons: Charles McFarran, Whilliam Schloeder, and Henry Dargerzen. Often these Dargers speak in the first person, as if they are narrating events, and sometimes they are referred to in the third-person, in which case you get Dargers talking about Dargers. It should be noted that all these Dargers are often blessed with authority and power: “I know the extent of your powers Mr. Darger and I know that you have p more power and authority than that National Guard”

(2624). They also have excellent judgment, bravery, superior wisdom, etc., which may even be celebrated in song.<sup>104</sup> It may be possible to dismiss this repetitive self-naming and self-construction as merely juvenile or unsophisticated, or at best, mere narrative convenience, or as Bonesteel suggests, multiple characterizations representing different parts of Darger's psyche.<sup>105</sup> They may well be fictions in which Darger is invested, but it is also possible to read them as alters through which his selfhood is constructed, and through which he can experience life as the play of coded roles, behaviors and actions. Using Smith's terminology, we could say that Darger sought other, more heroic, "alters," modeled, *not* from the "real" world, but from the world of fantasy narratives in which he sought entertainment.

Even when he seems to be remembering scenes from his actual former life, the person remembering is a "Darger" who is not the original narrator of the story.<sup>106</sup> He creates, like Williams, a narrating subject(s), that does his remembering for him. The tornado story, for instance, even though it begins as the author's own memory, is repeated and embellished through a repeating parade of witnesses. It is also true that actual memories may be conflated with fictional ones, as Darger keeps fragmenting himself in search of models for

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<sup>104.</sup> O -  
 Oh here comes the army of Darger  
 It's a mighty big one dont you ~~thing~~ think  
 But it scattered the foremost fire quicker than a wink.  
 Henry riding his famous Charger  
 Our Kaliko a great Hero and so is ~~his~~ Henry his friend.  
 The foremost fires have vanished like birds on the wing.  
 I guess as fighters they're the real  
 Thing. Hurrah for Darger  
 On his famous charger. (2465)

<sup>105.</sup> I recall here the dialogues that Darger would hold with himself in his room, mentioned earlier. "Both Lerner and the Berglunds reported hearing "voices" coming from Darger's room at night—different voices, one high and one low, that carried on conversations, in an often animated emotional manner (MacGregor, *In the Realms* 78).

<sup>106.</sup> For instance he remembers the photo book about the tornado of 1967: "Later when I lived and still live in Chicago, I've seen pictures of what tornadoes did in Omaha Murphysboro, Melrose park and also in Oak Lawn and Belvidere" (279).

particular characteristics or emotions. A case in point may be Darger's odd claim to supposed Brazilian origins, which he announces at the beginning of *My Life*: "(D Argarius in Brazilian)." <sup>107</sup> Just as Caroline and Willie give Donna Williams a character through which to enact the varied responses of normal life, this Brazilian Darger may provide an identity by which Henry can acknowledge or "recognize" his violent tendencies: "Yet because my real decent of my nationalty is much g agianst such type of punishment, had we been in Brazil, he would have been killed for boxing my ears" (52). "People of my nationality use knives on "framers" I firmly believe he was the real snitcher, and as "you call it" it 'hooked' me to 'cover up'" (177-178). Darger's constant recreation of himself in self-similar, emotionally blank but trait-bearing repetitions of himself, may well be a misplaced or misdirected energy finding release in the multiplication of a form—his name (not his image, because we almost never know what these people look like). The continuing, repeating story then may well be the medium by which the self-images can be repeated; Darger retells the story and makes another Darger to experience life in place of Darger himself.

EXPERIENCE AS REPLAY: As I will be examining this in greater detail in the next chapter, this following discussion will be relatively short. The replay of memory, that xeroxing process mentioned earlier, might account for two things we notice in Darger's writing. One of these is the repetition of nearly exact paragraphs, etc., throughout the text. Darger may be pulling them up out of his memory, where they were mentally photographed either from his own writing or from borrowed texts. Secondly, it might explain the slight variation in the repetitions, a variation due to noise or decay of the original text, just as a photocopied image decays with each reproduction, or a story "decays" and changes with

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<sup>107</sup>. The Brazilian identity comes up later several times in the autobiography as well as in real life. Once the Lerner's had a birthday party for Darger, and he sang a song in Portuguese (or what passed as such); he was likely living in his Brazilian character for that moment.

each telling. This replaying of scenes is an overwhelming fact of *My Life*, and however we construe the telos, or goal, of Darger's narrative—reportage, adventure, descriptive indulgence, prophecy, elucidation of mystery—once it is achieved, the narrative should, by convention, end. It does not; instead Darger “rewinds,” and begins the tale over again in the words of a new witness/narrator and this makes up the bulk of the narration in *My Life*. This would suggest that Darger could not appreciate the complete narrative as an object or accomplishment without going through and rewriting the narrative.

What I hope to have achieved in this discussion of autism/Asperger's is the illumination of how various aspects of this condition that can produce excess. The lack of ToM creates a flatness to the narratives and narrative characters that may be compensated for with number. Instead of describing the complex emotional state of a character, Darger simply multiplies that character in a way that “adds up to” a similar effect. For instance, one tragic character wailing does not need an emotional life or backstory if you simply produce a hundred or a thousand tragic characters wailing. A similar mathematic takes place in the realm of description—the inability to render the emotional tenor of a scene may be compensated for by the rendition of its numerical qualities, and/or by the repetition of the scene itself. The tendency toward third-person experience can create an overproduction of these third persons in the ongoing quest for true subjectivity. The necessity of replaying the tape to reproduce the code means that the tape must be replayed often and cannot be simply referred to. All these effects produce volume, excess, which, in effect, stands in for (lends weight to) a self that is not properly felt. This is what Smith would call “differently embodied subjectivity” (94), a subjectivity embodied in forms of excess that will, by their pressured representation, give rise to vorticity.

## 2.5 A Catastrophic Scarcity of Self. *Speculative Diagnosis #4: OCD/ Compulsive Hoarding*

In this current section I will concentrate on the diagnostic/neurological condition of abnormal collecting or what is sometimes called Compulsive Hoarding (CH),<sup>108</sup> which can be defined generally as the acquisition of, and the inability to discard, items, even though they appear (to others) to have no value, and to such an extent that significant interference with normal daily activities results (S.W. Anderson 202). Compulsive hoarding has garnered much attention in contemporary society and it is sometimes thought of as an effect of consumer culture and the related valuation of self through ownership. CH may also be due to an anxiety about the throwaway nature of this consumer culture and the devaluation of objects. Compulsive hoarding sometimes is called Collier's Syndrome after the Collier Brothers in Harlem, NY, who eventually died due to the consequences of their collections. It is a syndrome that is undoubtedly more common than is reported and is present in urban and rural locations. The syndrome often takes place in relative isolation, where there is no family member or friend to oversee and correct the behavior. Compulsive Hoarding has been observed in several neuropsychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia, autism, mental retardation, Tourette's syndrome, various types of dementia, eating disorders such as anorexia, as well as in non-clinical populations, but it is most commonly found in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), with which it shares a possible chromosomal link (Saxena 380).<sup>109</sup> Many researchers have concluded that despite the above coexistence of CH with

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<sup>108</sup>. I will be discussing collecting in greater detail in the next chapter, which will focus on collecting and its relationship to self-organization and subjectivity.

<sup>109</sup>. The correlation between CH and OCD has also shown to be age-related. When CH shows up at an earlier age, it tends to have greater OCD correlation: prevalence of symmetry, ordering, counting compulsions, and indecisiveness. Other symptoms might be "excessive doubting, checking, and reassurance seeking when trying to discard possessions that appear related to compulsive rituals" (Saxena 381).

other disorders, there is mounting evidence that CH is an altogether separate diagnosis. The researchers Frost and Hartl have posited that hoarding and saving symptoms are part of a discrete clinical syndrome (“A Cognitive behavioral Model” 343). Some investigators have suggested that CH differs from OCD symptoms in that obsessive thoughts and distress do not seem to drive the CH behavior.

### 2.5.1 Neurology of OCD/CH

Neuroimaging studies have shown that the pattern of brain activation associated with compulsive hoarding differs from that of non-hoarding OCD symptoms. “Compulsive Hoarders also appear to have a different pattern of neurocognitive deficits than nonhoarding OCD patients, reporting significantly more difficulty making decisions and showing impaired decision making performance, as well as different autonomic skin conductance responses” (Saxena 381). Brain scans of compulsive hoarders taken during the process of decision-making showed greater than normal activation in specific brain areas.<sup>110</sup> What is perhaps more telling is that, of the different brain regions that become active, two of these regions, the orbital frontal cortex (rational decision-making) and the hippocampus (memory), can be said to be in conflict with one another. This war between these two brain regions is comparable to punishment. In other words, the brain appears to be engaged in self-punishment over the object and the prospect of its loss.<sup>111</sup> As David F. Tolin suggests,

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<sup>110</sup>. These areas include the bilateral anterior ventromedial prefrontal cortex and to some degree the cerebellum and visual areas.

<sup>111</sup>. The prospect of the destruction or loss of the object is actively contrasted to the search for memories related to and *valuing* the object. I point out, as well, that for Andersen, the modulation of the drive to collect is assisted in part by a weighing system, whereby the neural representation of a “stimulus item” is associated with a particular signal value, which serves as an index of the *relative worth* of the stimulus item. This weighing system would influence the cognitive process of deciding which such items should be marked as valuable and thus sought after or retained, and which items are of less value, and should be passed over or discarded.

“The person who hoards is going through a very, very effortful search of their memory to try to think of as many things as they can [collecting, piling up facts] about this item before they make the decision” about what to throw away. Consequently, such a person is “processing this activity as if it is deeply punishing” (“Medical Mysteries”).<sup>112</sup> The result is a conflict: an aggression of objects toward the self and a desire to maintain those same objects as definitions of the self.<sup>113</sup>

There is a probable physical neurological cause to this behavior. Anderson’s findings suggest that, in the absence of brain injury, the mesial prefrontal structures regulate the tendency to collect, thus guiding “the reasonable, context-appropriate acquisition of food and other items and [this regulation] probably underlies the ubiquitous tendency in humans to create socially acceptable collections” (208). Anderson notes that damage to the prefrontal cortex has been associated with an inability to organize and carry out goal-directed behavior, particularly in situations *with few external constraints* (social or institutional). Such damage may contribute to the failure of what is called *normal discard behavior*. The frontal lobes are generally linked to self-regulatory, self-referential behavior, and patients with certain types of frontal lobe damage typically have impairments of decision-making, including planning and anticipating the future consequences of their behavior. One important result is compromised abilities in regard to *mentalizing the self* relative to others, and *projecting the self* into the future.<sup>114</sup> This is important in that it reflects on individual

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<sup>112</sup> For further discussion on CH also see Tolin, Frost, Steketee, *Buried in Treasures*.

<sup>113</sup> I would here point out the relationship exists between the pain caused by objects in CH and the pain of chaotic sensations in autism. In both cases the phenomenal perception of the object world can cause a mental effort at organization that can be experienced as psychic pain.

<sup>114</sup> Again, note the similarity to autism and the results of insufficient Theory of Mind.

self-constitution. Indeed *poor self-awareness* is common among sufferers of CH, as is evident in the subject's inability to be aware of their own hoarding activity.

### 2.5.2 Symptomatology of CH

Among the general characteristics of CH are indecisiveness, perfectionism, procrastination, difficulty organizing tasks, and avoidance behavior. Compulsive hoarders may also be slow in completing tasks, frequently late for appointments, and given to the use of circumstantial, overinclusive language (Saxena 381). A prominent aspect of hoarding is an apparent deficit in the decision making process as well as in categorization and organization (Frost and Hartl, "A Cognitive-Behavioral Model" 343–347). As to the first of these, the patient may be unable to decide about the comparative value of objects, and may therefore see little difference between a pile of paper cups, a pile of books and a box of costume jewelry. I would suggest that we can see this type of behavior as a failure of the object to pass from one system of organization to another. It is related to a second aspect of hoarding, which is a deficit in categorization and organizational abilities, an inability to fully delineate or create proper categories, thus failing to display or highlight the important properties of a particular possession. One of the results is the overcreation or confusion of categories and a consequent porosity between category and object, which may result in the overinvesting of the object with the significance of the entire category.<sup>115</sup>

This *over-engagement with objects*, which is common to CH, manifests as excessive emotional attachment, leading some individuals to acquire or save indiscriminately in order

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<sup>115</sup> In what might seem like a contrast to this general disorganization, compulsive hoarders do seem able to navigate the chaos of their material environs due to the prevalence and strength of what might be called brain maps that allow them to locate items despite whatever chaos the actual environs may be in.

to avoid emotional upset and/or prevent negative outcomes. The object accrues memories and meaning as much as possible until it becomes in effect, oversaturated, “imbued with an importance far in excess of their true value” (Steketee and Frost, Sec. 2). Emotional attachment to possessions encompasses the emotional comfort provided by the object, the fear of losing the object and thus something important, and the consequent *feeling of loss of self or identity*. The search for memory and valuation is bound to be frustrated eventually; emotional over-investment may then take the place of, or compensate for, historical memory, with the object acting as a physical form of memory (and emotion).<sup>116</sup> The failure, or deficit of memory, in CH may be related to the organizational problems mentioned above, inasmuch as memory is at least partly dependant on organization (of narrative, of time, of events, etc.). “People with problematic hoarding recalled less information on delayed recall . . . and used less effective organizational strategies. [...] Hoarders also reported significantly less confidence in their memory, more concern about the *catastrophic consequences* of forgetting, and a stronger desire to keep possessions in sight so they would not be forgotten” (Steketee and Frost, Sec. 6.1). It is important, in our context, to highlight this substitution of a material object for the emotion and memory. Memory is directly related to self-constitution, the deficit of memory would thus translate into a perceived deficit of self. Indeed it is often speculated that obsessive hoarding has a relation to scarcity, and not merely the scarcity of material existence, but a scarcity of self. The hoarder is stockpiling against catastrophe, the catastrophe of forgetting, the catastrophe of empty space, of empty being, of absent self.

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<sup>116</sup> Note the correlation with the lack of memory in trauma victims, and the correlation with autism wherein a fascination or over-engagement with objects can be seen as a compensation for an improperly formed “self.”

### 2.5.3 Darger and Compulsive Hoarding

That Darger exhibited compulsive hoarding symptoms is evident from the description of his room below.

Bundles of newspapers and magazines rose in stacks nearly to the ceiling, covering most of the wall space. The floor was also knee-deep in newspapers and other debris, allowing only for a narrow path around a large oval table where Darger would sit and work. There were several large trunks, an old wind-up Edison phonograph, and, next to it, a music box with large metal music disks. Tables along two walls were piled with books, and an iron footbed was covered with with newspaperx, telephone books, and phonograph records. Two old typewriters stood on one of the tables. On top of the fireplace mantle were plastic figures of Jesus and Mary and various kitsch objects. Every other surface was completely filled with collections of old Pepto-Bismol bottles, boxes of rubber bands and old eyeglass frames, hundreds of tiny plastic containers of maple syrup from restaurants, and about five hundred home-made balls of twine. (Bonesteel 13-14)

The description goes on to list the numerous framed pictures, piles of newspapers and coloring books, scrapbooks made of old telephone books, bottle caps filled with paint, etc.

Almost all the wall space was covered. Behind the large work table in the center of the room, “was a chair with a telephone book and a pillow stuffed into the space where the seat had fallen through and held in place by a rope. This is where Darger sat and worked—and slept, if indeed he ever did sleep” (Bonesteel 14). We can conclude from this description that Darger’s hoarding could be seen as detrimental, even dangerous, to his carrying out of regular life functions and this is one of the defining features of CH. Darger had basically crowded himself out of what we might call a normal living situation and into a small area, congested and difficult to navigate. It was a fire hazard, and, as noted by Bonesteel, he probably slept in his chair, so it might also be considered a health hazard. Whether or not

Darger suffered from what we now call OCD,<sup>117</sup> we cannot know, nor can we say if Darger would have had an early predisposition to hoarding, as we do not know enough about his past. In any case, because he spent the greater part of his early life in institutions, any tendency for hoarding would have been held in check by those institutions—the lack of cognitive restraints countered by cultural ones. It can be rightfully argued that Darger’s hoarding was a part of his creativity, and that he collected objects for their inspirational affect or use value. However, much of what Darger collected had no value in relation to his art—for instance the hundreds of Pepto Bismol bottles, eyeglass frames, rubber bands, and balls of string. Even if use value could be shown, the fact remains that he was unable or unwilling to throw things away or to reasonably judge the amounts that might be needed. I suggest that all these items may have some kind of symbolic or emotional resonance and that is why Darger could not get rid of them. I also suggest that at least part of this resistance relates to Anderson’s statement above about the fear of loss of objects and the fear of loss of identity.

There are other correlations to CH in Darger’s behavior. For instance, he displayed an inability to complete tasks, as seen in the life-long projects that he took on and never completed. The length of his books may be due to a flawed or painful decision-making process, (i.e., deciding on a conclusion, or a future path to the narration). He may also have harbored a chronic anxiety about closure, based on the loss of the physical process of making, and presenting himself with, an object world. Both of the above possibilities would lead him to perpetuate his projects to the point of absurdity. I would like to suggest that this

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<sup>117</sup> While he lacks some of the symptoms of proper OCD he does exhibit others. He was not overly fanatical about cleanliness, or even about order, nor did he have a rage for symmetry that is often the case with OCD patients. It is more likely that Darger’s symptoms manifest later in his life, after he is settled in Chicago. OCD, when it shows up in later years, is more correlated with “severe family and social disability,” and social phobia. Darger definitely showed signs of these types of problems.

same CH-driven accumulation takes place in Darger's hoarding of language. Darger's writing, like his collecting, becomes an exercise in excess. There is an obsessive collection of fact/objects, and we often find his descriptions to be overly concerned with the enumeration and listing of items. This relates to organizational difficulties in that his obsessive efforts to organize seem ineffective and redundant. In fact, much of Darger's writing can be seen as a failure of organizational systems to have any effect—both in subject matter, i.e., the greater cultural systems and institutions that are impotent in the face of the tornado, and his own obsessive categorizing. As evidence of the latter, we have the endless enumerative descriptions of scenes, the multiple listings both inside and outside the narratives, and the spawning of separate journals, in what seems to be excessive rhizomatic reproduction by which Darger sought to control the chaos.<sup>118</sup> Lists are hoarded facts, even if they are made-up facts, and there is indecisiveness in the inability to be selective. In addition, we have Darger's general hoarding of words, such as the piling up of adjectives; since the best or most effective words cannot be decided upon, all are used. We might also view his repetition compulsion as partly influenced by an inability to discard a previously used description, causing him to use it again. His listing and descriptions are attempts to organize a fragmented or destroyed post-catastrophic world in language. I refer here to something mentioned earlier, that the hoarder is reacting to the scarcity of material existence and the consequent scarcity of self. The hoarder is stockpiling against catastrophe (of forgetting, of empty space, of emptiness in general). This catastrophe is in part related to the present or threatened dissolution of the world, the fragmentation of which produces the things that are then hoarded. In effect, the catastrophe becomes the very thing that is

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<sup>118</sup> In one sense Darger is like a sports buff collecting statistics, or a fanatical collector accumulating quantities of information about his objects.

hoarded. The vortex, formed in the excess flow of accumulated and created things is precisely the sign of this catastrophe, being itself both the hoarded object and the catastrophe that is hoarded against.

To sum up I have shown that Compulsive Hoarding is accompanied by 1) a sense of punishment in the decision-making process; 2) a deficit or fear of a deficit of memory; and 3) a fear of a catastrophic scarcity, all of which can lead to the production of excess, as in acquisition, which is characteristic of Compulsive Hoarding. The narrative analog to hoarding is hypergraphia, which takes the form, in Darger's work, as the hoarding of the ruins and excitement of the catastrophic event in the form of continuous writing. The hoarding of language finds a correlation to the obsessive production of language-to-ward and this brings us neatly to the next neurologically based symptom, that of hypergraphia.

## **2.6 Anxiety for the Dissolution of Self.**

### ***Speculative Diagnosis #5: Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE)/Hypergraphia***

Temporal Lobe Epilepsy is a condition of abnormal neural function in the temporal lobes resulting in seizures that may go undetected as they may be minimal, or may be interpreted as something else. It is of interest to this study because hypergraphia is often the result of this condition. Hypergraphia is, quite simply, excessive writing, an overpowering drive to write, often to no communicative end, and it is, seemingly, obvious in Darger's voluminous written output—both in his incredibly long manuscripts, and in his need to save and accumulate that writing. Flaherty describes the following indicators of the hypergraphic personality: the desire to write comes from a strong, conscious, internal drive rather from an external influence; the writing often has philosophical, religious, or autobiographical themes that are highly meaningful for the author, although, importantly, the writing need not be any

good (25). Flaherty believes that, while perhaps only a neurological oddity, hypergraphia might have something to tell us about literary creativity, especially in autobiography, to which hypergraphic excess is often a partner in the attempt to give meaning to a life. Hypergraphia is related to logorrhea and graphomania, as all three terms refer to an overabundant verbalism, be it spoken or written, a production of excess, pressurized language that is often associated with abnormal psychology. However, logorrhea and graphomania carry with them connotations of cultural and individual decay or malaise.<sup>119</sup> In this study I will use the term hypergraphia, a more clinical than sociological term, and one that I believe to be less pejorative.

### **2.6.1 Neurology of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy/Hypergraphia**

Unlike previously described syndromes, PTSD, Asperger's Syndrome, or to a lesser degree, Compulsive Hoarding, Hypergraphia is not itself a clinical diagnosis or disorder so much as it is associated with various other disorders; it can be caused by a number of conditions, and, like many neurological conditions, it often appears in clusters making its source difficult to diagnose. Flaherty describes hypergraphia (like writer's block) as being based in the geography of the brain, specifically the several different regions of the brain that govern the act of writing. The physical movement of the hand is controlled by the cerebral cortex, which comprises part of the outer layer of the brain. The drive to write, on the other hand, is controlled by the limbic system (amygdala, temporal lobe, etc.), which, as we have seen, governs emotion, affiliated instincts and inspiration, and is said to regulate the human need for communication. While ideas are organized and edited in the frontal lobe of

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<sup>119</sup> Koestenbaum calls logorrhea the “malaise of the writer who writes too much, the speaker who speaks too much; malaise of excess language, of words luxuriating in their own profusion” (285). Graphomania, another term for excessive writing; is, according to Koestenbaum, logorrhea displaced to the hand (286).

the brain, they are, along with words, cognized and understood by the temporal lobes, which are in turn connected to the limbic system. It is in abnormalities of the temporal lobes that a common source of hypergraphia can be located, specifically in seizures caused by temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE), which in turn is generally caused by lesions or tiny scars resulting from either birth defects or head injuries. Such seizures are commonly described as electrical storms in neural circuitry, the wild activity of neurons firing without restraint in chain reactions that may start in the temporal lobes but could spread to other regions of the brain. Flaherty describes temporal lobe seizures as: “Caused by repeated random volleys of nerve impulses traversing the limbic system, these seizures could eventually scramble the connections between the visual cortex and the amygdale, indiscriminately enhancing some links and diminishing others” (69). Despite the drama of such a description, it is also true that most people with temporal lobe epilepsy are not easily distinguished from the rest of the population, as their seizures may be slight and experienced as mere sensory disruptions, albeit sometimes of a high and hallucinogenic order, such as an aura about objects or the sensation of briefly hurling through space. The physical foundation of this symptom is traceable: “Researchers, who can reproduce these sensations with electrical stimulation of the temporal lobe, can also induce ‘out-of-body’ sensations in which the subject feels he is viewing himself from outside” (Flaherty 28). Hearing voices is another common temporal lobe hallucination. Often seizures are accompanied by acute attacks of painful nostalgia, perhaps coupled with specific childhood memories. Flaherty tells us that most people with TLE exhibit symptoms (as above) only during the seizure (*ictal* symptoms), but it is also possible to have such symptoms between seizures (*interictal* symptoms). Hypergraphia is said to be an interictal symptom of TLE (23).

## 2.6.2 Symptomatology of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy/Hypergraphia

Flaherty defines four basic symptoms of TLE as: 1) DEEPENED EMOTIONAL LIFE: sometimes described as hyper-philosophical or hyper-religious (which can include attending mass frequently several times a day or believing oneself to be the Buddha; 2) EMOTIONAL VOLATILITY, including aggressive outbursts; 3) ALTERED SEXUALITY, usually manifest as decreased sexual activity; 4) OVER-INCLUSIVENESS, including an extreme talkativeness caused by excessive attention to detail (24). All of these symptoms are relevant to the hypergraphic impulse, inasmuch as each of these finds compensation in excess language. By this I mean that such excess can be seen as emotional or sexual compensation. In the case of over-inclusiveness we can think of writing as the attempt to contain, or include the phenomenal world through writing.

I mentioned above that the terms logorrhea and graphomania seem to suggest a pathology of abnormal linguistic output, and so they carry with them connotations of cultural and individual decay or malaise. In fact, Max Nordau in *Degeneracy* interpreted graphomania as a sign of degeneracy and feeble-mindedness.<sup>120</sup> He based that opinion on a perceived fault or lack in language to fulfill the user's needs. Nordau writes: "No linguistic form which the mystically degenerate subject can give to his thought-phantoms satisfies him; he is always conscious that the phrases he is writing do not express the mazy processes of his brain" (qtd. in Koestenbaum 287). What I would emphasize in this statement is the inability of language to satisfy, or contain "what is meant." Here I recall Marvin Minsky's observation that "Whatever we may want to say, we probably won't say exactly *that*" (qtd. in Dennett, *Consciousness* 242), and in fact we might not even come close. This observation

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<sup>120</sup> Feeble-Mindedness was the diagnosis given to Darger as a boy, and it was to an institution for feeble-minded children that he was sent.

draws attention to the essential inability of language to satisfy or to truly encapsulate “whatever we mean,” and that without closure, there is the ongoing attempt to achieve proper meaning, resulting in a repetitive overwriting that struggles to “mean.” Koestenbaum describes this problem specifically in relation to males, as “inexpressivity and inarticulateness collapsing under a torrent of words” (285).

### **2.6.3 Darger and Temporal Lobe Epilepsy/Hypergraphia**

As with Compulsive Hoarding, the volume of Darger’s writing puts him unquestionably in the hypergraphic category. And, as with the other possible diagnoses, the neurological cause cannot be known, but TLE is not out of the question. MacGregor, himself a psychiatrist, suggests that Darger’s self-confessed tantrums may be related to such a cause: “Because of the loss of control they involved, their increasing frequency (on occasion several times a day), and their religious content [Darger’s ongoing experiences of intimacy with God] the possibility must be considered that Darger’s tantrums were undiagnosed seizures of some kind, so called brain storms correlated with focal epilepsy deep in the brain” (652). He goes on to suggest that: “The compulsive involvement with writing, in the seeming absence of any concern with communication with others, inevitably awakened thoughts of temporal lobe epilepsy” (657). There are other aspects of Darger’s behavior that might point to the possibility of TLE. I refer back to Flaherty’s cluster of four personality traits—deepened emotional life, emotional volatility, altered sexuality, over-inclusiveness—which I will now examine in relation to Darger’s life.

1) DEEPENED EMOTIONAL LIFE: MacGregor and numerous others have consistently pointed out Darger’s extreme religious engagement. It is evident in the religious nature of

the war between the Christian armies and the hedonists in *The Realms*. It is evident in the religious symbolism of *Crazy House*.<sup>121</sup> It is evident in the religious apocalyptic fixation of *My Life*. Religious preoccupation is also evident in Darger's quotidian existence. We know from his diaries that Darger went to mass obsessively, numerous times a day in his later life, and even identified himself as some kind of "sorry saint." 2) EMOTIONAL VOLATILITY: Darger had problems with aggression most of his life; he was known, and knew himself, to have a violent temper, both as a youth, and in his old age. Throughout "The Autobiography," Darger admits to an inflexibility that leads easily to anger. And in his diaries of 1968-1969, Darger often mentions suffering tantrums, occurring especially in relation to his attempts to bind balls of string, but also to his leg pains. Much of this pain is blamed on God or the failure of religion and so the tantrums take the form of swearing against God and even physical attacks on images of God. In many of these entries Darger mentions that he is working on *My Life* at the same time. If he is suffering TLE symptoms, we might assume that such symptoms would affect his writing and may be the reason *My Life* has a different structure and narrative flow than his other works.<sup>122</sup> 3) ALTERED SEXUALITY: Darger's knowledge of and attitude towards sexuality is the subject of much debate, leading to speculation as to whether or not the violent depictions in his art and writing were representations of repressed sexual desires. From what we know of his life, it is likely that Darger had no actual sex life, or if he did, in his youth, it was very possibly an abusive one. It is also true, the paintings notwithstanding, that Darger barely mentions or speaks to the topic of sexuality in his writing. He does briefly comment on an attraction to a

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<sup>121</sup>. MacGregor states that much of this narrative has to do with visitations and religious visions.

<sup>122</sup>. I refer here again to MacGregor analysis of *My Life*, which emphasizes its circular repetitive structure.

girl, but this is never developed.<sup>123</sup> There are some rather distorted references to sex, as is evident in his recounting and definition of the experience of rape as being equivalent to evisceration.<sup>124</sup> In general, however, we can assume that some alternative attitude toward sexuality is present. 4) OVER-INCLUSIVENESS: Darger's attention to detail was indeed extreme as noted in his obsessive lists and endless descriptions that seem to go far beyond the dramatic needs of the narrative. However, the talkativeness mentioned by Flaherty poses a question that needs to be addressed. While Darger seldom talked to others, interviews with people who knew him confirm that Darger was indeed talkative, but only in private settings, and not as a form of social communication. MacGregor quotes a Chicago art student, Andrew J. Epstein, who sometimes walked with Darger, and who claimed that Darger only seemed to talk to himself, that talk usually taking the form of some diatribe on the weather (*In the Realms* 79). I have already mentioned that David and Kiyoko Lerner remember hearing Darger talking to himself all night, taking on the voices of various characters.

Beyond these four general signs, there other indications of TLE that might be noted, though they supply little true evidence. Flaherty mentions that hypergraphic handwriting, for instance, tends to have distinctive overly stylized characteristics, such as graphic flourishes, or a tendency to fill in margins. As mentioned earlier, Darger's handwriting does not exhibit such artistic flourishes, although he does on occasion decorate his text with a particular type

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<sup>123</sup>. "There was a little girl there by the name of Jennie Turner. I thought I could be attracted to her, but when I learned from others of her disposition I kept away from her. I had my d outs for a while thinking they wanted her for themselves and lied to me.

The truth was heaven help any man that when she grows up marry her. She was a wildcat and let you know it" (54).

<sup>124</sup>. Darger's definition of rape occurs in *Chicago Crazy House*, section no. 2, p. 66:

"What is rape" asked Penrod.

"According to the dictionary, it means to undress a girl and cut her open to see her insides," said Joice. (qtd. in Bonesteel 34n)

of mark (see Appendix K). It is also true that Darger had a sometime habit of writing above or below the lined spaces of his composition book pages, and when he is using unlined paper he tends to write smaller to use up the available space. Probably the observable symptom most indicative of TLE would be Darger's odd hand movements. Flaherty mentions that, as the temporal lobe seizure spreads, it can cause motor symptoms, repetitive gestures or inappropriate acts, such as undressing in public. Such repetitive hand gestures are something we know Darger experienced, as he admits to them on several occasions.

I also loved to splash water at pools left by rain, especially with my hand to pretend it was raining, but somehow never got wet. (11)

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Also, in my boyhood days, (I was like a little devil, if called "kid") I had a very queer way of playing in the snow, by motion of my left hand, which later on got me into some serious trouble, of which I will explain somewhat later. (14)

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[. . .] yet for other strange things I really did I was thought of and called 'crazy' Before that and yet for other strange things I really did I was looked on as 'Crazy' and also called crazy.

Especially for the strange way, I threw with my left hand like pretending it was snowing.

Had I known that, I only would have done it where I was not seen. (38-39)

Darger's odd hand gestures were often thought to have a sexual origin to the point of being labeled public masturbation.<sup>125</sup> We can't know how much of this sexuality was in the mind of the attending physician and school personnel. We do know this behavior was considered inappropriate, excessive, indicating either a lack of control or a disregard for social manners on Darger's part. The move from odd hand movements to sexually expressive hand movements to the hand movements of obsessive writing parallels Darger's movement from

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<sup>125</sup> MacGregor points out that the paperwork that sent Darger to the home for the feeble-minded does hint that such hand gestures were masturbatory. (*In the Realms* 45)

adolescence to adult life and may in fact demonstrate a primacy of the expressive gesture that Prinzhorn describes as being vital as the sexual drive.<sup>126</sup> Thévoz describes the act of writing as something that “in effect brings into play all the libidinal impulses combined with the ‘polymorphous perversity’ of infancy: the urethral libido of flowing ink, the sado-anality of staining, the onanistic rhythms of the hand, the pen caressing the fecund paper ‘defended by its whiteness’” (“The Sorcery of Words” 37). Thévoz draws together a number of threads that connect the act of writing with libidinous impulses as well as with Prinzhorn’s “urge in man not to be absorbed passively into his environment, but to impress upon it traces of his existence beyond those of purposeful activity” (21). I stress this to make obvious the connection between the inappropriateness of said gestures and the repetition and the fulfillment or creativity that results.

To conclude this section on hypergraphia, I would contend that Darger’s overwriting, his hypergraphia, is connected to his self-constitution in a number of ways, and this will be the topic of most of this study. It is the overwriting of himself into selfhood, trying to perhaps “fix the mazy processes of his mind.” Hypergraphia, and indeed TLE have been attributed to a number of writers. Flaherty cites Gustave Flaubert who, as an epileptic writer, describes one of his seizures in what Flaherty claims is classic TLE: “They tended to start with a sense of doom, followed by a feeling that the boundaries of his self were dissolving. He wrote that his seizures arrived as ‘a whirlpool of ideas and images in my poor brain, during which it seemed that my consciousness, that my me sank like a vessel in a storm’” (28). I would point out two things in Flaherty’s statement: one being the insecurity of self

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<sup>126</sup> Hans Prinzhorn writes: “The expressive urge can be understood only as an ever-present atmosphere, like the erotic. [...] What we are trying to define are the roots of the forms of expression within the vital processes” (14).

and the other being the association of that insecurity with a vortex and storm in which the self is being lost. The way out was through writing.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, it is worth restating at this point that, barring an autopsy and modern DNA analysis, it is impossible to posthumously diagnose Henry Darger; we can only speculate using the available evidence and the lens of modern neuro/psychology. Darger may well have been affected by any of the above disorders, a combination of two or more, or none at all. A constellation of related disorders with common symptoms is also possible. Autistics often have temporal lobe lesions and may therefore be given to hypergraphia. In fact: “Investigators have found that nearly one third of children with autism have had temporal lobe epilepsy in infancy, and the proportion may be much higher given that many epileptic seizures go undetected” (Ramachandran and Oberman, “Mirror Neurons” 69). Autistics may also suffer abnormalities of the orbital frontal cortex causing symptoms similar to OCD. Hypergraphia has been found in PTSD and OCD patients. CH is found with Autism/Asperger’s and OCD. PTSD need not be related to any of the above and may be caused or manifest at a later stage of life. However, it can generate OCD and CH and possibly even hypergraphia. What is important is that each condition described here carries with it the possibility of neurologically-based disnarrativa in conjunction with a compromised apprehension of self, which may be deeply perceived, if not present, at the

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<sup>127</sup> Darger is not completely unconscious of his overwriting. In several instances he refers to his narrative as long, or extremely long. The first “apology for excess length occurs on page 254, shortly after the beginning of Book Two: “I know this is a long narrative but I have write all to explain all this insanely wild twister did, and also what other tornadoes can do, if not even worse.” Later in a section entitled “Long Conclusion,” Darger asks: “The tolerance of the reader is asked in this lengthy conclusion because it is almost an interpolation. It has no place in the original compilation but the conditions which developed at Chesterbrown Illinois justify the presentation of that city’s immeasurable calamity in its true relation to the entire most terrible Catastrophy on record” (2997). And again later, he describes another section as: “A long description by a witness of the fateful August 15th by a Survivor of the Angel Guardian Orphange” (4346). These self-conscious references to the length of the narrative testify to Darger’s appreciation of the fact of his overwriting as well as, in a sense, his apologetic stance toward to his “reader”.

conscious level. All of the above neurological conditions have these traits in common: 1) possible turbulent perception of the phenomenal world; 2) anxiety over memory; 3) the failure of normative models of systemic containment; 4) compensation/over-compensation; 5) the possibility of excess in presentation; and 6) an anxiety of self in terms of location, boundaries, and porosity.

## **2.7 The Vortex and the Crisis of Centrality**

### **2.7.1 The Vortex of Valences**

Keeping in mind the context of altered or abnormal physical brain structures, I would like here to briefly focus on the mechanism of *selection*, which will be important as we move on to Chapter Three (Collection and Re-Collection) of this study. Selection is a bifurcation event—one thing or path is chosen over another possibility,<sup>128</sup> which in human beings is based on what is often called “affective” or “emotional” valence, a psycho/physiological dimension that determines behavior and that is often described as varying along a continuum from negative to positive, pleasant to unpleasant, approach to withdrawal.<sup>129</sup> Put simply:

Given choices [...] we are not indifferent, our preferences are themselves subtle, variable and highly dependent on other conditions. There is a time for chocolate and a time for cheese, a time for blue and a time for yellow. In short (and oversimplifying hugely), many if not all of our discriminative states have what might be called a dimension of affective valence. We care what states we are in, and this caring is reflected in our dispositions to change state. (Dennett, *Consciousness* 175)

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<sup>128</sup> I am using the term “bifurcation event” here somewhat more simplistically than it would be used in the study of system dynamics, where a bifurcation event is brought about by a failure or breakdown of one system leading to the creation of another. Rather, I am speaking of selection based on valence, preference, bias, or value, and yet it determines the direction of the system.

<sup>129</sup> It is my contention that affective valences are at root physically determined.

Affective valence is important for a number of reasons, not the least being that it modulates the neural processes that are engaged during the encoding of information; it therefore comes into play early in the hierarchy of neural pathways and may be established long before it is recognized by, or rises to, consciousness. It is also possible that valence plays a role in the recording and retrieval of memory images, which is to say in the earliest electrical stimulation of the brain. In other words, valence affects what is encoded in memory and the facility with which it is retrieved, i.e., the relative importance of particular memories over others, and the relationship of the memory to the stimulus. Evidence of the importance of brain locality in this process can be found in studies showing that some valences are differentiated according to dispositions of the brain hemispheres (like handedness or gender). For instance, the left hemisphere is associated with writing, thus emotional valences patterned in that hemisphere may more easily find expression in written language. It is also speculated that the left frontal cortex may be associated with positive “approach” emotions, while the right frontal cortex may be associated with negative “withdraw” emotions. If this is so, “approach” emotions may be more likely to give rise to an artistic expression such as writing, while “withdraw” emotions may not. Other physically specific conditions such as malfunctioning or missing mirror neurons (autism) or temporal lobe abnormalities (hypergraphia) will affect the valence of neural pathways by closing off possible routes, or creating deviations, short-cuts, repeating loops, labyrinths, etc., thus affecting the transmission of information up the organizational hierarchy. Thus higher organizational levels will be affected; goals may not be properly formulated or presented as possible competitors for attention; mixed or missing signals may indicate that, contrary to reality, a biological goal has or has not been achieved. Subject-object differentiation may even

become confused or non-existent. One's location on the various continuum of perspective may jump about inappropriately or remain oddly fixed.<sup>130</sup> In turn, relevance (value, taste, valence) may be affected and undue importance (obsession, paranoia, fascination) accorded to certain types of sensations, facts, or images, as often happens in autism, or in schizophrenia. My point here is that, in the process of expressing, through art, writing, etc., valence determines a person's attraction to images, symbols, and narrative situations, as well as the type of images they will be prone to produce. Darger's narrative output in *My Life*, as in all of his work, is based on his selections of (his attraction to) words, narrative phrases, stories, and plot types, etc. I will call this the "valence structure" or "hierarchy of valences" underlying his work, and state again that there is a reason for one path to be chosen over another and this reason is rooted in the valences of physical systems.

Admittedly, when we interpret creative output we speak in terms of psychology and emotion. MacGregor, writing about Darger's output says:

The flow of content in Darger is controlled, not by the logic of the narrative, but by internal necessity. [...] Scenes, images, vast natural events, storms, floods, fires, massacres, ruined cities, spring into being in the novel [*The Realms*], not because they are necessary to the evolving narrative, but because they are required by temporary, but recurring psychological needs within the artist himself" (*In the Realms* 108).<sup>131</sup>

Indeed it is difficult to avoid the idea that Darger's repetitive storm imagery, his attraction to catastrophe, is representative of his inner turmoil.<sup>132</sup> MacGregor, above, is

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<sup>130</sup> By continuum of perspective, I mean that point or location from which one observes phenomena, as illustrated in the phrase: One can't see the forest for the trees. The self as a location may also shift.

<sup>131</sup> There is, of course, a logic of narrative at work, it is inherent in the stories Darger borrows and in his various attempts to imitate those narrative logics. However, this narrative logic exists as a byproduct of the drive to write that propels Darger's narrative.

<sup>132</sup> We might make a similar analysis by stating that Darger's general obsession with circles and spheres might be read as emergent images of the psychological condition of autism—i.e., a high emotional valence between his brain state and the images of enclosure and constraint. Thus, we can read one basic graphic unit so

speaking of psychological/emotional needs that require a high degree of speculative analysis rooted in pre-existing psychoanalytic narrative forms. However, it is the point of this chapter to emphasize that these “needs,” and thus Darger’s selections, are determined by the degree of the facility with which his neurological (physical) state fits itself to, or binds with, various representational structures available in the larger culture, structures that manifest coded meaning, and, which are themselves the product of a hierarchy of *cultural valences*. There are thus two dynamics in play: one is the psychological (neurological) need of the individual as suggested above; the other is the need of the culture that has produced the language and the system of symbols (meaningful containers) available to the individual. The self-organization of the subject is contained, restricted, produced by the presence of organizational models provided by the culture (or other larger organizational levels), which is itself in a state of constant self-narrativization. Certain memes (catastrophe, apocalypse, paranoia, child sexuality, etc.) have a high valence in the culture surrounding Darger. The narrative units that attach themselves to such memes are also of a certain valence,<sup>133</sup> one that is relative to the time of their circulation—the stability, the needs of the culture, or rather the signs and symbols within the cultural system. “High-valence” story types will be selected for; they will be attached to the thoughts of individuals, and this attachment is based, as

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prominent in Darger’s imagery—a point of concentration or centralized absence, surrounded by an enclosing or restricting circle or a series of concentric circles—as a mutating, reiterated representation of autism itself, in which a psychic barrier separates, empathetically, the individual from the outside world. The circle or border functions as a limit beyond which exists the chaos of disengaged objects. The narrative analogy to this visual obsession would be Darger’s repetition of scenes in which things become wrapped, encaged by other structures: the windmill that wraps around the barn, the various other scenes in which wires or structures are wrapped around other structures just as the tornado seems to wrap itself around the throat of the girl.

<sup>133</sup> Again I refer to Dennett’s description of the viral activity of memes—that patterns, units of meaning (memes) are looking for the means to reproduce themselves in the susceptible minds of individuals, minds that will submit to, and not resist the meme’s reproduction.

mentioned, on what Dennett calls their “clout,” their redundant presence within the cultural system.

I do not wish to limit this discussion to thematic material alone; it can be extended to the structure of narrative itself, in that Darger’s repetition compulsion can be seen as reflected in/borrowed from the high redundancy of the mass media of his time. Both the radio and newspaper media to which he was attendant tell the same stories over and over again, as a means of establishing their significance within the cultural identity, and Darger may therefore repeat this structure as a “meaningful” one. If we think of media as the means by which postmodern culture knows itself—which is to say, the redundancy of media functions as a kind of knowledge through which cultural identity is constructed—then we can look for this same redundancy in the self-construction of member individuals. Here, I wish to turn to the question of knowledge and its relationship to identity. This requires that we revisit briefly the concept of trauma and self-knowledge and to examine Darger’s relationship to knowledge as a function of his subjectivity.

### **2.7.2 Location of Self/Location of Knowledge**

Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn, writing about traumatic knowing, state: “Ways in which we attempt to know or not know are major organizers of personality” (287). Laub and Auerhahn are referring specifically to trauma victims, a category of which, as I have established, Darger may be a member. We can, however, extend this connection between “knowing/not knowing” and the organization of the identity to postmodern culture at large, which, as I have mentioned, finds itself struggling to maintain identity in the fragmented ruins of the metanarratives it formerly relied on. “We all hover at different distances

between knowing and not knowing about trauma,” Laub writes, “caught in the compulsion to complete the process of knowing and the inability or fear of doing so” (288). The authors go on to discuss avoidance of knowledge, or “not-knowing” as a choice: “To protect ourselves from affect, we must at times, avoid knowledge. We defend against intense feelings or rage, cynicism, shame, and fear by not knowing them consciously” (288). I contend that, inasmuch as the self exists in direct relationship to the known environment, this “not knowing,” whether voluntary or involuntary, necessarily impacts upon self-knowing.

I have shown that due to various possible neurological abnormalities, Darger may well have suffered an anxiety of selfhood and we can find evidence for this in his writing, perhaps most obviously in his anxiety about information as manifest in a dialectic of “knowing” and “not knowing” that pervades the work and seems to indicate a lack of a secure knower, a secure self who is confident of knowing. After all, if the self is uncentered, what is known and by whom becomes problematic. *My Life* indeed starts out with a conflict about information: “In the month of April, on the 12, in the year of 1892, of what week day I never knew, as I was never told, nor did I seek the information. Also I do not remember the day my mother died, or who adopted my baby sister, as I was then too young, nor who my uncle Charles would tell me or did not know either” (1). Darger is admitting to a lack of ground for knowing, and this ambiguous relationship between the subject and what he can or cannot know continues throughout the text in various ways: “I do not know or even remember, how long I was away from school, after being excumicated” (33); “I do not know the length of time or years I remained there in the mission of our Lady’s home” (41); “(I know not the day or date of the month) I was hustled into the Chicago and Alton Limited

train, and brought to some kind of home for feeble minded children, outside of and south of the small city of Lincoln Ill” (42-43); “What sin it was if it was one I do not know for sure but when I told it in confession the priest was disturbed admonished me, and gave me a severe or long prayer penance to recite” (160). These are only a few examples, but what I wish to point out here is that, “not knowing” is, in fact, a fundamental motor of the text; it is the rationale and excuse by which the text generates itself.<sup>134</sup> Darger’s life, as he recounts it, is in a large part structured by losses and gaps (gaps in memory, agency, and causality) and he is filling those gaps in with text. What may be equally important, in contrast to any particular autobiographical details, is the structure and rhythm of narration that emerges. The repeated admission, or consciousness of *not knowing* when contrasted to what is accepted as *known*, creates a dialectic that is mirrored throughout “The Autobiography” as a tension between control and lack of control, containment and escape, authority and defiance, tensions that are further amplified in the remaining catastrophic books in the form of conflicts between order and chaos, density and explosion, the inexplicable and the limits of human knowledge—knowledge that I stress is in a state of crisis. In general, we could say Darger’s crisis of knowledge shows itself in two ways: 1) an anxiety about “knowing” that manifests early on as a mystery<sup>135</sup> over his own behavior, as well as his life in general, and later as an inability on the part of anyone to arrive at a conclusion or an answer; and 2) a concurrent obsession for explanation, causing the text to repeat hypergraphically, as each

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<sup>134</sup>. See Appendix C, The Anxiety of Knowledge, for a representation of the states of *knowing* and *not knowing*, *remembering and forgetting*, *believing and disbelieving*, as they are presented in pages 1-206.

<sup>135</sup>. I would draw attention here to the analogy that can be made between this mystery Darger feels in relation to his own life and the mystery that is the ongoing theme of the narrative of *My Life*.

witness poses questions, and each meeting seeks answers in the various attempts to explain the phenomenon of the storm, the fire, the mass suffering, etc.

Another aspect of the crisis of knowledge can be seen in the curious circuitous ways that information travels in *My Life*, never finding a functional center. A major theme of the Catastrophic Books, Two through Four, is how information moves or does not move from one place to another and the failure of information to prevent catastrophe or to ameliorate its results. Note that the inability of information to travel is often related to the states of “wreckage.”<sup>136</sup>

Every kind of communication telegraph, telephone and railway were annihilated by the “beautiful shroud” and no wires of any kind not even yet no could be repaired or replaced, causing much severe almost unbearable high tension day or night and also which at times almost because dire panic. (379-380)

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The place of the people became almost like a mad camp. Many soldiers had to be assigned to help the guards to handle this crowd of people. What had made this situation worse was because of such destruction of telephone and telegraph wires and such no one could send message of injury. And if it could have been done it would have been absolutely impossible to ascertain definitely any information concerning the dead or the injured survivors in the districts prostrated by this most awful twister. Even letters and mail could not come through because of the destroyed bridges over the river.

Therefore no normal or private or other mail to persons could be delivered or answered. (1023-1024)

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Without knowing the true situation that the four cities were completely cut off from wire and telegraph and railroad communications people send from everywhere so many messages that operators in all places north of the disaster zone plunged into great piles of telegrams from persons in their desire to find out what became of their friends and relatives on the missing trains in Chesterbrown.

[...]

There were from people anxious over the fate of all those on the wrecked trains. Yet no messages could come or go out because of destroyed communications. The relief Committee expressed the wish that people throughout the country refrain from sending messages of inquiry It was

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<sup>136</sup> I will be addressing the relationship between information, knowing, and wreckage in Chapter Four.

impossible to ascertain definitely any information concerning right then the number of all the passengers in the wrecked trains. (1128-1129)

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A strange thing about the disaster was that Chesterbrowns destruction was kept secret for three days by the storm for all communication ~~is~~ was broken down. (2966)

Note in the following passage, the interesting circuitous route that information takes.

A very disheartening phase of this tornado history in ~~what~~ which relates to which to the manner in which the news of the disaster could not reach the public until it came from Lincoln Nebraska. And then it was slow coming.

Practically all the tornado news which was given to Lincoln newspapers for many hours after the tornado horror emanated from Lincoln and Omaha and Kansas city and Rock Island and Moline cities over only one small telephone ~~w~~ wire secured by a Peoria Newspaper.

From this point the news and many official messages were disseminated by circuitous methods.

For instance one telegraph circuit was made up to reach Chicago consisted of telegraph lines, from Cincinnati to ~~L~~ Louisville to Memphis even to Dallas Texas to Denver Colorado and back from Denver back to Chicago. Toledo though in Ohio received its news and information from the stricken section of Northern Illinois by way of Cincinnati through Nashville to New Orleans to New York, to Detroit and back to Toledo.

In some cases a circuit was established by using a telephone line to complete a telegraph circuit and yet it was not for a week after the wild cat tornado that some not full telegraph service was established. From La Salle, Ottawa and Chesterbrown and also much further east beyond Zaneville no communication of any kind still could not be recovered in any way.

Why? Because of conditions left by the wild storm the linemen could not get into the stricken territory. (3014-3015)

Information travelling by wire or newspaper is important to the story; it influences the state in which we find things, why they do or do not change, and the confusion of the characters.

In fact, the characters seem to exist in a constant state of confusion concerning information;

they never seem to believe what they hear and so they are glad to have what they hear

confirmed through repetition. They need redundancy and redundancy is one thing that

Darger can offer. Indeed, Darger wants to offer this redundancy because *the characters'*

*anxiety about information is also his own*—thus his insistence on delivering what may seem

endless irrelevant details. I would also suggest that Darger's state of unknowing in his quotidian life is projected into his fictional world and amplified as mystery, thus taking on metaphysical significance.<sup>137</sup>

### **2.7.3 Narrating the Center of Knowing: The Crisis of Centrality and the Writing of the Vor/text**

I want to return here to what I previously called a crisis of centrality and how it can be seen in the narration of *My Life*. The center of any narration is the emanating point, the narrator. However, throughout *My Life* the reader is in the difficult position of determining who is actually the narrator of Darger's autobiography; is it the author or a character who is speaking/writing? I have been discussing the writer's relationship to knowledge in terms of a dynamic between "knowing" and "not knowing," which is a trait of trauma narratives. But, even taking the possibility of trauma out of the equation, the dynamic between the known and the unknown can be seen as a function of the anxiety of self as it is a product of the postmodern crisis of knowledge. This crisis of centrality (of the center of the knower to his/her experience) shall be defined as an anxiety over the perception or apprehension of a proper self, or the self's location in relation to experience. Laub and Auerhahn maintain that the different forms of traumatic knowing vary along a continuum of psychological distance from the trauma, one of these being the "degree of ownership of the memory—i.e., the degree to which an experiencing 'I' is present as subject" (289). This is important in the study of Darger's prose because one of its primary qualities is the slipperiness of the bond between narrator and narration: Who is the narrator? Who is the knower of these events? As mentioned already, Darger's narrative voice is often difficult to locate in one particular

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<sup>137</sup> These metaphysical, religious, spiritual qualities will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

individual, character, time or place. I am speaking primarily of the narrating “I” that appears with the sighting of the tornado, shortly after page 206, and who can be seen as closely identified with the tornado. I focus on this transitional period precisely because it is here that the “I” becomes slippery; it moves about between various versions of “Henry Darger” (boy, man, firefighter, professor, public authority, etc.) and indeed, between other characters as well. It is also largely different from the narrator of the first 206 pages, even though it purports to be the same. In the effort to integrate these narrators into one, I will posit the existence of a supra-narrator, an Ur-Henry as it were, or Henry Prime who encompasses both. This narrator is the universal “I” spoken by all narrative as its ground, and which Darger, lacking his own stable, centered, individual “I”, adopts, more or less objectively, as a requisite narrative device. As such, it serves the functions of, a) allowing the narrative to exist; and, the more rhizomatic function of, b) propagating redundancy within the narrative, therefore propagating, suggesting, presenting Darger himself—the author as subject.

I would suggest that this Henry Prime, as I have dubbed him, is, in Darger’s case, ungrounded; it has no defined center in a self, nor is it loyal to any time, space or body. Because it is not grounded it does not recognize the inconsistent fluidity of the world it exists within. It moves from location to location, spinning up into the vortex of a story, with each story locating an “I” temporarily at its narrative center. By this process, the disembodied self seeks embodiment in physical creation. As I will show, Darger’s compromised subjectivity seeks its body in materiality, in the concrete phenomenon of words and things, and not in an abstract meta-self, which, as I have suggested, may well be unavailable to it. Darger’s repetition, his continuous engagement with various versions of his own name—a known physical sign of his self—can be seen as precisely an act of

seeking this materiality. In Chapter Three, we will look at how this Henry Prime functions in relation to the structure of the text in its entirety, but now I wish to transition into the next phase of this study, which is the structural effort needed to suggest centrality and thus, full subjecthood.

If we accept that subjectivity is dependent on the proportionate centrality of the self to experience, then a compromised centrality would lead to a compromised subjectivity. Darger's sense of being off-center is everywhere present in his experience. For instance, in "The Autobiography," he is seldom the decision maker; in other words, he is seldom at the center of the decision. Decisions are made for him, a situation that is reversed in the *Catastrophic Books*, in which he often casts himself as the decision-maker. We can also note that, in "The Autobiography," Darger's life is a repeating pattern of capture and escape: the imprisoning negative centrality of capture, and the frightening, though positive, freedom of escape. Thus, for Darger, centrality may very well be equated with institutionalization and the pain of confinement and would therefore be a source of anxiety and conflict. Darger is indeed conflicted about his habitation at the Lincoln Asylum: he claims to have felt at home and safe there, and yet he repeatedly tries to escape. We have also seen, throughout "The Autobiography" and in his concurrent diaries, there is a focus on pain, a state of existence Darger may feel the need to be redeemed from.<sup>138</sup> Centrality is equated both with pain and with loss and so I wish to suggest that Darger's missing center, his missing self, is not entirely within himself—that is to say, it is not completely generated by his own physicality.

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<sup>138</sup>. This anxiety of centrality is also apparent in the episode of Darger's visit to the doctor to determine his feeble-mindedness. Darger was told his heart was not in the right place. His answer was to ask, "Where was it supposed to be? In my belly?" (41). Oddly, Darger does not think his heart should be central in his body. We do not, of course, know what the doctor actually told him, only how Darger himself interprets it, which is with indignation, anger.

It is at least partly located in what is missing outside of himself, in his history—his sister, his mother, the lost girls that fascinated him in the news, the idea of loss itself. Inasmuch as these lost people are, or should have been, part of his identity, they constitute part of what is missing in his self-conception. Because we construct our “selves” in contrast to, or in opposition to the environment, any major missing aspect of what is considered a normal environment will be detected as a missing part of the self.

We may also look at Darger’s general attraction to specific words, themes, metaphors, and obsessive imagery, as a desire for centrality. As mentioned, Darger’s fixation on circle images—the strangled child, the tornado, the wrappings of things around other things, etc.—can be seen as being of a piece with this crisis of centrality, in that his prime obsession, the vortex, can be said to *emerge* as an organizational form, or system to embody and to resolve this crisis. The repetition and consequent circularity inherent to vortical structure suggest a center by which the crisis might be resolved.<sup>139</sup> Thus the crisis of centrality influences the valence structure that underlies Darger's selections, and this valence structure is a hierarchy spanning the electro-chemical, the grammatical-linguistic, and finally the narrative.

But this crisis manifests itself in more ways than within the valence structure. It creates a tendency toward excess, or, when we are speaking of language production, hypergraphia. This is because a centrality can be suggested by circular narrative self-construction, but such construction can only suggest; it is a “pointing towards.” The actual absence will persist, resulting in excess, as the circularity must repeat—not around a point of convergence but around the elusive, missing center. Another way to put this is that the

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<sup>139</sup> The vortex points in an emphatic way both towards and away from a center, yet it has no center itself, which is what differentiates the vortex from a confluence or point of convergence.

intensifying circularity attempts to force or create a center where the self should reside, an attempt that is doomed to frustration. Mark Taylor writes: “The search for self presence in self-consciousness leads to the discovery of the absence of the self. Once again self-affirmation and self-negation prove to be indivisibly bound. Apparent ‘selving’ is actual ‘unselving’” (51). One solution is the generation of narrative or text, as Taylor writes: “Through the presentation of a consistent narrative of personal experience, the subject seeks to establish individual identity and to secure personal property. Such self-presentation is inseparable from recollection, representation and repetition” (14), which will be the focus of the next chapter.

#### **2.7.4 From Neurons to Nest**

This chapter began by presenting a variety of neurological disorders that might have affected Darger’s sense of self-presence in relation to experience, resulting in a drive to excess narrativization. To briefly recap: in the case of physical chronic pain, the self can feel under assault, losing its boundaries. It may seek language in an effort to conceptualize the experience, but “pain language” has no object in the physical world and will often borrow narratives in an ongoing attempt to regain what is lost, to remake the world and the self that has been shattered. In the case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the registration of memory may be displaced. The resulting attempts at narrative recuperation may miss or avoid the memory and the self’s engagement with it. Self-narratives may relocate that center into an Other, as in the commonly-used displacement constructions of trauma victims: “I am not the one who experienced that,” or “It was not me but another me, another.” Trauma narratives may circle about what is missing, the unsaid, unspeakable “black hole” at the center of

experience, resulting in repetition and excess in the narrative mechanism. In autism/Asperger's Syndrome what is missing is not necessarily a single traumatic experience or group of memories—but a lack of Theory of Mind and thus a coherent concept of the self. There is an inability to construct or conceive of a self in any other than an objective (i.e., received) manner, which may take the form of a grammatical construction, a third-person representation, or, on a more basic level, a mere obsessive listing of things, an ongoing, selected record of sensory experience. Among autistics, the recording of sensory experience may take the form of a fascination with, and amplification of, patterns and number, often to compensatory excess. In the case of Compulsive Hoarding Disorder, we find an anxiety about memory, which translates into an anxiety about self-continuity in time. There is, as well, a fear of scarcity, and in particular the kind of catastrophic scarcity by which the self may perish. Thus we might extend this scarcity to that of the secure self itself. The need to sediment, or fix, the landscape of the self (physical and temporal) can lead to abnormal collecting behavior, or hoarding as a means of concretizing memory and fixing identity through excess. In the case of hypergraphia, which may be an effect of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, the centrality of the self is overporous, diffuse, lacking secure boundaries, or poorly located. An overproduction of words, a barrage of language, attempts to fix or delineate a self, or it may serve merely to manifest the anxiety of the self's absence.

In all the conditions outlined above, a crisis of centrality, which is equivalent to an incomplete or compromised perception of self, may be compensated for by either excess narrative production, redundant narrative production, or undirected narrative. This is not to say that any of these conditions causes or is a result of an absence of self that is *unique* to these conditions, but rather that such neurological conditions can augment an absence that is

*already the essential nature of the self.* In making this point, I am attempting to temper what might seem an overly pathological explanation of narrative excess by stating that the compromised self as I have defined it is not to be seen as a distinct pathology, but rather as an alternating location along the continuum of self-construction that extends from zero narration (unconsciousness, or non-reflexive “animal” consciousness) to normal self-narration (full human self-consciousness) and beyond to a proposed far end of the continuum, that of the dissolution of narration, where meaningless (excessive, nonsensical) language signals the failure of narrative structures in relation to self-maintenance. Here, language dissolves into nothing but un-directed narrative or disconnected utterances—what I will describe, using one of Darger’s favorite words, as “wreckage.”<sup>140</sup> Such language is still the product of a body and brain, but it no longer properly serves the maintenance of “self.” It is narrative in a state of turbulence. Again, I call attention here to the metaphorical constructions of neurologists mentioned earlier likening the ‘self’ to a *position* within a dynamic landscape of many cognitive functions. And I would add that this is not a fixed position either and that even in “normal” conditions the self is intermittent, tenuous, fragile, inconstant, perpetually under construction, under attack, and capable of being altered or destroyed.<sup>141</sup> This relates to the postmodern breakdown of the metanarrative and the chaotic

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<sup>140</sup> The term wreckage is one of the most common words in *My Life*, and it is an appropriate term for the milieu that Darger finds himself within. I will be discussing this further in Chapter Four.

<sup>141</sup> In *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness*, Ramachandran gives us an example of how consciousness is actually temporally fragmented in the situation of driving a car while having a conversation. You are conscious of what you say. You are not necessarily conscious of negotiating traffic, which is to say, you are *not* thinking “I am now turning right,” or “I am stopping.” You are merely acting, producing these events. Ramachandran calls this unaware activity, “blindsight,” the kind of automatic being in the world (unconscious activity) that is not part of self-consciousness as we define it (29), although you can become self-conscious of these activities at any moment, spinning up (to use computer terminology) to self-awareness at a nano-second’s notice. The question can be asked: Is this intermittency of self-awareness also an intermittency of self? Does the self exist when we are not aware of it? Ramachandran seems to be saying that such is, in fact, the case: “self that is unaware of itself is not a self” (98). The word “awareness” as it is used here, refers to self-reflexivity, i.e., the awareness of being aware, and this requires a metarepresentation of what it is that is aware—a model of the

equivocation of “language elements,” as Lyotard describes them—a metanarrative detritus out of which the individual must self-construct. That construction, in Darger’s narratives, comes about through the formation of organizational vortices, within the flow of his language. Since Darger himself uses the vortex (and weather phenomenon in general) as a metaphorical constant, we might feel justified extending that metaphor here to our purposes. To use the weather metaphor of storm formation—it is *unknowing* that creates a vacuum, a low-pressure area that will be filled in with repetitious detail of *knowing*, information in the form of redundant narrative.

The vortex organizes by two processes. The first of these is *collection*: this is the act of the gathering of objects into the attracting influence of the structure. These objects, I reiterate, are selected by the dynamics and valences of the systems through which they pass before coming under the influence of the vortex. The second organizational process of the vortex is *recollection* or *redundancy*: this is the repetition and circularity of patterns established in the collecting process. Recollection begins in the reversal of flow, a turning back upon itself. Thus, recollection forms the vortex as it reiterates collection. Collection is the beginning; it produces the weight of series and the perception or apprehension of an end of series, either in the self or in the infinite.<sup>142</sup> In this sense, collection is teleological, whereas recollection/redundancy is not. We can also say that collection, in its accumulating tendency, and its suggested teleology, leads to a crisis of the inevitably unachieved. This crisis is propagated by a paradox—that the knowable end or thing, that completion or closure which would be the end of the series, cannot actually exist in the infinity of time and

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modeling entity. As Ramachandran goes on to say, “‘Awareness’ simply doesn’t mean anything without a metarepresentation—the concomitant sense of self” (111).

<sup>142</sup> It is worthwhile to note here that it is as the end of series that the self and the infinite combine.

space. A collection may be added to yet other collections, or the terms of its seriality may be altered by possibilities yet unknown. The closure of the collection cannot be absolutely determined. The information that collection carries becomes threatening at this point, *unless* it is contained by, or folded back into redundancies, recollections. Here the threat resolves itself into a vortex of redundancy as the excesses of collection collapse into the impossibility of what it has suggested. An example of this: the collections of pictures of girls that Darger kept could conceivably go on forever, they could be joined to those of other collectors in other spaces, other universes, at which point the collection threatens to become useless, meaningless. It therefore shifts phase into another form—that of recollection—the collection of what has already been collected. Recollection, of course, is not only equivalent to memory (the recollection of what has been collected) and which must be repeated (as it originally was), but it is also the place where art begins to emerge.

### 3.0 Chapter Three. Technologies of ReLocation: Collection, ReCollection and Critical Mass

*Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the days rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogs everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the confused array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial Magic. [...] He comes up, shaking his head and stumbling over the paving stones, like the young poets who spend their days wandering about in search of lines. He is talking to himself; he is pouring his soul out in the cold, dark air of the night. It's a monologue splendid enough to make the most lyric tragedies seem pitiful.*

— Charles Baudelaire (*Of Wine and Hashish*)

To begin this chapter, I recall here the description of Darger's room quoted in the last chapter: it is the room of a compulsive hoarder, an abnormal collector. As an urban collector, a man who wandered the streets of his city picking up items from the trash, which he would refurbish by his own brand of industrial magic, Darger bears a relation to the Baudelairian ragpicker above. MacGregor records that "Sometimes [Darger] would be seen in streets and alleys far from home, rifling through garbage cans and trash in search of treasure which he brought back to his room" (*In the Realms* 79). MacGregor also cites Andrew Epstein, an art student, who remembered Darger: "I'd see him walking and talking to himself. He'd pick up things and put them in his pocket—bottle caps, packaging. He seemed to like it [in the alleys] under the El tracks" (*In the Realms* 79). I would like to highlight that this collecting is a type of concentration, moving items from a diffused fragmented state to a concentrated state, from disorder to order. The concentrating vector, the movement of this mass of imagery (cultural waste corresponding to his obsessions) was from the outskirts or margins of Darger's world, the alleys and streets he walked, to the inner sanctum, his room where the material was placed in loose collections of "like" objects.

Some of these objects we can assume were hoarded for symbolically resonant but non-utilitarian reasons. Others were gathered for creative purposes and indeed became the very stuff out of which his art was made.

Chapter Two discussed a number of physiological conditions that may have had bearing on Darger's artistic production, specifically resulting in an abnormal need to accumulate and produce *in excess*, as a means of resolving what I have called a crisis of centrality related to selfhood, and that this process is guided by a hierarchy of neurological and affective valences. In regard to writing (as opposed to the collection of objects), collection and recollection were considered to be stages in a hypergraphic process, which could be seen as generating a vortex as the form of resolution with the movement toward "meaning" being analogous to the movement toward self-constitution. The present chapter will examine the processes of collection and recollection in greater detail, concentrating on Darger's process of production and his result, which includes the achievement of a critical mass of transformational potential.

To begin, I will examine the phenomenon of collection in non-subjective material environments (physical sorting systems), then move on to collection as it occurs in self-replicating life forms and finally in human subjectivity and productivity. I will concentrate on how collecting accentuates or enhances identity or selfhood, i.e., how the accumulation of objects can be seen as the emergence of a landscape of the self. This discussion will revisit the phenomenon of abnormal collection (compulsive hoarding) and its relationship to the compromised self discussed earlier. Where collecting approaches or aspires to art, it is lifted out of the realm of biological necessity (i.e., the hoarding of food or other useful items) and into the realm of excess, which can be interpreted as the superfluous generation

or scaffolding of meaning. I will look at how Darger used the images he collected, how they came to be reorganized into art. I will then make the transition from the collecting of artifacts and images to the collecting of text as an essential process in his writing, both as structure and subject matter.<sup>143</sup> I will discuss the problem of excess collection, both in terms of imagery and text, and how such excess puts pressure on the limits of the structural systems designed to contain it, especially narrative structures. When such structures fail or fall into chaos (too much material in a disorganized state), a pressure is created for alternative forms of stability or meaning. One of these is simply the recuperation or redundancy of previously meaningful material put to use in the restructuring of the compromised space of chaotic excess.

I have mentioned that narrative and literature are part of the complex of systems by which humans create an evolutionarily beneficial sense of “self” in time, and a means of binding populations of “selves” into larger protective groups of societies, also maintained in time by narrative. Therefore, the second half of this chapter moves from collection to redundancy in the form of the (re)collection of one’s own text, the retelling of the already said. This is important because one of the overall structural realities of Darger’s text is its high redundancy; it exists as a vast field of repetition—repeated words and phrases, repeated scenes, repeated stories—and, it must be said that, without such redundancy, Darger’s textual output, which is most notable for its size, would be considerably smaller. *My Life*, his last work, is also his most redundant text, in that there are only five basic stories that are

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<sup>143</sup> It is important to remember here that, although I am moving from image to word, Darger was first and always a writer, and his collection of language was not a result of image-collecting but rather preceded it and continued concurrent with his art.

repeated for thousands and thousands of pages.<sup>144</sup> Because redundancy can be seen as the imitation and/or repetition of information used as a structural device, a strategy for meaning, identity, and self, Darger's text can be viewed as an act of self-maintenance, self-constitution, self-generation—a continuous process that creates a vortical motion within his continuous textual production. This chapter will examine the levels of redundancy and how they are related to vorticity, turbulence and the act of self-making.

### **3.1 Collecting: From Matter to Mind**

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a great mass of debris twice the size of Texas, weighing 3.5 million tons, floating in the Pacific Ocean between San Francisco and Hawaii. The majority of this patch (80%) is composed of plastic bags and other discarded plastic material that finds its way from the far-inland locations of cities and towns, into sewers and other water streams or air currents. As it makes its way to the Pacific Ocean, it is picked up by what Marcus Eriksen calls circular “currents in the gyre,” a vortex that collects the refuse (qtd. in Allsopp et al). The vast, slowly turning gyre of plastic presents a graphic and contemporary example of the way natural dynamic processes cause collections of like materials, leading to the observation that collecting as a physical phenomenon, self-organization without agenda, is something that takes place outside of, or previous to, what we might call the province of subjectivity. Collection occurs across the spectrum of the physical world; the executive agency need not be sentient, it need only be a force, a velocity, a dynamic—an agent of difference. Examples would be the formation of beaches and

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<sup>144</sup>. These basic stories might be delineated thus: 1) the coming of the tornado; 2) dealing with the aftermath of the tornado; 3) discussions as to the cause of the tornado; 4) the advance of the Great Fire; and 5) fighting the fire.

riverbanks composed of like-sized particles. Of particular interest to this study are, first, the states of materials being collected and the dynamics of how they come into proximity. The trajectory from physical to aesthetic collecting sums up what Dawkins would call the quantitative accumulation of small change, local effects gathering to global effects. Any dynamic system will affect a degree of collection inasmuch as it causes a sorting based on physical relationships (friction, surface, and temperature variance, etc.), and some of these relationships, if they increase the likelihood of like materials being accumulated to like materials can be considered as having the effect of valences, biases in the bifurcation process—the system creates a preference of one thing, size, shape, or weight, over another. A second process that comes into play is that of sedimentation, the subsequent coalescing of homogenous sedimentary units into a new entity with emergent properties of its own; this is often accomplished by the “percolation” of other minerals through the sediment (filters), crystallizing and consolidating the temporary spatial relationships into a more or less permanent architectonic structure (De Landa, *A Thousand Years* 60).<sup>145</sup> Something similar happens in chemical binding. Chemicals that react with unlike chemicals to form new compounds do not do so out of a *sorting by sameness* but rather by a collection process that could best be called “recognition,” which I would point out is equivalent to the valence structure discussed earlier—a facility for combining.<sup>146</sup> Self-sustaining loops of catalyst and product may form, and we can look at the stability of these loops as an “attractor,” an

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<sup>145</sup> I am using the term “percolation” as Paul Virilio uses it in *Lost Dimension*, describing the soup of materials put in contact with one another and then subject to a variant dynamic such as heat. Sedimentation is De Landa’s term.

<sup>146</sup> “This act of recognition is not, of course, a cognitive act but one effected through an (accidental) lock-and-key mechanism: a portion of the catalytic molecule fits or meshes with a portion of the target molecule, changing its internal structure so that it becomes more or less receptive to yet another substance” (De Landa *A Thousand Years* 62).

organizational process that precipitates itself, resulting in homogeneity of production. The sameness of the individuals produces the system of generating that sameness which in turn produces the system for generating the system that produces that sameness, and so on. Life-forms themselves are collections of smaller systems into larger, self-sustaining structural relationships. As systems get folded into one another we move from inanimate to animate systems and from the inanimate to the animate collecting act. Manuel De Landa draws an analogy between mineral sedimentation and the biological genetic sedimentation:

Genes, of course, do not merely deposit at random but are sorted out by a variety of selection pressures, including climate, the action of predators and parasites, and the effect of male and female choice during mating. Thus in a very real sense, genetic materials, “sediment” just as pebbles do. [...] Furthermore these loose collections of genes can, (like accumulated sand) be lost under drastically changed conditions. [...] Through selective accumulation and isolative consolidation, individual animals and plants come to form a larger-scale entity: a new species (*A Thousand Years* 61).

My intention in outlining these processes is to demonstrate that collection can generate the emergence of higher-order (living) systems, and in that manner it offers a bridge between the behavior of inorganic physical systems and the collecting behavior of animals and eventually of humans. In fact, collecting is a deeply rooted biological process.<sup>147</sup> All nesting species collect—pack rats, birds, and wasps. Animal collecting is pragmatic. Birds collect certain types of similar twigs or material to build nests. Humans often assume that non-human animals “behave” or act according to natural (i.e., material) laws—that they are, in effect, instinct machines; they do not reason or manipulate symbols,

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<sup>147</sup>. “Behaviors comparable to those of human collecting have also been described in non-human species and are not limited to food. Some birds (e.g., American Crow, Northern Raven) are known to accumulate aluminum foil and brightly colored objects; hamsters prefer hoarding glass beads over standard chow or sucrose; food hoarding (also called ‘catching’ or ‘storing’) occurs in at least 12 families of birds, 21 families of mammals and many insects” (S.W. Anderson 201).

nor do objects have “meaning” for them the way they do for humans.<sup>148</sup> But collecting among animals, as I have shown, is related to home-building and by extension to community and identity, be it family, species or individual. Life-forms collect into nests, hives, packs, tribes, colonies and cities, based on similarity of species, race, ethnicity or common purpose. Urban neighborhoods may collect according to similarities of race, ethnicity, religion, or similarities of purpose—praise of divinity, class solidarity, demographic perpetuation, shopping, or entertainment preferences.<sup>149</sup> Likeness of form may become likeness of purpose and vice-versa as unlike forms may be rendered similar *by* purpose (social mobility, employment opportunity) via a selection process.

Returning to collecting at the level of the individual, Anderson writes: “The adaptive value of certain forms of collecting behavior is evident, e.g., storing food in anticipation of times of scarcity. Anticipated need, however, hardly accounts for most instances of collecting by humans” (S.W. Anderson 201). Collecting, in the human sense, is the tendency

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<sup>148</sup> The pack rat accumulates without self-conscious reason (S.W. Anderson 207), but there are valences, biases that cause the pack rat to choose one thing over another. How is this different from the hoarder? Opposed to the pack rat, the hoarder is theoretically, at some point, aware of the choice he makes, of why he collects newspaper and string, etc. But what if the thing hoarded has no value, where does awareness come into play? More importantly, does it matter objectively? We can only judge the pack rat objectively and so we must judge the hoarder in the same way. Awareness is something we assume. We are not always aware that we are making a decision to move our arm or to walk across the room; we may be acting on impulse, or as a reaction of subconscious stimuli. Where then is the actual conscious decision made? Is it made in afterthought—as a backwards projection? The pack rat is not capable of assigning retrospective meaning. The question of the presence of awareness, however, remains valid. We might also consider the difference between hoarding and obsessive collecting. The hoarder is said to be unaware that he is hoarding. The obsessive collector may be aware he is collecting, but can he say why? Can we as observers assume there is purpose to the collection?

<sup>149</sup> We don’t need regulations and city planners deliberately creating structures. All we need are thousands of individuals and a few simple rules of interaction, which may be physical, biological or cultural. Polish immigrants will attract more Polish immigrants. There is no dictate, no zoning needed. The bright shop windows attract more bright shop windows and drive the impoverished toward the hidden core. Separation and reorganization has taken place. What Steven Johnson suggests is common to them: “In the simplest terms they solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements, rather than a single intelligent ‘executive branch.’ They are bottom up systems, not top-down” (*Emergence* 18). Thus agents residing on one scale, without any intention or knowledge of higher scales can start altering or producing behavior the higher scale just above them scale above them.

to acquire and retain objects, even when they are not of immediate or even long-range utility; as defined by Anderson, it is “the accumulation of any type of object in a greater number than is considered reasonable by peers and is thus noted as ‘unusual’ or remarkable” (203). It is commonly seen among both children and adults, in modern as well as primitive societies.

“Collections of art objects, antiques, books and coins can be found in homes throughout the world, no category of objects being without its ardent collectors, and there are conferences and organizations for collecting of items ranging from postage stamps to farm tractors” (S.W. Anderson 202). Collecting is also encouraged as a means to social cohesion. Capitalism promotes collecting as a form of market growth. The larger cultural ramifications are related to the suitability of these evolved collecting patterns, which may be described as being determined by use value, appropriateness, and affective valence.

It appears likely that most humans acquire a collection of some sort at some point in their lives. Pursuing such collections often can be justified on the basis of their aesthetic/emotional value, or monetary value, or both. In some instances, however, collecting behavior may deviate from the reasonable and acceptable pattern and be directed toward objects that are not only unnecessary for daily life, but are deprived of discernable, aesthetic/emotional and monetary value, not to mention downright useless and inconvenient. (S.W. Anderson 202)

Anderson is speaking of abnormal collecting, which is a cultural determination, but the above statement is important for his mention of aesthetic and emotional value. Thus we pass from the objective physical world (the collecting of riverbanks and pack rats, etc.), to the “subjective” world of collecting as self-enhancement, collecting as aesthetic—art as collection, collection as art, the artist as a force or agent of nature that collects.

In human culture, the human brain allows for selections and accumulations of images based on symbolic gravity, or memetic valence.<sup>150</sup> I have already mentioned sedimentation, by which collected materials cohere into new stable states. In human cultures we might speak of memetic sedimentation—societies that settle into fixed ways of thinking, of building, of speaking, and I want to reiterate that this sedimentation is due to the sedimentation of the narratives by which the societies are constituted. These become what we might call metanarratives, or assumed, foundational, “given” modes of thought. Darger’s collections of images—of girls, of fires, of storms—indicate an emotional valence structure creating a homogeneity of sorts. However, it is important to remember Darger is selecting for similarity amongst *what is available to him*. A selection process was in play *before* Darger chose his images—the images were selected by social and cultural needs as a condition of their production: 1) by the needs of a traumatized culture; and 2) by an economic dynamic that feeds off these needs, while at the same time producing a similarity meant to appeal to the affective valence of an audience—specifically the culture as it emerged as a system for valuing.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the idea of a compromised selfhood, a crisis of centrality (the centrality of the self to its “experience”) revolving around a gap or dislocation. This gap inspires the act of collection; it is an absence that acts like a psychological low-pressure area generating, via a vacuum affect, a vortex of accumulating objects and narratives that, in turn, points toward or *suggests a center* to the collecting objects/narratives; this center is the self. What is missing, the unrepresentable (self-in-itself) is sought in the solidity of the material world (objects, physical words). Another way of

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<sup>150</sup> I use the word “memetic” to refer to the agency of memes, thus memetic valence is the attraction of memes. It is not to be confused with “mimetic,” which has to do with representation, imitation and reproduction.

stating this is to say a *signified* is sought in the material of the *signifier*, which is then invested with the power of a *sign*; what is absent is thereby replaced by what is present.

What the collector accomplishes is the creation of a material memory, one that is proximate and available to the senses. In fact, Walter Benjamin describes collection precisely as a material form of practical memory, and in this function collection becomes closely allied with self-presence in time. For Benjamin, collection begins with fascination, the almost magical aura of things. The collector then “brings together things that belong together, by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time” (*Arcades Project* 211).

Benjamin’s collector is highly invested in the history of each object, and while I would agree that Darger is inspired by the “aura” or suggestion of his objects, I would hesitate to claim he has much interest in their history. His fascination, his investment, I believe, is more akin to what I have described earlier as a high affective valence, one that is not determined so much by a quality in the object as by a (unknown, unacknowledged) need that facilitates his projection into the object. This is a need to see in the object the mirror of a self, a self that the collector, Darger, is ever in the act of organizing. Here I would like to propose a somewhat different take on subjectivity and collection.

One can see, of course, that this relationship between self and object has a lot to do with the confines and/or limits that allow for a distinct “self,” limits that are partially achieved through the arrangement of the object world—a furniture of the mind. In other words, a collector (like Darger) surrounds himself with a landscape of objects that reflect back to him, or in some way resonate with his personality, or at least what he hopes his personality would be. The psychologist Christopher Bollas calls this the landscape of the “self- idiom.” Bollas contends that certain objects function like psychic “keys,” opening

doors to experience in which each individual “articulates and elaborates a self through his or her quality of response” (12-13). Bollas goes on to eroticize this response: “As I see it, such releasings are the erotics of being: these objects both serve the instinctual need for representation and provide the subject with the pleasures of the object’s actuality” (17). We can place this process within the dialectic of “knowing and unknowing” as discussed earlier. Beginning in a state of “unknowing” (which may manifest as a vague sense of “having once known,” or of not being able to “think” what is known, i.e., to put it into thoughts or words), Bollas believes we nominate an object as a vessel to concretize or signify this thing as “known.” In other words, the object gives form to the feeling. “This type of projective identification is ultimately self-enhancing, transforming material things into psychic objects,”<sup>151</sup> that “elicit us” or “through which we think ourselves” (19). Bollas calls this process a “metaphysical concrescence of our private idioms” (19), which also includes our personal relation to culture, society, language, and history. I would like to suggest that this “concrescence” is somewhat analogous to the sedimentation process I mentioned earlier, the creation of a semi-stable material environment that serves as a personal language (a lexicon of objects), created and codified by collection. Benjamin and Stewart both describe collecting as a fight against dispersion, a battle against chaos that, on the psychic level, is integral to the constitution of the self. For Bollas, this evocative effect is in essence the valence of the object *in relation to* the subject’s inner needs: “I may choose an object because it is meant to resolve a state of anxiety or to recontact a split off part of myself housed there” (24). Bollas is emphasizing the selection process by which our immediate object world can be made to speak to specific, even obsessional dispositions. I would add

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<sup>151</sup> Bollas compares the construction of a personal environment to the Aborigine’s walkabout, also called “the dreaming,” whereby the landscape becomes a “materialized metaphysic, and each tree, or rock, or hill is part of the dreamed.” (18).

that, in cases of abnormal collecting, the selection process may well be guided or biased by neurology: trauma, autism, OCD, Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, etc., or simply by a radical or abnormal position on the continuum of self-constitution. Thus the object world becomes a type of language that speaks the self through particular choices, guided by affective valences.

### 3.1. Choosing and Being Chosen: Material Excess

As discussed, Darger collected all sorts of seemingly useless objects—empty Pepto Bismol bottles, old eyeglass frames, tiny plastic containers of maple syrup, and homemade balls of twine. He also collected images, numerous images, which were taken from magazines, newspapers and books found in trash bins. MacGregor gives us this description of Darger’s room:

All over the room, piled in corners or beneath furniture were bundles of magazines and newspapers, tied with twine. Henry didn’t subscribe to *Life*, *Colliers*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *National Geographic*, or the *Chicago Tribune*, etc.; he simply acquired random copies from the garbage. These magazines were an important source of significant images. He cut out every picture that had even *the slightest associative connection* to his imaginary world. (*In the Realms* 119, my emphasis)

MacGregor has insisted that “each individual picture possessed meaning for him sufficient to necessitate its survival and its presence in the room,” and he points out the “associative connection” that Darger feels in regard to these images (*In the Realms* 119). In this sense, he is restating what we have discussed above. All of what Darger did collect was selected by its valence, its suitability or emotional reflectivity. As MacGregor writes: “Henry certainly read the papers, but not as a means of maintaining contact with reality. *He sought in newspapers for reflections of his own deeply introverted concerns*: accounts of fires, storms, and

especially reports of lost children (*In the Realms* 104, my emphasis). The types of stories that attracted his attention (war, weather, girls, fires) were relevant to him inasmuch as they *elicited emotions*. However, I want to re-emphasize here that the lexicon of objects that is available to him was *already selected*, by economics, by culture, which can become obsessed in the same manner as individuals. In other words, these magazines already contain the biases of a culture. As noted in the discussion of memes, there is a certain amount of seduction that takes place by the object toward the individual.<sup>152</sup> Bollas indeed suggests something similar to the seduction of the meme when he says that objects “process us.” The subject is “called,” so to speak, into an elaborating engagement with the object,” which then “processes” the subject (24). Note here that Bollas is granting a certain agency to the objects themselves, or at least to the system of objects. We have the suggestion of the object “wanting” to engage subjectivity, in order to perpetuate itself (perhaps in the sense of memetic repetition), but it is not the object *per se*, but the meme, the unit of meaning that does this. We experience this unit of meaning (a pattern) desiring its repetition through us, as a form of subjectivity, or perhaps as subjectivity itself.

What I wish to do in this section is to highlight the relationship of Darger’s creative projects to the excessiveness of his collecting tendencies as a kind of self-organization out of chaos. In a similar manner, creativity in the individual is the product of thousands of unseen systems operating below the organizational level of the individual. When this emergent system is attributed to the will of a single agent or even multiple agents, we speak of creativity, and when that creativity produces non-essential and particularly aesthetic structures we call it art. As mentioned, collecting is often considered art even if the collector

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<sup>152</sup> Again, I refer back to the idea of memes looking to replicate themselves, patterns looking to perpetuate themselves, structures of meaning looking for a mouthpiece by which they might maintain themselves.

does not have that intention. Collecting can certainly lead to art, that is to say that the collector, in regarding the collection, may find that he or she needs to do something about it, and may be inspired to reorder aspects of the collection into forms that eventually have their own identity.<sup>153</sup> This may come about because the collector becomes overwhelmed with the items he collects. This overwhelming materiality can be seen as analogous to the greater volume and speed of a river, which causes vortices to form and to break away.<sup>154</sup> Darger indeed collected to excess, which may have played no small role in his need to reorganize his collection in patterns as art. Michel Thévoz, writing about Darger's process, says: "before actually creating these images, Henry Darger was a consumer, or more precisely, a scavenger and collector of images he found in magazines, comic strips, calendars and children's coloring books—publications he found in the trash can ("The Strange Hell" 16)." Thévoz goes on to suggest that: "having the finished images at his disposal, he was inspired to make use of the figures 'ready-made,' so to speak. Thus he was encouraged to build up his supply until he had piled up thousands of images that were later found in his apartment" ("The Strange Hell" 16). Thévoz is suggesting that, at least in part, Darger's inspiration for pictorial organization arose *from* his collection—in other words, the illustrations he would construct were not at first the reason for the collecting, but the collecting and its results—sequence and juxtaposition—spawned a narrativizing impulse to illustration. In regard to this idea, Thévoz poses a question concerning top-down versus bottom-up organization: "Was the composition and narrative layout suggested by the arrangement of these images,

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<sup>153</sup>. The collection can be said to go through a process of sedimentation, via the filter of the collector, and the emergence of a new structural entity may come into being, a new organization, a new collection with its own identity.

<sup>154</sup>. I refer the reader here to Briggs and Peat's discussion of vorticity within a flow in *Turbulent Mirror* (47-49).

spread out haphazardly like a deck of cards, or did he first conceive the layout and then look for images that would suit?" ("The Strange Hell" 16). Thévoz resolves any seeming contradiction between the two processes, however, by claiming Darger's creativity was a "repetitive process, similar to a *whirlwind* that develops haphazardly within the flow of images, but which later expands by enlisting additional specific images depending upon the desired final ending" ("The Strange Hell" 16, my emphasis). Thévoz relates Darger's artistic process to the Levi-Strauss concept of *bricolage*.<sup>155</sup> The *bricoleur* or "handyman/tinkerer," stands in opposition to the proper engineer, in that while the proper engineer first conceives of the product and then gathers his materials and methods to that end, the *bricoleur* begins with the collection, which is continued on the off-chance that it will one day come in handy, or that order will emerge or will be "recognized" therein. For Darger this handiness manifests as a material pursuit emerging into a "spiritual" one, or, as I would suggest, the more fundamental pursuit of achieving self-presence. I am suggesting here that the volume/excess also played a role in the organizational impulse: re-collecting narration (art/story) emerging from collected excess.

It is instructive here to bring up the subject of collage, as this is the first form of visual artistic creation that Darger attempted. His earliest artworks were made by cutting pictures out of newspapers and books and then gluing them into large chaotic scenes. Collage, as its etymology indicates, is a process of gluing together (*colle* = glue); it is a re-ordering of already-existing images into new compositions. As used by the Dadaists and later Surrealists, the purpose of collage was to create an effect of discontinuity (as opposed to continuity), allowing for the formation of radical, previously unexperienced links and

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<sup>155</sup> For an in-depth discussion of *bricolage*, see Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*.

organizational forms to emerge. Collage thus affected an emergence via unexpected juxtaposition. Surrealism's "convulsive beauty" was also dependent on radical reorganization; it was a rupture of the existing sedimentation that causes the mind to *reincorporate* the disparate unknown. The Dadaists and Surrealists were, to some degree, "insider" artists working within the system of the art world.<sup>156</sup> Thévoz, I believe, is right when he maintains that Darger, and indeed other outsider artists (Wolfi, Ramirez, End, Corbaz), sought not discontinuity but rather integration.<sup>157</sup> The collected materials that form a nest provide a shelter for the collecting agent. Thus we see collection works on two fronts: 1) the possibility of reorganization; and 2) the possibility of integration.

Elements of surrealism can be found in Darger's visual works, but it is less useful as a tool for analyzing his textual assemblies. Rather, I will be looking in the direction suggested earlier (in Chapter One), that of the volume, growth, excess and aggrandizement of his collections, be they of text or objects. Within the contained space of Darger's room, which I am now considering as a concrete manifestation of his mental space (the landscape of his idiom) continuous new forms of organization emerge. Because of the extreme repetitiveness of Darger's collecting, it is likely that the pleasure Darger got from the activity is in some degree derived from its volume, i.e., the creation of volume, because that volume gave birth to or suggested a form that was self-enhancing.

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<sup>156</sup> Of course the Dadaists began as outsiders of a sort, working outside the "art world." Their canonization only came later. I maintain, however, that they were aware of being outside, and their work is at least partly reaction, thus making them in some sense inside the conversation.

<sup>157</sup> I do not see this as wholly anathema to the Surrealist quest, whose rupturing of the sedimental state of conscious and unconscious forms was, in fact, a process of *integration* with a larger order, thus the feeling of transcendence. This sense of continuity with a larger universe beyond arbitrary cultural limits, allows the unknown, the chaotic to be *brought in*, i.e., integrated with the self. Aesthetic systems, like all systems, evolve in ways suitable to self-maintenance; a collection, inasmuch as it serves the system that produces it, serves that system through maintaining it.

### 3.1.2 From Ragpicking to Textpicking

I have already mentioned Darger's hoarding of material artifacts, and from the above discussion we know that Darger collected many objects and images that would be reused in the production of his work, and that this was in part what drove his collecting activity; as Bonesteel writes, "Virtually everything we see in his work is derived from another source" (29).<sup>158</sup> But Darger was not only a collector of objects; he was also a collector of text. He sometimes made files of clippings of certain types of stories and pictures. In a similar manner he collected certain types of narratives—history tales, children's tales, catastrophe tales. Those texts that he did not collect physically in the form of newspapers, magazines and books, he collected by rewriting, copying, and re-presenting them to himself for his own delectation.<sup>159</sup> It is necessary here to briefly outline a somewhat expanded definition of collecting that will be used in this study. I am including in the category of collection, the act of copying from one context into another—just as the collected object is taken from its context and placed into another.<sup>160</sup> I include this activity as a form of collecting because Darger is collecting the object/text/idea from an outside world, into his private world where it is reorganized, placed in a new set of relationships as a collection. This expanded definition of collection thus includes not only the gathering and organization of objects but

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<sup>158</sup> Note that Darger's images/texts, lifted from mass media, are themselves already copies, placing Darger in a continuum that neither begins nor ends with him.

<sup>159</sup> Walter Benjamin wrote about the purposes of collection in his essay "Unpacking My Library," (in *Illuminations*) in which he analyzes his collection of books, and at least one of his great written books, *The Arcades Project*, is, in fact, largely a collection of quotes selected through the affective valence informing his project.

<sup>160</sup> My point here is that the reproduction of text is a form of collecting. A different vocabulary is employed when speaking of copied text—for instance text is reproducible, and so it is often said one borrows text, steals text, copies text. However, there is a sense in which text is like an object. We collect types of text. Our books are containers of text as well as objects in themselves. Text is also the repository of ideas, so one is borrowing, copying, or stealing ideas.

also of facts, statistics, ideas, symbolic forms, etc., based on a similarity, be it one of perceived physical likeness, or likeness of purpose, or of sequential relevance, or of an appreciation of the integrity of a series. All this collection leads to meaning in the same manner that one collects one's thoughts, in order to impart (organize) a meaning to them, gathering thoughts relevant to a situation or problem, collecting them for organizational purposes and, possibly, presentation. In this sense, Darger's collecting of text mirrors his collecting of objects; whether or not they would be inserted into narratives, both are used to counter an insufficiency, felt or real, either concerning his sense of self, or, on a practical level, the competency of his production. MacGregor believes that Darger's collecting and copying of imagery is largely due to his own lack of drawing skills (*In the Realms* 179). If we extend MacGregor's explanation, it is possible to say that Darger collects the text because he doesn't know how to, or doesn't want to, write his own.<sup>161</sup> While this may be in some sense true, I will bring the discussion back to the insufficiency of self as I have been discussing it, and with that in mind I will break down Darger's collecting into categories or orders.

### 3.1.3 Orders of Collection

I now wish to create a platform for looking at Darger's textual production, the text as collected text, with a critical eye. I believe that Darger generated narrative in the same manner and with the same purpose that he generated imagery. In his writing Darger is not a

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<sup>161</sup>. Such an inability might be due to autism, a lack of a subjective ability to identify with stories. Darger's creativity, then, is dependent upon the accumulation of stories/scenes from already-extant narratives, an accumulation and repetition of code, which as we have seen is the process by which autistics recreate social behavior. And in fact, in relation to what I wrote earlier about Darger's lack of depth in his depiction of characters, Darger would have to copy emotional affectations, and would therefore end up with clichéd characters, especially considering his sources.

ragpicker so much as a text-picker, wandering in the narrative streets of popular culture, history, and literature and gathering what seemed to have emotional resonance for him. It was, as Thévoz says, a manner of *bricolage*—putting together a system that works out of what is at hand. Thus I will now describe Darger’s textual collecting, organizing the levels in terms of orders. To that end I will here describe what I perceive as six orders of collection: 1) WORDS; 2) PHRASES (exclamatory, descriptive, expository, etc.); 3) STORIES/NARRATIVE UNITS; 4) NARRATIVE STYLES; 5) COLLECTION AS SUBJECT MATTER; and lastly, 6) COLLECTION AS ACTION IN THE TEXT. While I will use the terminology “Orders of Collection” it should be remembered that they do not and will not correspond on a one-to-one basis with the “Orders of Redundancy” that I will discuss later in this chapter. There is a relationship however, in that the orders of collection tend to indicate orders of emotional and organizational importance that reappear in the hierarchy of recollection. Moving from the smaller unit to the larger also illustrates the agglutinative act of adding things together (like to like) in the hope perhaps that structure will emerge. This quantitative or “mathematical” process becomes important when we address the issue of Darger’s subjectivity in relation to the particular kind of sublimity he produces in his work, which is the subject of the final chapter of this study.

### **3.1.3.1 1<sup>st</sup> Order**

WORDS: In this category, I include single words, words Darger came back to again and again. Darger collected words both for the reinforcing quality of their emotional valence but also for enjoyment, for fun. That he enjoyed words on a number of levels is obvious in his playful attitude toward them and in his tendency to pun. He also piled up his language in

what could be called traffic jams of words and phrases. His use of technical words, borrowed from textbooks and science articles created for him a sense of authority perhaps.

MacGregor makes this comment in regards to Darger's language use in *The Realms*:

Darger used his writing to prove over and over to himself just how intelligent he was. His style reflects this endeavor in its occasionally awkward formality and its preference for new and unfamiliar words. The extraordinary range of his vocabulary was certainly not acquired in an institution for mentally handicapped children, where the intellectual level of the staff was likely to be only marginally superior to that of the inmates, and in which opportunities for education scarcely existed. He manifests a profound curiosity about, and love of, words, *which he seems to have collected*, using them on occasion without any clear idea of their meaning. (105, my emphasis)

Throughout *My Life* we find a similar fascination with words, but it is less extreme than what MacGregor describes. If Darger did consider himself a collector of words, this would not be particularly unique, as many writers do exactly this. Finally, I would note that, as one reads through *My Life*, one notices a definite attraction to certain types of words, for instance, words indicating chaotic or circular motion: swirling, whirling, twirling, spinning. Other themes are words of increase and amplification: growing, advancing, spreading, driving, increasing, exceeding, expanding, countless, greater, vaster, etc.

### 3.1.3.2 2<sup>nd</sup> Order

PHRASES (clichés, descriptions, exclamations, etc.): This category can include groups of words, ranging from a few words up to whole paragraphs, etc. We often find Darger using copied word constructions and clichés, some of which are archaic or dated and most of which are surely borrowed from newspapers, novels, and textbooks. Darger may well feel an affinity for such language, or he may feel he is participating in the simplified cliché culture he loves. Words such as “freakish, mad, dancing,” etc., as applied to the storm, could easily

have been borrowed from storm descriptions taken from the Chicago papers of the era (see Appendix D). I do not wish here to take away from Darger's creativity by claiming that he copied everything and did not come up with his own adjectival phrases, only that he did liberally use collected material.

### 3.1.3.3 3<sup>rd</sup> Order

STORIES/NARRATIVE UNITS: Darger collected stories and often used them whole-cloth. He also collected motifs— 1) war stories; 2) storm stories; 3) abduction stories; 4) stories of children; 5) boys and girls adventures—which is to say, each of these had an emotional valence (based on certain emotional or narrative qualities) as well as a use value. This is evident in the fact that one often runs into large sections of text that are obviously not his own, as Bonesteel says: “On certain occasions his work appears suspiciously smooth and polished: some of his chaste, but overwrought, love scenes, for example, seem lifted from romance magazines” (25). Other examples would include Darger's many battle scenes and fire-fighting descriptions, which often seem lifted from other sources and are sometimes used to cross purposes, such as when he adapts the language of Civil War histories and battle scenes for use as fire fighting descriptions in “The Inferno” section of *My Life*. In addition, Darger does not hesitate to borrow (collect) from more “literary” sources, such as copying whole sections of a Charles Dickens novel, or an Edgar Allan Poe story.<sup>162</sup> That he was familiar with a range of literary work is evident in his references.<sup>163</sup> In addition, a

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<sup>162</sup>. There is a difference of course between citing or referring to or even quoting, and copying or stealing. It is also unclear if Darger was overly concerned with this difference.

<sup>163</sup>. Bonesteel lists the following books that make appearances (either by reference or by name) in *The Realms*: *The Divine Comedy*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Kidnapped*, *Don Quixote*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Heidi*, *Penrod and Sam*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and a great number of the Oz books. It is also possible that Darger quotes from the Dicken's novels: *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two*

sermon delivered in “The Inferno” episode seems suspiciously lifted from somewhere.<sup>164</sup> Even Darger’s eyewitness descriptions of the tornado are similar in style and content to eyewitness accounts printed in newspapers and books, and some of them may have been copied verbatim. In the setting of the Chesterbrown tornado, he is already fragmenting and altering accounts of at least two real life tornadoes that we know of.<sup>165</sup> One would be the 1925 Tri-State tornado, of which he might have stolen some actual accounts.<sup>166</sup> The other would be the 1967 tornado that occurred in Chicago and may well have been the impetus for the beginning of Book Two.

It is of course impossible to trace the sources of many of the passages in *My Life*, and the borrowing may not be verbatim. The most extensive case of such borrowing, at least in the first thousand pages, is from the Poe story previously mentioned, “The Descent into the Maelstrom.” So many descriptions, themes, names, and verbatim phrases are lifted from this story that one almost suspects Darger of having a copy beside him as he writes, smashing it into narrative “wreckage” and reorganizing the pieces into his alternative narrative, reconfiguring the scenes and changing the context. In regard to context, the Poe story, which takes place at sea, becomes, in Darger, a confrontation with a storm. Darger initiates this changed context by announcing that the Chesterbrown tornado reminds him of the great

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*Cities*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *A Christmas Carol*, and various other Dicken’s short stories. Bonesteel points out that both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* are mentioned, too. So are the poets Robert Southey, Longfellow, and Francis Thompson. A poem of Thompson’s, “Daisy”, is quoted twice in *The Realms*. (Bonesteel 24 and MacGregor 98–105)

<sup>164</sup> Lisa Rundquist, in her study *Pyre: A Poetics of Fire and Childhood in the Art of Henry Darger*, discusses the sermonizing that surrounded the Great Chicago Fire and how it influenced Darger’s work. It is entirely likely that Darger copied similar sermons into *My Life*.

<sup>165</sup> Tornadoes are common in the Midwest and there would be no shortage of reportage from which Darger could borrow.

<sup>166</sup> See Wallace Akin, *The Forgotten Storm: The Great Tri-State Tornado of 1925*, and Peter S. Felknor, *The Tri-State Tornado: The Story of America’s Greatest Tornado Disaster*.

whirlpool off the coast of Norway known as the Moskoe storm, the local name of the whirlpool/maelstrom in Poe's tale. "The dark cloud above could see. The dark cloud above acted like the described big ~~whirlpool~~ ~~whirle~~ whirlpool north of either Sweden or Norway" (489). Up to this point, the tale of the Chesterbrown tornado has evolved as a series of eyewitness accounts. What seems to be the fourth witness, a farmer met along the road, claims that he will tell them a tale so horrible that the experience had turned his hair from black to white—exactly the same thing that Poe's narrator says (see examples below, Sec. 3.7.4 on 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancy). Instead of the ship's galley, Darger substitutes a highway underpass as the place where the farmer, another farmer's daughter and a group of other strangers eventually seek refuge. Just as in the Poe story, a ring bolt appears to which the farmer clings for safety. This reiteration of story units from "Maelstrom" does not cease with one telling; it continues for nearly seventy pages of circling descriptions in which phrases and situations from the Poe story continually emerge, yet with almost no dependence on Poe's plot nor any mention of Poe as author or influence. Unless the reader is already familiar with the story, he or she may never make the connection.

While "Maelstrom" is the most glaring example of wholecloth copying, there are others. One of these is a section from Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Chapter 55, "Tempest" (see Appendix F). Here, despite the thematic relevance of the material, the story seems to be inserted as if Darger had need of some kind of filler; or perhaps he is merely "vamping" with the borrowed material. Another text that can be identified is the Frank Baum book, *The Lost Princess of Oz* (see Appendix E). While Darger does copy some language verbatim from the Oz books, more important is the use of the landscape of the book. Much of the latter part of Book Two, "The Maelstrom," is involved with a journey in search of a lost

town called Zaneville. In this search Darger and his companions, Dorothy and Angelina, cross a landscape in which they encounter various structures and elements prominent in *Lost Princess*. Darger is not, however, writing a reproduction of the *Lost Princess* landscape but, rather, a ruined version of it, as if that landscape were exploded, fragmented across Darger's section of central Illinois. And, in fact, it is one particular structure from *Lost Princess*, The Wicker Castle, which becomes prominent as a transitional figure in the movement from Book Two to Book Three. There are many other possible examples of such borrowing: bits of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an adventure story seemingly copied from a magazine, and a long episode about a sick soldier that is also likely copied.<sup>167</sup> Another example could be long scene Darger writes about a floating house, caught up in the storm, which may be borrowed from *The Wizard of Oz*. This house eventually collides with "Simon Legree's barn" which is likely borrowed from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though Darger insists that it is not the same Simon Legree. The importance and prevalence of windmills in *My Life* may come from *Don Quixote*.<sup>168</sup> His scientific explanations may come from any number of meteorology journals he collected.

The idea generally recieved is that this tornado as well as the great unusally severe thunderstorms east and west of it it have no other cause than the collision of waves of colder air from the northwest rising and falling at flux and reflux of the heated air of the August hot wave against a ridge of thunder clouds in an unusal turmoil which confined the chiller air so that it precipitated itself low down into the heated air like a cataract and thus the higher the heated air arose the deeper was the fall of the colder air to be and the natural result of all was a whirlpool or vortex . . . (3042)

Images and phrases that seem suspiciously lifted from *Pilgrims Progress*, *Oliver Twist*, are all thrown into the mixmaster of the narrative.

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<sup>167.</sup> While I have been unable to find the specific sources of these episodes, the incidental nature of the narratives along with the stylistic difference indicates an outside source.

<sup>168.</sup> Bonesteel notes that Darger owned a copy of *Don Quixote* illustrated by Doré.

### 3.1.3.4 4<sup>th</sup> Order

NARRATIVE STYLES: Darger also seems to have collected styles of writing. We might think of James Joyce's use of various styles of English prose in *Ulysses* as a canonical literary example of this type of collecting. In *My Life*, the collecting of style is, of course, related to the previous orders of collecting, in that in borrowing the words of a pre-existing text, one necessarily borrows the style. However, it is also evident that Darger, when writing what we might call his own original text, often fits it into pre-existing styles, thus borrowing or collecting them as models. MacGregor believes that much of Darger's writing, if not "borrowed" from, at least imitates the journalistic writing of the Chicago papers of his time:

Inevitably, the style of writing used in Chicago papers in the early part of the century influenced Darger. His style is often consciously journalistic, particularly in terms of his use of abbreviated headlines. He also incorporated bits of information obtained from his reading of newspapers, just as he would later incorporate drawings obtained from the same source. At times it seems as though he simply is changing names and copying passages from newspapers directly into *The Realms*. (*In the Realms* 105)

In *My Life*, the same situation occurs. As mentioned, Darger may have copied the more florid, emotional and, at times, poetic approach to tornado reportage. By comparing Darger's writing to the newspaper examples in Appendix D, we can easily note how similar the writing styles are. In addition, as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> order of collection above, we can see how Darger may be borrowing words or word groups from these newspaper articles. However, storm descriptions are only the most obvious examples. There are other "styles" that Darger collects/borrows: a more academic style of "textbook" prose often appears in battlefield and meteorological explanations, and a more emotive style of moralizing religious tracks can be seen in the righteous indignation of his witnesses. Another style that can be detected is that of the rational argument that appears in the various panel discussions but more obviously in

the “courtroom” scenes in which trials of the arsonists, and of Sweetie Pie herself, take place. These may well be borrowed from popular courtroom documents or programs of his day, such as *Perry Mason*, or they again might be borrowed from transcripts printed in newspapers.

### 3.1.3.5 5<sup>th</sup> Order

COLLECTION AS SUBJECT MATTER: This order of collection is not one of artifacts or textual units, but rather the *representation of collecting* by characters or entities within the text. Perhaps it should not be considered an order *per se*, but it does, like the other orders, add mathematically to textual increase, and one could even make the claim that the narrative on a whole is largely a collection of smaller narrative descriptions of collecting. MacGregor writes:

Despite Darger’s limited education, he possessed a startling range of information which he acquired on his own, motivated by the extraordinary task which he had taken on. Everything was grist for his mill. The construction of a truly encyclopedic alternate world requires an astonishing capacity for the *acquisition* of relevant material, often in a situation of extreme intellectual deprivation. (*In the Realms* 105, my emphasis)

The endless generation of lists, etc., was a large part of Darger’s subject matter. Much of the text in fact describes collections, collections of things, of facts. Many of these facts are borrowed, though many are also made up. MacGregor writes of *The Realms*: “An enormous number of pages are given over to listing and describing material things: items needed, objects destroyed, along with detailed assessments of destruction and of the costs entailed” (*In the Realms* 108). In *My Life* we find similar lists of injuries, lists of animals and body parts, lists of contents of buildings, etc. These lists generate further lists, further accounts, in what amounts to an endless regress of the listing of collected information. In this Darger is

much like the fanatical baseball card collector who lists statistics as an augmentation of his obsession—cards, lists of cards, lists of statistics to accompany the cards, lists of groups of statistics. The process feeds off itself.

Macgregor writing of *The Realms*, says:

By far the largest part of his book is devoted to obsessional accounts of battles, described in irrationally elaborate detail. [...] Utterly lost in perceptual detail, he documents individual battles over the course of hundreds of pages yet, despite the extraordinary richness and specificity of his accounts of sieges, attacks, retreats, and total routs, written with unusual knowledge of battlefield tactics and activity his military set pieces remain strangely static and unconvincing. The interminable and cumulative effect is of a single, endlessly varied sentence being repeated again and again. (*In the Realms* 103)

Again, MacGregor is describing *The Realms*; however, *My Life* is not dissimilar. The first thirty or so pages before the actual narrative of *My Life* begins, contain what amounts to a collection or list of biblical books followed by a very brief description of what happens in each book: “There are *one hundred fifty psalms* in the Holy Catholic Bible. There are *19 Chapters* in the Book of Wisdom. There are *fifty 2 two chapters* in the first book of Jeremias. There are *five chapters* in the book of the lamentations of Jeremias. The Book of Baruch. It has (not gas) *Six chapters*. The Book of the Prophecy of Ezechial has *48 chapters*” (see Appendix A).

For Darger, collection is a narrative device, in that the narrative revolves around opportunities to describe collection, generating lists of debris, wreckage, buildings, bodies, supplies, all the plurality that catastrophe exposes—a vast rendering of the world of things that the eviscerating winds creates. This world of things, in its exposure, is further aggrandized (exposure and growth are related, with the former nearly always leading to the latter) by the lengthy descriptions, which themselves can be seen as vast collections of

words going on and on. Thus the work of collecting, organizing, categorizing and rebuilding is a flux, which can be seen at larger and larger levels of textual organization

### 3.1.3.6 6<sup>th</sup> Order

COLLECTION AS ACTION IN THE TEXT: This final order is comprised of the presentation of the *act of collecting*, or collecting as the result of a described action perpetrated by various animate or inanimate entities within the text—winds collecting into storms, storms collecting objects into piles of detritus, men collecting the detritus into more categorized piles, fires collecting together into larger fires, men collecting together to fight the fires, etc.

Obviously, the primary actor is the tornado itself, which collects the debris it creates. The tornado is a collection of winds into an organized pattern, but it pulls many other objects into the field of its attraction.

Wagons, buggies and short trains had mysteriously pulled towards it, by the drivers, or engineer not guarding against it before they were within its reach. It likewise happens frequently that horses, cows, bulls, dozens of sheep or even the largest hogs come too mean that type of passing tornado and are at that distance overpowered by its violence and then its impossible to describe their various noises in their fruitless struggles to disengage themselves. It read of a bear once attempting to swim the Mississippi river in Wisconsin, was caught in the attraction of such a tornado a mile away, and pulled up onto the funnel while he roared terribly so as to be heard for a mile.

Large fir trees that close and pine, trees after being absorbed by the attraction, rise high onto the main cloud and finally when flung free, come down broken and torn to such a degree as if bristles had grown upon them. Even farm house, silos, barns or tall windmills have been torn their foundation by the attraction, and absorbed into the awful funnel. Persons too (614-615)

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Soothing at their phlegmon then rushing near the park but yet a little more than a mile away I could not help at all smiling at the very simplicity with the hornet Tornado described records as a matter difficult of belief the anecdotes

of these tornadoes attracting creatures towards them a mile away, for it appeared to me in fact a self evident thing that the impact was that the largest grain Elevator in existence, when a twister of that sort, passed within a mile of them and being then within the influence of that deadly attraction could resist being pulled towards it as little as a feather in some West Indie hurricane and must be pulled all to pieces big as they are, and some of the debris disappear bodily and at once. (617-618).

A second category of actor would be the various non-human, material presences that operate as collectors. Large sections of the narrative (at least in the two tornado books) revolve around various iconic buildings of symbolic value: The Barn, The Windmill, The Bridge, The Convent, The Asylum. These buildings act like magnets for the collection of the landscape that seems to spread itself in disorder around them. Each building appears and reappears in different guises, but their relationships to the narrative and other story units are set. The buildings seem to have a dynamic/gravitational force that attracts things to them.

Looking up at that howling Phlegethon above I could not help thinking that the largest and strongest buildings of the line of resistance caught in the influence of that deadly attraction could resist it as little as a feather in a hurricane and must disappear bodily and at once, like the most of the Sacred Heart Convent and the great St Vincent Church and its Rectory building and others by it. (3041-3042)

A third collecting actor or agent is the population of humans themselves. The people that are dispersed by the storm collect together again, from their dispersed state. Some gather to bear witness and grieve over the disaster.

It is believe that men from all other cities will come to to La Salle to the meeting It is also intended to take such steps as may be possible looking to relieve the crowds of anxious mourners who lost their children in the convent disaster caused by the explosion of the tornadoes suction tube and representatives will probably be sent to La Salle for the purpose of gathering exact information regarding the fate of those convent children. (4958-4959)

Some gather to gawk.

I can only say that Mr Legree is an honorable gentlemen with whom anyone here would be glad to associate. Directly after the terrific storm at Chesterbrown he turned his barn into a hospital for all emergency cases of the injured. He is making business now from tourists and other visitors who come to see the freak around his barn. But where that came from I believe it will always remain a mystery. (3810)

Others gather to repair. Trains and trucks arrive with supplies as men and materials begin to collect at the sites where a need, a vacuum, could be said to exist: “The benevolence of the country took practical form and trains laden with food clothing shelter and money given out of the fullness of sympathetic sorrow hastened to the scene of the suffering” (4788).

Suddenly out of the sky between two big thunderstorms came the shock of as immeasurable tornado the destruction of the cities towns and villages the death an horrible torture of unknown number of men women and children, the tortures of fire famine and thirst the torture of thousands of injured, the heartrending grief of multitudes of mourning their lost ones the wail of thousands crying for succor.

It was a spectacle of horror which I had no chance to witness, one never to be obliterated from the memory of those who saw it, the wounded or those who hastened to the relief of the horribly suffering. This Country aroused to an outpouring of sympathy never excelled gathered trains river ships, messengers of pity money food clothing and means of healing mostly from the south to hasten to the stricken cities for the salvation of those who had survived. (4790-4791)

And finally, many gather to deal with the damage and disorder. This disorder prompts further collections. Indeed, one of the main themes of large sections of narrative is the attempt made by the collected population to re-collect, out of the disorder, a semblance of order. An instance of this can be seen at the beginning of Book Four (see Appendix G for the full text of this example):

Three days later I went to tornado town, Chestertown (some call it Esterbrown) and observed something the most greatly surprised me but made me also feel joyful and exultant.

*All the timber of all the devastated buildings that could be saved had for a certain length of distance had been stacked or piled up like you see lumber in a lumber yard but much higher.*

*All bricks from demolished buildings that also could not be salvaged had been put up like wide tall walls and all wood not fit for salvage also had been stacked neatly in the yard of houses not touched by the whirlpool of the air.*

Hastily made refugee shelters and for the injured had been very strongly strengthened and continued living quarters and comfortably furnished. Simon Legree barn was the same with the windmill structure wrapped around it still.

As to the stacking other debris into piles so high and neat it must have taken tremendous work for this short time. ~~Many~~ Many stacks were thirty feet high and one hundred feet long and forty wide. *And all board were placed neatly according to size.* I couldn't believe my eyes. I had never believed or thought if the people of Chestertown if that they would plan to construct the lumber piles could do it within months. (2951-2952, my emphasis)

I wish to make the point that within this passage there is no commercial point to the collecting, nor is there any pragmatic end stated; the activity is engaged seemingly for the satisfaction alone, the joy and comfort of creating order.

What I would like to call attention to in the above examples is that there are disorganizational and organizational forms of collecting. The collection done by the storm, the gathering of shattered objects and forms into its vortex is a disorganizational form of collection (in relation to the cultural organization) in which distinctions are largely erased. What exists within the vortex is something like Deleuze and Guattari's "plane of consistency,"<sup>169</sup> where there is no difference of value between any object and another; everything is reduced to a kind of radical equivalence. This, of course, is chaos, but in the

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<sup>169</sup>. "The plane of consistency knows nothing of differences in level, orders of magnitude, or distances. It knows nothing of the difference between the artificial and the natural. It knows nothing of the distinction between contents and expressions, or that between forms and formed substances; these things exist only by means of and in relation to the strata" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 266). For Deleuze and Guattari, the *plane of consistency* is opposed to the *plane of organization* or development. In the plane of consistency, "there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 266).

case of Darger's vortex, it is a chaos created and maintained by an organizational structure (the vortex). The human collection that follows the tornado is directly organizational; it is the attempt to re-establish order and meaning in the aftermath of chaos. Human collecting is the creation of redundancy, i.e., ordering by likeness and the repetition of likeness. Here we arrive at one of the definitive aspects of redundancy—the recollection of the previously collected.

### **3.1.4 Collection as Excess: Critical Mass and the Drive to Redundancy**

What all this collecting leads to is a phase shift, a breaking point, an explosion. When there is too much of something, the containing structure must give. Explosions are one of the effects of excess; the other is redundancy. Redundancy might be seen as a defense against explosion or it might be seen as a form of explosion; in the process of accumulation, a critical mass is reached that then opens itself up, breaks its defining structure, and explodes in a redundant spilling over of sameness. Here I wish to recall how collecting can be seen as the fight against dispersion, relating this concept to the battle against chaos which, in part, defines the constitution of the self. The self is that attractor toward which all material moves in the self's effort to define itself. By collecting one creates a foundation for self, but one also makes that self vulnerable to fragmentation if and when the collection grows too large to adequately relate to; in other words the collection begins to threaten (rupture, explode) the very boundaries of the self it served to define. Excess collection, like any increase in volume or flow, instigates a movement toward the chaotic that then seeks reorganization in the form of the vortex or multiple vortices that structure turbulence. It might be easier to think of collection and explosion as alternating states. These same engines of difference—heat,

speed, friction, etc.—that first exposed material to the sorting process, if pressed to the extreme, can also disrupt the stability of the structures, leading to turbulence or chaos as the structure breaks down. The weight of accumulated snow causes an avalanche. Extreme heat entirely destroys the cellular structure of wood. Individual water molecules travel great distances to form collections of their kind in streams and rivers. Water breaks the boundaries of the channels of streams and rivers and causes a flood. When the speed or volume increases in a dynamic system, new forms of order emerge.<sup>170</sup>

Redundancy comes into play when excess threatens the stability of series, which is the meaning of the collection. Likeness in excess threatens the collection as a structure of meaning. As the collection gathers more and more “like” elements, as it extends its series unto infinity, it ceases to mean anything “as a collection.” This happens because a new organizational structure necessarily imposes itself, gathering sections of ill-defined and fragmentary collections, looping them, refiguring these sections into a vortex whose attracting center is different, i.e., has a different meaning, than any of the original collections. This new vortex remains stable as long as the speed and volume of the currents that feed it are constant. However, if excess increases, new vortices may form within this

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<sup>170</sup> It is interesting to note here that Darger associates the act of collected increase with explosion (fire) in his remembrance of a fire he may have started as a child; it was his own *stacked* papers against a stove that caused a fire. In another instance he writes:

In order to get even even with him when he was not home (he being a peddler) I took a few of the crates piled them in the center of his yard and set them on fire. Then I quickly left and sat on the steps in front of the house facing the ally. My father soon came out, it being near night and sat with me.

Just about dark we both noticed a light of brightness which I felt sure could not come from the few crates I set afire.

I ran over there to see what was cause. Against the west side of the house the peddler had stacked by three wide a actual wall of the crates.

I could not (belive) believe my littler bonfire so far from there could cause it, but the She bang including the side of the house, was one high towering mass of ringing flame. Some of the blazing crates crashed down, bouncing and covered the spot where I made the little one eracing evidence against me. (15-16)

vortex, and, again, vortices will form within the new ones, increasing the complexity of the structure until it resembles the nested vortices of turbulent flow as described by De Landa.<sup>171</sup> What I wish to draw attention to here is that the increased volume and/or the increased speed (the collecting excess) are what break the structural integrity of the flow (the collection), creating turbulence. These forms, these vortices, emerge within the collection itself, within the over-accumulated likeness of the collection, which reorganizes itself into other newer structures of meaning.<sup>172</sup>

While this collapsing of textual material in *My Life* is not significantly different from what Darger does in *The Realms*, the narrative structure of *My Life* is different. The text in *My Life* operates as a recuperative collecting engine, with sections of the story circling, turning back, recouping lost strands, characters, phrases words, story units, lost time—all of it moving forward at various narrative “speeds,” with the succession of supposedly different witnesses as the only plotting we can detect.

As mentioned earlier, MacGregor points us in this direction when he says the style of *My Life*, “a mode of compulsive writing” he describes as “turning in a gyre,” that, unaware of what he had previously written, Darger seems to “circle, coming back again and again to the same events, the same images, the same questions and concerns, as though, caught in the tornado’s rotating funnel” (*In the Realms* 434-435). MacGregor is claiming that Darger’s circularity is due to a failure of memory—the memory of what he previously wrote. But

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<sup>171</sup>. De Landa has said that the complex structure of vortices within vortices is effectively the structure of turbulence—it lends to turbulent flow whatever stability it has.

<sup>172</sup>. It can be said that this train of thought is in contradiction to the idea of the emergence of Darger’s subject from collected material, as I have discussed it earlier. This disparity can be partially reconciled by considering that Darger is in effect representing a process of emergence through his third-person characters. I would add that that accumulation, the collection and mounting up of invented or borrowed material, verges on collecting in that it is self-collecting or self-generating collection which results.

Darger does remember what he previously wrote and often refers to it. If he could not remember, he needed only look back in the very notebooks he was writing in.

This leads us to ask: What is the point of all this collective imagery? Here we can associate re-membering with re-building. To do so, I wish to return to the idea of excess, mass, and volume, which is so much a part of Darger's aesthetic—the piling up, the mounding up of images and words. In the first chapter I wrote about Darger's excess volume and put it into the context of the container and the contained (book and text), the latter always seeking to break free of the former. I will now approach this excess in terms of collection on two fronts: as self-generating aesthetic and as self-making. Bonesteel notes that, like his paintings, Darger's writing may seem naïve or awkward or obviously copied at the smaller levels of organization, but it is the cumulative effect that gives it meaning—the fact that these details *build into majestic structures*, depending for their effect on accumulation.<sup>173</sup> We could say that Darger's artwork is based on accumulation, not only in the accumulating of individual images, but also in the stitching together of the paintings themselves; the actual surface of the paintings accumulates as paintings are glued and stitched together to become longer, in effect, collecting themselves to themselves. Similarly, with Darger's text, the text itself becomes a collecting force—it must continue, and to continue it must keep collecting text, binding itself to further instances of itself, generating itself, reproducing itself and thus becoming more and more like itself.

A commonly noted quality of *art brut* is the compulsion to plenitude, a passion to fill space, to leave no margin unexplored, as if empty space were intolerable. It may well be, however, that it is the *identification* with empty space/empty self that is intolerable. The

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<sup>173</sup>. I am extrapolating here from Bonesteel's description of Darger's paintings: "the rendering of the individual components in his watercolor drawings are sometimes crude and unskilled, but build to majestic vistas" (23).

filling of empty space is also the fixing of space, the disallowing of any vaguery or ambiguity that may suggest absence. In Chapter Two, I made a point of demonstrating that each of the possible diagnoses we might attribute to Darger could be seen as creating a vacancy, a psychic absence, or dislocation of self, around which a compensating narrative circles, but onto which it can never collapse. I mentioned the horrible hope one witness describes, that the tornado will accumulate so much wreckage that it will slack off, die out or collapse from its own burden (573–578). In this ambiguity, Darger suggests that perhaps it is exactly this collapse that is desired, hoped for. For Darger, the author, the accumulation of writing is what can bring it about. The writer (collector) enacts this collapse simply by continuing to write, *ad infinitum*, collecting as much textual mass as possible. The desire for material memory is enacted here. As with hoarding, the writing is a defense against catastrophe; either imminent or passed. Collecting clings to a culture that is threatened; it is a defense against scarcity. One hoards images or stories against the possible scarcity of images, the scarcity of story. The fear that the story might end is equivalent to the fear that the subject might end. One hoards against one's own self-lack. (In respect to possible autism, Darger would have lacked any kind of emotional engagement, and this lack of empathy would leave a gap in his concept of self.) If we think of empathy as a filling-in—filling-in the gap between oneself and the other—then the lack of emotional empathy might call for a desperate *material* filling-in of that gap. If the gathering of material fails to bring this about, then there is the repetition of gathered material.

### 3.2 Redundancy and (Re)Collection

Darger, as I have pointed out, has collected about himself a landscape, a self-idiom, a material mirror, as an aid to self-construction. It is not, however, sufficient merely to exist among objects and lists. They must be acknowledged, engaged, and recycled through the senses. He must (re)collect them in a process equivalent to recall or memory, in which the repetition, the recollection, opens the space of time in which the self can exist “in-time.” This recycling, recollecting is a structural strategy, or better yet, a structural dynamic, inasmuch as it is capable of maintaining or self-generating itself (by the literary device of witnesses and narrators). Recollection is a mode of being that all humans are engaged in as they live in and through memory. It is this cultural and tribal mandate to retell—“don’t forget where you came from, don’t forget your story”—that is the basis of religious ritual, and indeed of the earliest literature. The resultant foundational stories may then be spun out into variants, altered copies, allegories, etc. In an emblematic breakdown, symbol splits into smaller synecdoche, whose meaning remains loosely dependent on their emblematic predecessor even if that predecessor is no longer part of a culture’s narrative currency.<sup>174</sup> Thus the original story gathers other stories to it, massing a huge storm of related stories (cultures, histories) turning about a central story that is, in effect, turning about an absence, an absence of factual origins that no culture can escape because they were lost to time before language could fix them in material form. Around that absence the variations, iterations, copies, must continue to circle, collecting in their vortex additional stories, additional

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<sup>174</sup> Characters and situations, even objects, travel through the narrative history of a culture and carry with them an aura or hint of their original meaning, though they may serve an entirely different function as time reframes them. The old stories they arise from may or may not be told, or may even be forgotten. Take the case of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, itself a retelling of the Prometheus myth. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the name gets transferred to the monster itself, and its many iterations, be they new movie versions, cartoons, or breakfast cereal characters. The train of influence goes back to the earliest cultural creation stories, which themselves exist to mask an absence, and “unknowing” about origins.

organizational vortices, be they individuals or societies. It is this redundant retelling that is the stability of society *and* of the self. Viewed in this framework, *My Life* can be seen as a metamap of history telling itself. This is likely *not* Darger's intention; his intention is to write his own history, but because he cannot (or chooses not to) contain it within accepted literary boundaries, it grows abnormally, and as it grows, its volume and weight threaten its stability. At some point a new organizational structure emerges, one that reflects the invisible structure that underlies all stories, the cyclical repetition of events that binds both teller and audience to time.<sup>175</sup> I believe we can say that Darger's text self-organizes because it is likely that Darger himself is not consciously organizing it; rather he is writing his "endless sentence" in the present, searching out forms of meaning without depending on chronological sequence or the logic of cause and effect.

Before moving on, it will be necessary to clarify the difference between redundancy and repetition as I will be using the terms. Redundancy *is* repetition, but in the interest of separating the two concepts, I will consider repetition to mean simply mechanical repetition, the linear repeating of a process or movement *exactly*, so that there is no difference between one instance and another, like the movement of a mechanical arm stamping out a plastic form in a factory.<sup>176</sup> Redundancy on the other hand involves a non-linear cycling, or wave-like fluidity. Robert Rogers differentiates redundancy from repetition by citing the

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<sup>175</sup> We could relate Darger's textual patterns to patterns in Darger's life—they can serve as the background for redundant patterns in his life, especially his early life, which played out as a continuing cycle of capture and escape.

<sup>176</sup> It can be argued that pure repetition does not exist, the repeated unit being always different from the original if only by context, by the knowledge that it is a repetition. It is also true that in physical reality, no two repetitions can be exactly alike. In fact, it is because the repetition is accompanied by difference that it is not strictly mechanical, and can be termed redundancy. As Rimmon-Kenan suggests, there is no true repetition since we never step in the same river twice (153). The very act of re-representing (re-presenting) distinguishes the repeated element from the "original" partially because of its place in the "accumulation," which lends an altered context even if the repeated item is exactly the same.

etymology of the word: redundancy derives from *redundare*, from *re* (again) plus *unda* (wave) to overflow, flow over, overlap, lap over, thus indicating a fluid, non-linear process (597-598). What I wish to emphasize for the time being is the idea of redundancy as the result of a surplus, or overflow, an excess expressed in repeating waves (of writing in this case), which are similar but not identical. Redundancy includes the actuality of difference; it is the overlapping and thus partially similar expression of something previously expressed. Redundancy has a structural benefit in architecture that is not only mirrored in, but is integral to, literature and literary writing for several reasons. Architectural redundancy counters the possible failure of structural units via the repetition of the units. Literary redundancy counters the possible failure of memory via the repetition of memory in codified form. The human search for coherency and meaning is thus stabilized. The earliest forms of literature, such as oral epics are highly redundant, partially due to the requirements of memory both on the part of the teller and the listener. In “A Note on the Sources of Redundancy in Oral Epic,” John Lindow writes:

The various forms of redundancy compose one of the most striking stylistic features of oral narrative poetry. A catalogue of epic redundancy might include direct and parallel repetition and parallel variation of verbal elements, as well as “stock epithets,” general repetition of entire ideas or scenes, regular summation of preceding episodes of the story, and perhaps even recurrent thematic structure. All of these are to be found in addition to high formulaic content, which itself introduces a degree of redundancy. (366)<sup>177</sup>

If we look at Old English epics like *Beowulf*, we find a redundancy not only created by line repetition but also through the effects of rhythm, rhyme, consonance and assonance. Peter Brooks suggests that this is indeed a necessary part of the story-telling process:

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<sup>177</sup>. The *Iliad* for example regularly repeats whole sections of lines.

To state the matter baldly: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, refrain, all are mnemonic elements of literature and indeed most of its tropes are in some manner *repetitions that take us back in the text*, that allow the ear, the eye, the mind to make connections, conscious or unconscious, between different textual moments, to see past and present as related and as establishing a future that will be noticeable as some variation in the pattern. (99 my emphasis)

Brooks expands his discussion to claim that such repetition is integral to story structure itself—the story is affective because it re-tells.

The purpose of storytelling in our age has changed to the degree that it is no longer the reassurance of master narratives we seek, but rather the thrill of the new.<sup>178</sup> William Paulson writes of literature today: “We tend to deplore redundancy in writing, considering it to be a sign of muddled thinking, or the refuge of those who have little original thought to express” (58).<sup>179</sup> Thus, in contemporary literature, the emphasis is placed on originality and difference—how *unlike* one work can be from another. Even within the single work, the element of surprise, the ability to counter reader expectations is valued. However, for the larger history of literature (before modernity and consumer economics began to influence writing), such unpredictability has not been so valued. Today as well, the pleasure of reading still often resides in an anticipated resolution of plot elements and characters we can

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<sup>178</sup>. This obsession with literary novelty may coincide with the increasingly important focus upon “the new” as it is configured by consumerism—literature as product, which needs be continuously repackaged.

<sup>179</sup>. It is possible to see that the pleasure of redundancy has merely been transferred to higher levels of organization, wherein we may not find repeating patterns within a single story, but we do find similar stories repeating themselves at the level of the media. We only need to look at television and film to see how this is true—the endless shows that revolving around similar plot structures with similar characters and similar dramatic arcs, all only slightly altered. Horror movies are a good example; here is a genre whose pleasure, while based on the unexpected, is itself highly formulaic. Yet if we look at the large number of horror movies produced in shorter and shorter time periods, we see they are not only formulaic but that they repeat each other with very little variation. To some degree mass-produced literature does this as well, be it the spy novel, the romance novel, even the identity novel. Indeed, contemporary literature seems to both struggle to avoid classification/predictability while at the same time striving for the same. This schizophrenic agenda has to do with literature’s marketability and its need to find a home in an exponentially increasing production environment.

“identify” with. The point of this discussion, however, is to highlight the importance, indeed the integral necessity of redundancy in literature whether it is acknowledged or not.

### 3.2.1 Orders of Redundancy or (Re)Collecting in *My Life*

It is impossible to overemphasize the role of, or the amount of, redundancy that permeates Darger’s text. It is, for all intents and purposes, his single most evident stylistic trait. To this end, I will break down Darger’s text to seven levels or what I call “Orders of Redundancy” 1-7, with higher orders indicating higher levels of organizational complexity. I will follow with an analysis of examples in the text. I have separated the examples from the definitions in order to preserve what I see as the accumulating effect of redundancy throughout the work and thus to give a better picture of the entire shape of the narrative. Note that as we move up in levels of organization, their importance increases: 1) LETTERS; 2) WORDS; 3) PHRASES; 4) UNITS OF MEANING 5) STORY UNITS 6) CUMULATIVE STORY UNITS; and lastly, 7) IDEATIONAL REDUNDANCY.

1<sup>st</sup> order redundancy is found at the smallest units of text—the unnecessary doubling of individual letters within a word. 2<sup>nd</sup> order redundancy can be found in the more conspicuous repetitions of words, primarily side by side, but also across the field of the text. 3<sup>rd</sup> order redundancy is the repetition of short sections or words groupings, such as descriptive clauses. These can be as long as two words or as many as four or five, but always *less than a full sentence*. 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancy occurs in the repetition of complete units of meaning, from one sentence up to a paragraph, or even two or three paragraphs, *but always less than a “story unit.”* 5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy is comprised of the repetition of actual story units: i.e., the retelling of a narrative section either by the introduction of a new

witness or narrator, or by the mere repeating of a story by the same narrator. 6<sup>th</sup> order redundancy is an extension of the 5<sup>th</sup> but on a larger scale: i.e., more than one 5<sup>th</sup> order narrative structure is repeated in a larger repeated unit, leading to an ongoing enfolding of larger and larger tales. 7<sup>th</sup> order is ideational redundancy as opposed to physical redundancy; it is not related to the repetition of physical language units but to the repetition of symbolic images, ideas, etc. (buildings, battles, catastrophes). Beginning with the second order, the repeating of units tends to be spread apart by larger and larger spaces of text. 2<sup>nd</sup> order redundancy can be that of words repeated in fairly close proximity, i.e., within the same page or couple of pages, although the textual space separating 3<sup>rd</sup> order repetitions can be hundreds of pages, which, as we will see, get folded into higher and higher levels. 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancies may occur one after another or they may be separated by hundreds of pages.

### **3.2.1.1 1<sup>st</sup> Order**

LETTERS: Darger has a distinct predilection to repeat or double the letter in a word. This of course can be attributed to a mere lack of knowledge of the properly spelled word, or it may be a reflex of his writing mannerism. It can be interpreted as a demonstration that, if there is any kind of doubt as to proper spelling, Darger will choose the path of redundancy as opposed to economy. This choice can be interpreted as a desire to reinforce the word, or his concept of the word by erring toward repetition. The list of words that contain repeated letters is small by comparison to the other orders of redundancy, but here are some fairly common examples: proffessor, untill, children, whirling. The most oft repeated letters are high verticals such as lls and tts and ffs but ss and rrs are also repeated. One can surmise here that we are dealing with a very physical (structural) kind of redundancy—the look of

the word, seeming to lack something, needs the structural support of the doubled letter. And, seeing as how his lines often seem to collapse or roll in a fluid manner, especially on unlined paper, it may also be that Darger, by doubling letters, is building visual scaffolding within the line, strengthening its appearance on the page. The doubling of letters also adds a thickness, a density to the word, emphasizing the physicality of the words, and perhaps combining that physicality with an augmented sense of its meaning. I call attention here to the previously mentioned, “outsider” tendency to plenitude, and excess, the need to fill in space, to solidify meaning.

### 3.2.1.2 2<sup>nd</sup> Order

WORDS: Throughout *My Life*, Darger obsessively repeats words side by side. This practice seems to ebb and flow and is more prevalent in certain sections of the manuscript than it is in others. It may occasionally be attributed to an uncertainty about spelling, as *My Life* is a handwritten manuscript. Indeed, we can often see that the first instance of the word is truly misspelled and the second is corrected. In such cases, the first may or may not be crossed out, but this is by no means always so. Just as often, the second instance of the word is spelled exactly the same. Darger may believe the word is spelled wrong, changes his mind, and spells it again the same way. But why rewrite the word in this case?

and with a thunderous crash it hit the barn, and some how twirled twirled  
itself around the barn and around with such a shock as to do to the barn you  
see. (256)

others went swifty away in dust and clouds of rubble with the crazies craziest  
sounds (489–490)

What animals remained lay dead, bodies ripped apart twisted into horrid  
horrid shapes (398)

I was very <sup>dangerous</sup> (dangerous) if teased (165)

It sounded like a deafening thunderous hum, thunderous thundering howl like an army of dogs (705)

A few among my companion shrieked shrieked or howled an apprehension and fear, (611)

Roofs were shaken from from houses, even more than a block away. (179)

I frequently came across knots of more slightly injured injured persons, gathered here and there waiting their turn for shelter and medical treatment, besides provisions of and food. (456)

The mother had been killed killed instantly as the body lay loose among the wreckage. (467)

They were screaming screaming to relief parties for an in locating their missing relatives of the convent. (1164)

I believe what we witness in such examples is further evidence of Darger's tendency to opt for repetition as a default strategy, similar to the repetition of picture elements in his paintings. The repetition may act as a means of shoring up word significance, doubling the word for effect, and/or tautologically defining the word by itself. For instance, in the example above, to twirl twirl, may be to doubly twirl, or to twirl the twirl. Here we see a language vortex forming: to twirl the twirl; then to twirl the twirl of the twirl; then to twirl the twirl of the twirl of the twirl, etc. This repetition also functions as a type of pause, a stutter, or temporary backing up of the text at which point the sentence restarts, in which case it can be read as a hesitation. To read it this way is to read Darger's writing process as fluid, unstoppable flow, and that he may find it difficult to stop writing, there can be no space in the flow of thought to pen and page, and so the hesitation is accommodated by local temporal return, which is the beginning of the vortex, a local reversal of laminar flow.

In the passage below, we see Darger's attempt to correct a misspelled word, and still ending up with a misspelled word. Three times in the paragraph he stutters in this attempt.

The dark cloud above acted like the described big ~~whilpool~~ ~~whilpe~~ whilpool north of either Sweden or Norway. It droned a horrible ~~huan~~ hum. All tall brick building that could be seen were all them seen disappearing in swirling writhing clouds of mortar brick and thick dust before the force of this stupendous gale, others went swiftly away in dust and clouds of rubble with the crazies craziest sounds and many others after a momentary resistance were no more. (489)

If such repetition is initially merely a gesture of correction, it can still be considered an effort toward making the meaning plain. The fact that no change is made in the word can be interpreted as a hesitancy on Darger's part about the word, or perhaps merely a speech affect, as when we repeat a word for emphasis. In all cases, what we see is an increasing degree of strengthening or supporting the word's meaning.

### 3.2.1.3 3<sup>rd</sup> Order

PHRASES (short word groupings): Here I believe two different forces are at work to bring about the redundancy. The first is what I will call Darger's (re)collecting of his own text—that is to say, he is collecting or recuperating his own language for reuse as the text progresses. Secondly, I will attribute this level of redundancy to what I have described earlier as narrative valence, which can either be a mechanical valence, as in the rote learning/usage of language sequences, or an affective valence that causes certain modifiers to easily attach themselves to certain nouns and verbs. This high valence facilitates and speeds the flow of the narrative in that situations calling for a particular emotional or descriptive timbre are easily filled by coded linguistic units.<sup>180</sup> The writer need not waste

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<sup>180</sup> I call attention to what was earlier said about autism and Asperger's syndrome in which the sufferer will use recorded elements in order to construct the present.

time inventing a new way of describing something; he just reuses what already sufficed, what has already been successful. We are in the realm of what is normally considered a marker of “bad” writing, as the repetition lends a “cheapness” of sameness to the prose such as we might find in mass-produced genre writing.<sup>181</sup>

#### 3.2.1.4 4<sup>th</sup> Order

UNITS OF MEANING: At this level several “differences” can be noted that begin to suggest turbulence. First, while these 4<sup>th</sup> order repetitions can be verbatim, i.e., identical word for word to their earlier occurrence, more often they are not—there are variations ranging from slight to extreme. But even at the extreme end (high variation unit to unit) there is an obvious repeated quality—the reader recognizes the unit, though he may not recognize the variation, unless it is compared side by side with another instance. Such variation distinguishes the redundant from the merely repeated and the difference allows for the possible inflation of a narrative unit into something wholly other—perhaps into a new mini-story line, via the vehicle of difference. The other aspect of 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancy that I wish to point out is that at this level we begin to see substantial textual blocks recurring and folding into themselves.

The first example I give derives from one of Darger’s collected units of language. Darger originally collects (borrows) a text from Poe (“Descent into the Maelstrom”). The following example is made up of a sequence of words (frenzied convulsions) followed by various combinations of “whirling, plunging, boiling, gyrating, hissing, and vortices.” Here is the original text as it occurs in Poe:

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<sup>181</sup>. As mentioned earlier this repetitive quality is also a characteristic of formulaic oral and epic poetry.

We had now been about ten minutes upon the top of Helseggen, to which we had ascended from the interior of Lofoden, so that we had caught no glimpse of the sea until it had burst upon us from the summit. As the old man spoke, I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie; and at the same moment I perceived that what seamen term the chopping character of the ocean beneath us, was rapidly changing into a current which set to the eastward. Even while I gazed, this current acquired a monstrous velocity. Each moment added to its speed—to its headlong impetuosity. In five minutes the whole sea, as far as Vurrgh, was lashed into ungovernable fury; but it was between Moskoe and the coast that the main uproar held its sway. Here the vast bed of the waters, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into phrensiad convulsion - heaving, boiling, hissing - gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except in precipitous descents. (“Maelstrom” 128-129)

Darger first uses this text in Book Three to describe a fire-tornado:

In five minutes the whole sea of smudge or smoulder as far as the eye could soon see here and there collapsed to the ground and inflaming hay like debris was lashed into ungovernable fury but it was between the two places of where both counter fires had met together that the main sea of horror held its sway. Here the vast beds of smouldering wheat debris seemed to ~~ream~~ ream and scar into a score thousand conflicting channels of seething high or low flames, then collapsing to the ground burst suddenly into most frenzied convulsions, hearing furiously like waves of the sea, boiling like molten iron, loudly hissing gyrating into gigantic and innumerable vortices of smouldering glares and bright reflection and all whirling and plunging back and forth to and fro, up and down and yet sweeping to the eastward with a rapidity which ~~such~~ such fires never before assumed, not even in the mightiest forest fires. (2263-2264)

It is used again to describe Sweetie Pie in Book Four:

Each movement added to its to its speed to [...] its most head long ~~impetuously~~ impetuously. The part of the cloud that had formed like the head of a child being strangled was in awful convulsion, or lashed in the most ungovernable fury but it was it and also the cloud part that had connected with the neck that the main uproar held its sway.

That whole what had been the head, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting cloudy channels ~~also~~ all in the most fren frenzied convulsions, while the cloud connecting with the neck was gyration in ~~geag~~ gigantic and unnumerable vortices and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity ~~wh~~ which even water never else where assumes except in very swift precipitous descents. I cannot dare to describe even to

save my life the terrible shrieks and yells that went up ~~from~~ to heaven and skies from the upper cloud connected with the revolving terror. (3112-3113)

This borrowing from Poe is repeated several times in this formation (see Appendix H/1).

The similarity of the descriptions is obvious to the reader even though they occur hundreds of pages apart. A question presents itself: is Darger copying from himself; is he remembering these word clusters, or is he emotionally/mechanically reproducing them? It is likely a combination of the three possibilities—partial memory augmented by the agglutination of high-valence word clusters, which in turn re-stimulates, re-excites memory leading to further agglutination, etc., all of it expanding the size of the repeated narrative unit.

It is important to note here that not only are the words repeated, but sequences are also repeated. Certain words, due to their valence (in Darger's mind, *and* in cultural use), attract other words, creating rough adverbial or adjectival collections that repeat, and these in effect act in a similar agglutinative fashion, attracting together self-similar clusters of language. One could claim that the “thickening” purpose is similar to that of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order redundancies previously mentioned, but on a higher level of organization. The resultant thickening sameness, or densification (sedimentation) of the text provides structural strength, which may be experienced by Darger as enhanced meaning. Another example might be this “borrowed” description below. Here is the original phrasing from Poe:

Those who drew me on board were my old mates and daily companions - but they knew me no more than they would have known a traveller from the spirit-land. My hair which had been raven-black the day before, was as white as you see it now. (“Maelstrom” 139)

Here is Darger's borrowing and repetition of the scene:

The principal force of the ~~storm~~ tempest was now over although millions of debris of all sorts and twigs and small branches that had been brought from a

great distance were still now seen following the blast as if still drawn onward by the same or a traveler from some land of lost souls. My hair from intense black yesterday, was as white as you see it now. (675-676)

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This short experience I had made my friends after that be unable to not know me no more than as if I was a traveler for a strange land of spirits. My hair which had been raven black a minute before was as white as you see it now. (3589)

The above is an example of a unit that is repeated only a couple of times. Below is another example of a descriptive metaphor with its accompanying phraseology. This example occurs far more frequently in Book Two and Book Four. Again, the figure is borrowed from Poe; the basic structure of it occurs here:

I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie; and at the same moment I perceived that what seamen term the chopping character of the ocean beneath us, was rapidly changing into a current which set to the eastward. ("Maelstrom" 128)

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At the same moment the roaring noise of the water was completely drowned in a kind of shrill shriek - such a sound as you might imagine given out by the waste-pipes of many thousand steam-vessels, letting off their steam all together. We were now in the belt of surf that always surrounds the whirl [...]. ("Maelstrom" 135)

The metaphor is then used by Darger to describe the sound of the tornado, as various witnesses experienced it. This is one of several similar phrases that are used, some of which appear mixed in with this phrase. But Darger alters it, running changes on the basic metaphor throughout his narrative.

The head front of the black cloud had been about ten minutes passing overhead ~~who~~ from I had first seen its approach, when I became aware of a loud, strange and gradually increasing sound up above, in the darker rear of the cloud further away, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon our American prairie and looking up, I noticed at the same time that other farmers terror the chopping a character of the ocean beneath us. (513)

It shows up again in Book Four (see Appendix H/2):

I heard a funny following sound and saw a strange change in both sections of the cloud. I became aware of a loud and strange sound that gradually increased. Where the tongue protruded there was a sort of coughing and half choking sound. While below the apparent shoulders which were convulsed a [...] came like the moaning of a most large swarm of buffaloes upon our western American prairie, and at the same moment I perceived that the strange almost human naked shaped body of the child formed cloud was rapidly changed into an odd churning current which set to the eastward with its arms appearing to stretch downward with hands wide open.

Even while I gazed the face seemed awfully contorted that strange current acquired a monstrous velocity. Again came lightning but tenfold brighter and the thunder that followed was doubly loud. (3159-3160)

The redundancy continues as Darger modifies the metaphor and continues to change it. A shift is taking place that is akin to creativity, as the herd of buffalo becomes a howling pack of dogs (see Appendix H/3).

It passed us by about thirty feet beyond us actually tearing and carrying all before it, and with something like a howling of thousands of dogs, mingling with the banging, hissing and ripping sounds of the buildings being scattered and ripped away. (288-289)

The same basic metaphor is also used over and over again throughout *My Life*, but substituting thousands of wolves (see Appendix H/4).

(I looked and saw what appeared going up high beyond reach of my eyes a strangely formed thick fog moving fast and wildly connecting to the ground. It hardly made no sound, until it struck. It then grew to a howling round like thousands of wolves but near as loud as ~~bound~~ as loud thunder. (241)

Lastly, we see the same figure rendered as a thousand trains and a thousand whistle blasts:

They say as the storm approached La Salle the atmosphere had become heavy and oppressive. This lasted about ten minutes and then the survivors said they heard a most terrific roar. The only way they described it was to compare it to a thousand trains rushing through a very long tunnel at one time.

Simultaneous to that noise they heard a loud crashing and grinding. They said ~~instinct~~ instinct told them that a tornado was striking the city.

All then was in darkness from the black cloud. (674)

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The noise of the storm was horrible. Mingled with the thunderous howl like bedlam seemed to be a thousand blasts from whistles all joined and then reverberating over the town mingled with the confusion of sound from the wind swept wreckage so thick you couldn't see through it. When finally that immensely wild storm passed on as suddenly as it came the sight that met our eyes was more than terrifying. Many houses had been torn or taken away from their foundations, big rugs and long carpets were wound around what is left of trees, big iron girders and steel picket fences had been twisted and tangled like string some around telephone poles and the utmost desolation and ruin was everywhere. (321-322)

Another example of a repeated unit of meaning is based on references Darger makes, as with the following reference to Milton. Note that this Milton reference arises out of the reference to hell, which itself rises out of a reference to heat, the tornado, the Day of Judgment, etc., one idea leading to the next via high valence and the agglutinative nature of the text (see Appendix H/4).

That is as far as I can explain the cause of its formation. The exceeding speed of its wild whirling motion must have caused the tornado to become so hot. As you well know gentlemen many famous poets have set their imaginations to play in picturing the frights and horrors of Hell.

I read the one of Milton's which is the greatest of them.

Reading that sent shivers up and down my back. But I believe these infernal regions and all its unspeakable horrors and terrors as he conceived them were not more heinous and appalling than what I've heard and read of the experience of those hapless inhabitants upon whom the explosive force of that strangle child's "tongue" tore through Chesterbrown and other places like a mad savage hell of its own [...]. (3331-3332)

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I know of many poets who have set their imagination to play in picturing hell and its indescribable fury. Milton was one of them and the greatest.

But the infernal regions and all its terrors as he really conceived them were not more heinous and appalling than the story of the experiences of the survivors of those hapless inhabitants upon whom the explosive force of "Sweetie Pie" tore up all of Chesterbrown Bunnybury and other cities. (4251)

There is obviously more going on here than the type of mimetic redundancy one would associate with the epic. There is, or seems to be, what I would call a delectation in the

repetition, a taking pleasure from the writing act, and it is this pleasure that is being augmented by repetition. It is an affect for the writer, not for the reader.

One might legitimately ask: does the additional instance of the phrase add force to the description, sustaining it and strengthening it, or do the repetitions actually deplete the strength? Again it is a matter of perspective. If the writer did not find the act pleasurable, it is unlikely he would continue. The reader, on the other hand, might give up on the text as having no meaning whatsoever. In essence, I am claiming that a large part of the “meaning” is in the pleasure of such redundancy, and that pleasure is Darger’s alone. On one level, it is a pleasure of re-writing, but it is also a creative, dare we say, musical pleasure in that what Darger has done is to create what amounts to a kind of musical phrasing—a basic theme with many repeated elements in repeated patterns which alternate and mutate for aesthetic effect.

### **3.2.1.5 5<sup>th</sup> Order**

STORY UNITS: Up to now, I have been describing sections of story-telling without reference to who is telling the story, merely highlighting the different types of linguistic units. When the narrator changes, or the same narrator begins the same story again, this is what I call the 5<sup>th</sup> order of redundancy whereby the whole tale is restarted. The 5<sup>th</sup> order is generally facilitated by the reinvention of the narrator in a new guise. Each of the larger sections of *My Life* are structured in this manner and can be mapped as narrative blocks composed of a story-line that moves forward to a crucial juncture where some kind of narrative convention would normally be required, such as a climax, a denouement, a conclusion, etc. However, if the point of telling the story is, as I have suggested, to establish

(the writer's) presence, then the story, in its drive to continue, can only retell itself, and so it reverses (repeats) essentially by default. Darger does occasionally introduce new story material; he may even provide an entirely new narrative umbrella, but again, these devices merely allow him to repeat his basic story using slightly different references. Therefore, I suggest that we can assign three different modes to Darger's narrative progression based on the three catastrophic books.<sup>182</sup>

BOOK TWO. In Book Two, we see a series of witness accounts; the witnesses themselves are often functionally self-similar despite their different titles—farmers, farmer's wives, engineers—but the rendition of events they give, the description of the cloud formation and wreckage, is often a verbatim repeat of what a previous witness has said. Book Two thus moves forward with Darger as he travels across the ruined landscape from one witness to another. We could therefore represent Book Two as a chronological line of Witnesses (W):

**Fig. 1.**

(Progression of text as series of Witnesses)

—>W—>W—>W—>W—>W—>W—>W—>W—>

BOOK THREE. In Book Three, the battle with the tornado turns into a battle with vortices of flames. This book finds its method of repetition in the action of the fire itself, which spreads rhizomatically across the landscape, erupting here and there at new locations. The fire sometimes travels underground, sometimes by wind, and sometimes by explosion, as in the case of the exploded munitions factory. As the firefighters seem to get control of the flames

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<sup>182</sup> I do not include Book One in this discussion, as it is not one of the Catastrophic Books. There are redundancies in Book One and they occur in the retelling of various thematic statements: declarations of violent personality, descriptions of explosions, fires, etc., the recounting of arguments or disagreements the author has had.

in one location, the fire bursts forth in another. The tale of the battle of the firefighters is thus given cause to repeat itself with each re-eruption of the fire. There are some new narrators along the way, but the narration moves forward primarily by the spread of the fire. We could thus represent Book Three as a chronological line of Fire Flare-Ups (F):

**Fig. 2.**  
(Progression of text as series of Fire Flare-Ups)

—>F—>F—>F—>F—>F—>F—>F—>F—>

In addition, Book Three contains, as subsets of the fire tale, the repeated tales of the Smoulder, which spreads underground, and the Poison Cloud, which spreads in the air.

BOOK FOUR. In Book Four we return to eyewitness accounts of the storm, but these evolve over the course of the book into repeated explanations of the strange appearance of the storm—the child-headed strangle cloud. The explanations of course also provide occasions for retelling the storm story. These explanations and descriptions often take place within the “controlled” framework of a panel discussion or a trial, but the effect is the same. Therefore, we might say Book Four moves forward chronologically along a line of Explanations (E):

**Fig. 3.**  
(Progression of text as series of Explanations)

—>E—>E—>E—>E—>E—>E—>E—>E—>

For the purposes of illuminating the structure of narrative continuance, I will say that Witness=Fire=Explanation (W=F=E), as equivalent excuses for the re-telling of the tale. Each excuse designates a larger narrative umbrella, or story-telling framework, that repeats smaller narrative units (lesser orders of redundancy) within it. I want to emphasize here that this structure illustrates the nested nature of Darger’s redundancies, and that within each

higher order of redundancy exist all the lower orders. In other words, within a 5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy we find the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> orders, all existing at varying frequencies.

### 3.2.1.6 6<sup>th</sup> Order

CUMULATIVE STORY UNITS: Here I am postulating a 6<sup>th</sup> order of Redundancy in which the repetitions of W, F, or E above could be grouped together in yet larger patterns that repeat themselves.

As a comment to this list of orders of redundancy 1 through 6, I would like to suggest that something like a fractal self-similarity can be seen in the nested structure of the text. For instance, a witness may be telling the narrative of his or her encounter with Sweetie Pie (or the fire) and within that narrative another witness is introduced who may be basically the same as the speaking witness but with a different name or occupation and this second witness also tells the tale, often using much the same language. That second witness might then describe a character who was also very much like themselves, creating a nested effect, a *mise en abyme* of witness/storytelling events in which both the reader and probably the writer are lost. We can never be sure whether we have exited this vortex of a story within a story or not, as the 5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy continues to work to swallow itself. This structure of nested vortices within vortices is the definition of the onset of turbulent flow.

### 3.2.1.7 7<sup>th</sup> Order

IDEATIONAL REDUNDANCY (self-similarity of signs/signifiers): I mentioned that the 7<sup>th</sup> order of redundancy is different in that it is not easily discussed in terms of language

units or story-telling arcs, etc. It is rather a redundancy of symbolic imagery, or meaning. In this sense, 7<sup>th</sup> order redundancy is largely an ideational redundancy. However, it can be detected in the text as a similarity taking place in the presentation of characters, locations, structures, vectors and perspectives.

CHARACTERS: For instance, though names may be changed, the actual figure of any character is often merely a variant of a previous one, manifesting one of Darger's stock figures or clichéd types: brave soldiers and generals, learned professors, brave and wise girls, courageous farmers and farmer's wives, and of course, various versions of Darger himself. Whatever uniform they might be wearing, their qualities are essentially identical. They show little in the way of unique personality and are seldom described. In fact, Darger almost never describes any of his characters physically; their only distinguishing marks are their names and whatever moral qualities they may have—brave, strong, etc. They exist primarily to perpetuate the forward movement of the narrative, and not for any intrinsic interest they might have “as characters.”<sup>183</sup> This is in contrast to proper fiction, which we believe should generate distinct characters with distinct human features.

LOCATIONS: The main cities destroyed by the storm (Chesterbrown, LaSalle, Chestershire, Gleason, Murphysboro), despite their location in Central Illinois, all seem to be versions of Chicago, with roughly the same shape: “The length of Chester town was twenty miles long and more than a mile at its widest section” (503). In fact, all the cities are approximately 25 miles long and from between one mile to five miles in width. It is also true that the three cities all contain many of the same street names, and these street names are often the same as Chicago street names, such as Racine, Halsted, and Wabash. Mary Jane Park in Chesterbrown is just like Lincoln Park in Chicago, and Darger even admits as much:

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<sup>183</sup>. See comments in previous chapter on autism and characterization.

“‘Mary Jane Park which my son and one of my granddaughters went to visit’ said the old man is nearly as long as Chicagos Lincoln Park, and as wide, had a big glass conservatory somewhat larger in size, a mammal and an animal House”(605). In fact, there is even a Lincoln Park in Chesterbrown: “I can never forget this horrid fiery choking whirlwind ~~wher~~ which enveloped me when striving o get out of its path. I and others had rushed for the underpass in Lincoln park (chesterbrown). This park equals that in Chicago” (3156). Gordon Park in LaSalle is another version of this. Darger makes almost no effort to create separate identities or to contrast the cities. Rather, he points out likeness, which, of course, is an aspect of collecting.

STRUCTURES: Buildings are all also roughly the same, sometimes almost exactly the same. St. Vincent’s church in Chesterbrown is almost exactly like the one in Chicago: “On its North and south front sides were two hundred and fifty foot towers, resembling the towers of Our Great St Vincents Church in Chicago” (411). We could also note here that St. Mary’s Orphanage is the functional equivalent of the Gleason Asylum, which is the equivalent of the Sacred Heart Convent. In this same sense, the Telephone Exchange Building in LaSalle is the equivalent of the Dennis Building in Murphysboro, a similarity of purpose that carries over to a whole list of iconic structures in the narrative: The Barn, The Windmill, The Bridge, The Orphanage, The Supermarket. These structures operate as attractors of storm energy, and even if they serve superficially different purposes, their qualities for the story Darger is telling are very much alike, in the sense that they are often described the same way and function in the text as similar “exemplary” structures, paragons of human engineering, moral and aesthetic values, etc., that are destroyed by the storm.

There are other, perhaps less obvious or important, self-similarities I could point out, such as those of vector and perspective. VECTOR: Event, fire, poison cloud—everything moves in a similar pattern, outward and inward, toward one center, or away from that center and toward another. PERSPECTIVE: The witness is at a location, in the process of doing his or her job when they notice the strange formation of the clouds above and in front of them. This similarity of perspective allows for the similarity of description, thus adding to the redundancy.

This equivalency (equi-valence) of characteristic, locations, structures, vectors and perspectives, etc., across vast stretches of narrative suggests a self-similarity of narrative elements in nested story units that points back to acts of collection based upon likeness, and that what is being circulated by the narrative is a (re)collection of like items and events.

### 3.3 Redundancy and Self-Similarity as Structural Effect

THE VORTEX ITSELF: In relation to 7<sup>th</sup> order redundancy described above, probably the most important redundant (self-similar image) is the vortex itself. If the vortex is the means by which the self and self-narrative is constructed, the vortex must be maintained through its continual recreation, as image, and as structure. The structure of the text, inasmuch as it is Darger's self-telling, allows for the reproduction of the vortex, *by itself being a vortex*, thus the self is maintained by maintaining the vortex. This is true across the divisions of the narrative. In Book Three, for instance, the fire provides a way for the vortex to grow to repeat and spread, creating smaller versions of itself.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> The self-similarity also applies to ways of knowing—all the wrapping, strangling, choking becomes a way of knowing, of shoring up the repeating of the vortex. The wrapping of the windmill around the barn, the wrapping of the telephone wires around poles and children's throats. I have already mentioned Darger's obsession with the imagery of circular constriction. And one could easily extend this discussion to Darger's

As the circling pattern is repeating itself (what is caught in the vortex repeatedly comes back around), there may be degrees of variation, but the shape is redundant, and redundancy is what gives the vortex organizational strength within the larger (laminar or turbulent) flow. As mentioned, what is redundant overlaps, or folds within itself its own repetitions. This folding-in is like a temporal return (we could also call it a temporal containment, or reclamation) represented in the concrete signs of words. I recall here Serres's description of the beginning of the vortex: the ongoing forward flow deviates with the clinamen as the marker of this deviation. The vector produced at the clinamen itself deviates, eventually causing a local temporal reversal. Thus Darger's continuous redundancies, as they create textual vortices, work to form local areas of stability in the text, which in turn, work to stabilize the entire text,<sup>185</sup> making it "knowable." In other words, the text shall not vary or surprise, but maintain itself in a knowable state—knowable even when it seems that the story has changed. The information becomes expected, predictable. Thus, a (metanarrative) stability is produced similar to that stability provided by myth in the binding narratives of a culture. What is bound in *My Life*, however, is not culture, but the self itself, Darger's self, via the act of making the text, the act of writing.

I have discussed earlier how Darger's narratives, when compared to the properly constructed/constrained narratives of "insider" authors, are, in fact, failures of narrative form, producing the repetitive, excessive text, which to normal critical thinking seems to have no "literary" point, no significant cultural meaning. But to read Darger's text as a

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obsession with binding: the binding together of manuscripts, of paintings, even his penchant for sewing together his own clothes.

<sup>185</sup> This is the structural stability that is provided by redundancy. If a part of the narrative structure fails, it is backed up by the recuperation of its units in similar structures throughout the text.

literary failure is to read it within the literary rules of constraint, and therefore to fail to analyze the narrative *as it is*. Indeed, *My Life* may best be described as a failure, but less in terms of literary ambition, and more as a metarepresentation or metanarrative of failure. Failure is a major concern of Darger's. In fact, much of what Darger is obsessed with throughout *My Life* is the representation of structural failure—of bridges, of convents, of great buildings, of systems of communication, all of which seem to fail over and over again—and he often goes into detail on how buildings fail.<sup>186</sup> Much can be made of an analogy between the architectural structure of buildings and the narrative structure of the text. Architectural redundancy is precisely what gives buildings their strength; if one component fails, a repetition of the component or the component's function is there to counter or stave off systemic failure. Likewise, a text can be made stronger through redundancy and repetition, just like a building can. Another of Darger's interests is the failure of systems of communication. As has been mentioned, the systems of communication in *My Life* often fail, and alternative means are used; the redundancy of wiring, for instance, lets telephone wires be used to send telegraph signals.

Here I would like to address the paradox that Darger is engaging. On the one hand I have claimed that the vortex is a stabilizing structure. Yet, all these failures, as he represents them, are attributable to a vortex, the tornado, Sweetie Pie. We might even say that the failure of the narrative, in conventional terms, is also due to a vortex, the tornado which is the subject of the text, but which is also the organizational structure of the text. In other words, the tornado that destroys the structure of the text *is the text itself*, the very vortex that forms in the attempt to stabilize the text. Meaning often derives/proceeds from structure, and

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<sup>186</sup> I note here that it is the collapse of the kitchen ceiling at his job, a structural failure that provokes the memory of the tornado. (204-206)

the failure of structure results in a failure of meaning. We could say that meaning arises out of redundancy, or (re)presentation as significance. Most systemic relations provide and operate around a meaning that has a utilitarian function. Art or non-utilitarian meaning arises in the process of creating meaning where there is no evident need other than the relationship constructed by the observer toward the object. This relationship is the creative act of the observer, for whom there may be a biological evolutionary predilection to form such relations. If the observer is unable to perceive the relationship, then noise remains noise; it does not mean, it does not become ordered (Paulson 87). If, however, such failed relationships are reconfigured, fit into new patterns, then something like an artistic event can be said to have occurred: “The principle of constructing a pattern out of what interrupts patterns is inherent in artistic communication, because this kind of communication arises by deviating from regularities [...] and this deviation must be the source of whatever advantage or specificity artistic communication possesses” (Paulson 87). The drive to make experience meaningful is the common drive of self-constructing human identities (and all reading systems for that matter). To make things meaningful is to eliminate disorder from the world, or at least to make disorder itself meaningful. Darger is making disorder into writing (which means something to him) and he borrows from literary and rhetorical conventions to do so.

I have been speaking of Darger’s writing as an act that is meaningful for himself, for his *self*. I wish to emphasize, however, that there are theoretically two audiences who can find meaning in Darger’s writing: the writer (Darger), and Darger’s reader, who did not exist in his lifetime. We must consider that Darger himself was the sole intended audience, and that the meaning generated was generated for him alone. How the text becomes meaningful *for him* is the organizational process we need to analyze, as opposed to how the text

becomes meaningful for a reader. There is the additional complication here that Darger is likely not reading his own text, and that his knowledge of his own text is equivalent to his memory of it.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, the self-organization, the meaningfulness of the writing event may only be happening *at the moment of the writing act*; therefore it is perpetuated.

In any case, Darger did use literary forms, and literary forms are themselves containers, structures placed upon narrative to control it towards certain ends—one of these being, as mentioned, the stabilization of cultures (and of individuals). I re-emphasize that it is his deviation from these forms—especially in his high redundancy—that we can search for the meaning writing had for Darger. Paulson writes: “In general, literary conventions impose restrictions on what may be done with a language: certain words may be excluded from literary discourse, rules of meter and rhyme are introduced that greatly restrict word choice and thus reduce the entropy of language” (62-63).<sup>188</sup> If rhetorical devices and figures in literature imply a reduction of predictability, then rhetorical deviation (variety) would diminish redundancy as it lessens predictability. Since literature is on the one hand bound by rules and narrative expectations, it allows (or creates) new information by *accumulating* variety. However, such accumulation must be purposeful (i.e., absolute) and not accidental. The highest degree of variety lies in the province of the artistic text, in which the word choice is theoretically absolute and not indeterminate (Paulson 63) In other words, in reading an artistic text, the reader cannot consider that another word could be used to equal

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<sup>187</sup> MacGregor, as noted, claims that Darger either does not or barely remembers anything he wrote the day before. But MacGregor also claims that Darger probably did not read anything he wrote earlier.

<sup>188</sup> Paulson states the problem thusly: “it might seem that the pertinence of information theory to literature is disqualified by our doubt as to whether the literary act really is a transmission of information, an act of communication” (81). This question complicates matters. Is literature a breach of utilitarian language whereby new information is allowed into a system, or formed within a system? Paulson points to the commonplace analogy that “the literary work is opposed to the utilitarian use of language as the living creature is opposed to the machine or artifact” (80).

effect. Can we say this about Darger's writing—that his choices are purposeful and absolute? As I have said, reading Darger as literature is already an effort to impose meaning upon it, to find information in it, specifically *artistic information*.<sup>189</sup> But Darger's writing is neither proper communication nor proper literature. It is a step outside of the codified (sedimented) rules of literature (thus “outsider”). One can, of course, say that it is, like literature, an attempt at creating order, or meaning—a redundant process engaged against chaos. Darger's narrative, like his visual art, is assembled as Thévoz says, by *bricolage*, a collecting process whereby the lack of specific, absolute authority or end is replaced by accumulation (collection and re-collection) in the hopes of producing an increase in meaning. There is, as well, evidence that much outsider writing differs from literary writing in the level of redundancy. Literary writing may well be redundant *within the larger literary system* in which it operates, i.e., telling the same stories over in slightly different ways—the difference being the subtlety/originality of the retelling—but it is still the retelling of stories that need not be told, etc. But outsider writing is redundant *within itself*, regardless of the larger system. It repeats itself as if to enlarge itself within the space it has created, filling in the space that the impulse to write has perceived. Therefore, so-called “outsider writing sees no need for closure as defined by the larger system of literature because it is not operating in relation to that system. Its meaning does not come from subscription to the larger system.

The absence that is prominent through all of Darger's writing—the absence of final explanations, of facts, of solutions—is an absence that, as we have mentioned earlier, we can equate with the presence of mystery (see Chapter One) and it drives the narrative forward as a meaning-producing machine. Absence—the unknown, the lack of knowing—is,

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<sup>189</sup> I am using the term *information* here to mean a “decrease in incertitude.” Information resolves for a receiver, an uncertainty (Paulson 55-58). Artistic information offers creative or new resolutions to uncertainty, often by challenging former certainties and offering alternatives, thus propagating its own *raison d'être*.

in fact, the generator of all narrative. MacGregor seems to suggest that a primary driving force of all Darger's work is, in a sense, a general unknowing, which he describes as a lack of information concerning various entities in his life—his mother and sister primarily—but which can be extended to all the circumstances of Darger's locations, situations, etc. (*In the Realms* 33). Indeed, Darger's drive to write may well be related to what MacGregor calls the staving off of death, the last and greatest unknown.<sup>190</sup> As long as one is involved in the process of making meaning, or seeming to, death will be held at bay. Recalling the difference between repetition and redundancy, Rimmon-Kennan, restating Freud, sees repetition without difference as a conservative instinct, which is opposed to change and difference; repetition signals an urge to return to an inanimate state, a state of inertia and of undifferentiated matter (155).<sup>191</sup> True repetition, then, is akin to death, an eternity of sameness; it is a process counter to, and beyond life and narrative. Staving off death, as MacGregor calls it, is the maintenance of oneself *in life*, and, in the case of self-conscious life, this is done through narrative, the continual reconstitution of self in narrative, which is a redundant, not a repetitive process. Writing narrative, then, is the maintenance of self in the face of encroaching chaos; it is the maintenance of the known in opposition to the unknown and it is redundant. Redundancy is a trait of what Barthes calls "a readerly text," a text that wants to be known to a reader, to fulfill a reader's expectations. In order to "mean" in this manner it must wage a battle against non-meaning, or noise, and one of the weapons in this battle is redundancy. In terms of information theory, the purpose of redundancy is to

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<sup>190</sup>. The anxiety of information would also be related to the isolation or disconnection Darger might feel—the information is not getting to him. It is also worth noting that, in Darger's scenarios, it is often the lack of information that drives men mad.

<sup>191</sup>. This association with the death instinct is from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is perhaps only in such a state that repetition can occur, which is why true repetition is impossible.

counteract noise—noise being anything that interferes with a signal, a communicated meaning. When the meaning is the “self,” redundancy augments self-maintenance. If noise exceeds redundancy the signal is unclear and the self unsure; if redundancy exceeds noise the signal is unnecessarily protracted. This could be said to be the case with Darger’s writings. Since Darger is not reading his own text, and presumably anticipates no reader, for the text to function as a signal to himself, it must be repeated, and as I have shown this redundancy occurs at various levels of the text. It is important to note that, as mentioned, each order of redundancy is a return in time to what has already been told (even if that telling is a mere sound or word) and that lower orders of redundancy fold into the higher orders, and the higher orders, 4, 5, 6 effectively enfold themselves. This enfolding, because it is a *restatement*, amounts to a reversal of (rhetorical) time, a looping back for the purposes of *recollecting* itself, thus forming a circular pattern that is vortical, swirling but semi-stable around a central event, or meaning, which I have claimed is Darger’s self-construction. This seems paradoxical to the outside observer. If we consider the continuous returning and retelling as an excessive narrative act, then it is the excess that creates the structural stability, as such. Thus, the effort to organize turbulent flow further creates that very turbulence via the destruction of the expected narrative/literary structures. What seems a chaotic failure to the reader is likely a successful strategy to the writer.

### **3.4 Vortical Structure Moves Toward the Empty Center of “Meaning”**

I have established the redundancy of Darger’s text and given a possible logic to it. I would now like to look at how redundancy can produce an overall structure whose vector moves toward a more defined meaning for Darger. I will begin by proposing the idea of the

vortex as a possible general structure for all “story.” I do this based on two principles. The first principle is that repetition is integral to any story, in its inception, in its telling and purpose. The second principle is that the story acts as a reduction or collapse of chaos toward a teleological end and this movement is vortical. According to Peter Brooks, any story is already a repetition; in other words, it is the revisiting of an as yet unstated but pre-existing narrative event that, at the *moment of the story’s telling*, is put into *concrete* language. The telling of the story, the *sjuzet*, is purportedly the repetition, with difference, of the originary, actual event, the *fabula*.<sup>192</sup> It is thus a concretizing of a temporal and causal chain of events into a linguistic/lexical chain that has material presence and that can be repeated, more or less exactly—and *it should be repeated*; a story told only once does not fulfill its function of being repeatable. A story that is not repeated and repeatable is no more stabilizing than the original event. It is therefore in the potential of repetition that the story has value, for in its repetition it binds time and identity.<sup>193</sup> The story therefore is a type of redundancy that, through a series of limits, collapses meaning out of chaos. Just as a vortex may form temporary islands of stability within a flow of elements as that flow progresses from laminar to turbulent, the vortex of a story creates a stable island of time to which social

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<sup>192.</sup> *Fabula* generally means the set of narrated events in their strictly chronological order. *Sjuzet* or plot refers to the situations and events as presented to the receiver. I am using a more extreme and simplified version of these ideas, in which the *fabula* is the event as it happened in the physical world-as-it-is, in real time and in all its detail (which is, of course, impossible to know). The *fabula* is independent of any subjective tellings (perceptions and representations of the event). The plot or *sjuzet* is the story as told, a narrative made of words arranged a certain way by a teller, for an affect. The *sjuzet*, then, while it is a function of story-telling, is also a function of story-perceiving, which is to say phenomena are structured as plots *when we perceive them*, so as to be understood. Every *szujet*, in both its telling and its perception will differ. The *fabula* may be suggested by the *szujet*, but it can never be known in any conclusive way.

<sup>193.</sup> In addition each story is a redundancy within the larger field of storytelling, which operates by certain rules and seeks to bind people, one to another, in functional self-sustaining cultures. Each story, as an instance of storytelling, incorporates those elements of repetition that are essential to the field at large.

groups can refer, thus uniting their history and identity.<sup>194</sup> The second aspect of the story that is related to the structure of the vortex is the necessary fact of its teleology. The story is told “to a point”; there is a structure—beginning, middle, end—and a dramatic arc that constrains the narrative elements toward that end. This end is the *meaning* of the story. From the beginning to its end, the story can be said to be focusing upon that meaning, selectively gathering elements along the way, and that selection of course is part of the focusing process.

What follows is a description of Darger’s story structure as vortex. The widest part of the angle is the field of material, both new and old, from which the story is drawn. What defines the width at the mouth of the vortex is the yet unfulfilled possibility of what the story will be. The vortex narrows as a reverse cone by the act of its focusing, its trajectory toward meaning. The three primary storylines of *My Life* correspond roughly to the three books.<sup>195</sup>

BOOK TWO, THE MAELSTROM: 1) Narrator; 2) Situation presents; 3) Emergence of storm, not yet a vortex; 4) Emergence of vortex and the naming of the storm (Oliver Twist, etc.); 5) The event of surviving the storm/witnessing its destructive power; 6) The aftermath; 7) Action of witnessing and taking control of the aftermath (failure of imagination and reason, lack of center for the experience; 8) The admission of an inability to understand or explain and the resultant need to restart the story; return to, 1) narrator. Often there is a search for an object, etc., providing a narrative axis, but what generally happens is that

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<sup>194</sup> Peter Brooks suggests that all story or plot is a result of the alternating dialectic of the Freudian death drive, or the Freudian metaplot, as he calls it, in which repetition—the continual appearance and disappearance, presence and absence, the there/not there, or as I have suggested, the knowing/not-knowing—is the essential dynamic of self-construction (96–112).

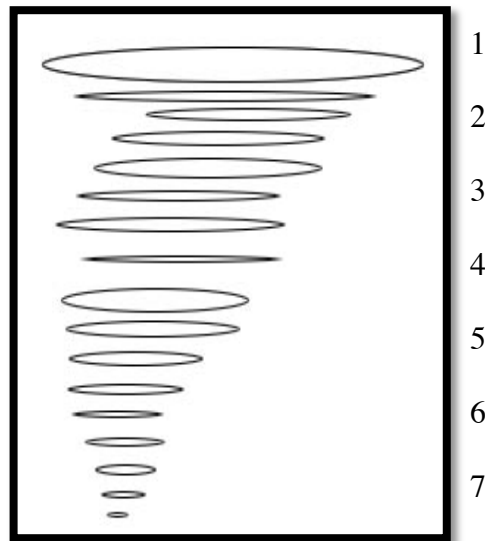
<sup>195</sup> Again, I am leaving out Book One, for the sake of simplicity. It is however, possible to discover vortical structure in Book One by plotting temporal and thematic reversals.

during this search, another witness is located who tells the story again and the line of narrative moves back up to the plane of new material. Books Three and Four follow a roughly similar pattern.

BOOK THREE, THE INFERNO: 1) Narrator; 2) Situation (fire) presents; 3) Characters assemble (firefighting team, etc.); 4) Discussion of strategy; 5) Strategy enacted; 6) Strategy fails; 7) Fire escapes/moves to another location; return to 1) Narrator.

BOOK FOUR, SWEETIE PIE: 1) Narrator; 2) Location/situation (establishing shot); 2) Characters assemble; 3) Statements are made (mystery, confusion, etc.); 4) Theories are offered; 5) Central theory is discussed; 6) Central theory fails; return to, 1) Narrator.

**Fig. 4**  
(Story structure figured as vortex or funnel)



These simple story breakdowns are intended to illustrate a narrowing or containment process. The diagram above (Fig. 4), a vortex, is meant to illustrate the general focusing structure produced by individual story-units. There are, as well, what we might call narrative phase shifts along the way. For instance, the witness-driven, temporal repetition of the tornado episodes is not the only form of progression. The telling of the vortex/storm in Book

Two is replaced by geographical repetition of the physical fire in Book Three, as it moves rhizomatically across the landscape. The fire spins off smaller vortices just as the tornado does, however, unlike the tornado, which is a single event, the fire breeds further events, each a copy of itself.

In Chapter Three, I discussed the presence of what I called a supra-narrator or Henry Prime. I will now bring this figure back into the discussion. The landscape of the text in some ways parallels the landscape described by the text, and Henry Prime moves across this landscape in the course of the narrative. Despite the name I have given him, this ur-narrator is in fact diffuse, fragmented, without a central identity—he is, we might say, the voice of storytelling itself. He might be inhabited by the character of Henry Darger or someone else—what matters is that this voice is the narrational ground, the super-speaker of the tale. Because this Henry Prime lacks location or center, he moves rhizomatically across the landscape giving the narrational impulse to new “located” narrators, defined (limited) identities that can tell the tale. Each new narrator provides a location for the dislocated voice; each constitutes an “I” for the time he or she tells the story. We could say that Henry Prime carries the spark or fire of the story to new locations where it will flare up into a retelling of the story. Henry Prime is also a collector, like Henry Darger, in that he is moving through a ruined landscape collecting narratives from witnesses, just as Darger collected narratives from magazines and newspapers. We might thus think of *My Life* as a collection of tales rather than a single tale (much like Darger’s journalistic model).

We can visually represent the path of Henry Prime in Fig. 5 below: from Chesterbrown to LaSalle to Chestershire to Gleason, etc., all towns without any fixed location on the fluid plane of the narrative.

**Fig. 5.**

(Story structure figured as series of towns destroyed)

—&gt;Chesterbrown—&gt;LaSalle—&gt;Chestershire—&gt;Gleason—&gt;LaSalle—&gt;

Each time a new narrator begins the story a new vortex is created—the storm itself and the telling of the storm story. These vortices can be envisioned in linear fashion as a series, one after the other as in Fig. 6. The vortex below could stand for each telling of the tornado story by a new narrator (5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy), but I will use it as a general sign for any redundant element.<sup>196</sup>

**Fig. 6.**

(Story progression figured as series of vortices/funnels)

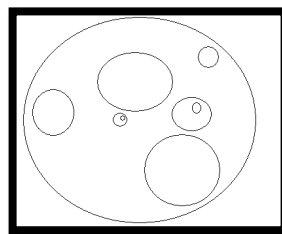
Each represents both the storm itself and the story structure as in Fig. 4, above.



If we consider the vortex as the shape of redundancy, and allowing that there are numerous levels or orders of redundancy as I have described them, we can say that within each of these larger vortices are smaller ones. In Fig. 7 below, consider the outer circle an instance of a 5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy, a single instance of a narrator telling a tale. The smaller circles within it are occurrences of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancies:

**Fig. 7.**

(Orders of redundancy within orders of redundancy)

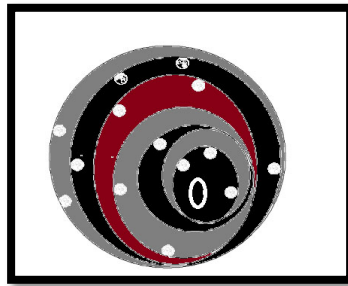


<sup>196</sup> They are also related to the chains of story units discussed earlier: W/F/E, Figs. 1–3.

I have presented the progression of story redundancies as being plotted on a line. However, the lack of a geographical and temporal center, uncontrolled by any storytelling structure, destroys the concept of the line, the limited cause and effect narrational axis, making the overall narrative flow one that seems to approach turbulence, a flow in which vortices form and break off and in which vortices form within other vortices in the act of self-organizing into yet a larger vortex. Thus the entire narrative of *My Life*, if we could visualize it spatially, is shaped like a (conceptual) vortex circling an unexpressed or unknown meaning. As the narration continues, it can be said to move toward meaning, and, as it does, the image becomes seemingly symbolic.

**Fig. 8.**  
(Vortex structure with internal redundancies)

The small figures within the vortex below represent repetitions of Fig. 7 above, which is a representation of 5<sup>th</sup> order redundancy.



On a larger scale, the outer perimeter of the vortex represents the totality of the narrative moving inward, repeating itself.<sup>197</sup> The empty space at the center of the vortex of the story is the meaning, or point of the story.

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<sup>197</sup>. As we will soon see, even the strangled child image is a kind of vortex in itself.

**Fig. 9.**

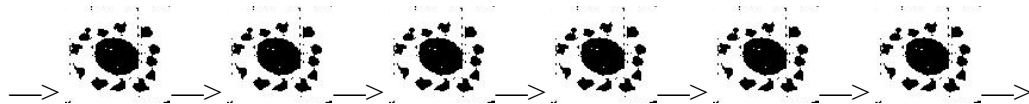
(Story progression shown as series of vortex structures with internal redundancies)



Keep in mind that the individual vortices along the line above can represent any order of redundancy from 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>, and that each order contains the lower orders within it as vortices within vortices—see Fig. 13 below. Because the central funnel of the vortex is actually empty (disregarding the taper of the funnel) the vortices “within” may be pictured as outside the boundary of the primary funnel. What we might get is something like the doodle that Darger draws throughout the manuscript, which can be read as a central abyss surrounded by smaller vortices. (For more examples of this doodle see Appendix K.)

**Fig. 10.**

(Substitution of Darger doodle for story progression)



This doodle then can be seen as a visual representation of the shape of the text recurring throughout the text as the surplus or excess of flow causes a new form of organization to emerge. I bring this up to point out the relationship between textual and pictorial structure in Darger’s work, which I will now explore.

### 3.5 Visual and Textual Structure

In a sense Darger’s career as a writer is of a piece with his visual art—it is all an endless flow. The missing constraints of regular (metanarrative/canonical) literary and artistic structures give way to unbounded production, the volume or pressure of which allow

for other forms of organization to emerge, other vortices. Above I have described the types of redundancy we find in Darger's written work. I would emphasize here that these textual patterns are not unique to *My Life*; they are in fact merely another form of the patterning that is evident everywhere in Darger's output, be it artistic organization or in the organization of his quotidian (collected) existence.

To be sure, redundancy is everywhere evident in Darger's pictorial work; in fact it is one of the most distinctive features: repeated figures, repeated clusters of figures, repeated motifs, etc. One instance of a common, repeated element that occurs throughout Darger's pictorial work is the image of a particular girl with blonde curls (see Fig. 12). Darger copied, collected such images from public sources such as magazines and coloring books, then repeated them with slight differences to create a redundant effect, a kind of visual rhyming or alliteration in his paintings, which he may have felt strengthened the composition structurally and thematically. The repetition/redundancy of any particular element along a line or within a space, would crowd itself, especially running into other pictorial elements, thus creating a pressure to double back, to return in visual space. In other words, Darger's drive to repeat the image is related both to his compulsion toward self-constitution, and his related need to fill in, to disambiguate any and all empty space, causing an overcrowding that forces a circularity (see Figs. 13 and 32–43). The eye of the perceiver, as it moves over the picture, replicates this process; it does not parse the picture in a strictly linear fashion, but rather in repeating circles, drawn by the similarity of the pictorial elements, which, as mentioned seem to appear in clusters. These clusters show up continually in Darger's paintings and may be composed of different elements. (For more examples and for a better idea as to the redundancy of this particular girl-image cluster see Figs. 32–43.) In order to

relate this visual redundancy to the textual redundancy discussed above, we only need to let one of Darger's image clusters stand in for all such image clusters, and then set it on a repeating line similar to the text progression diagrams shown in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10 above, or Fig. 14 below.

If we consider the larger composition of most of Darger's paintings, each can be seen as an instance of story with various levels of redundancy within it, shaping it. Thus what we actually see is a picture plane approaching turbulence, with the elements of the picture organizing into vortices of larger and smaller scale wherein similar images recur. Thus we can fruitfully compare a section of a Darger painting, or even an entire painting to the structural representation I have made of Darger's text (see Fig. 15). My point here is two-fold: 1) to show how, in Darger's work, the repetition of visual patterns is similar to the repetition of textual patterns; and 2) to suggest that a general equivalency occurs between presented elements, pictorial or textual, inasmuch as any and all elements repeat themselves to similar degrees and with similar effect, over the entire field of his output. This redundant circularity, or vorticity, is the general attractor, or shape not only of particular locations on the paintings, but also of entire groups of paintings, entire manuscripts, and indeed of Darger's *oeuvre* in general.

I have cited the example of the blonde curly-haired girl, and her image cluster, and shown how her repeated image is an example of redundancy. I wish to re-emphasize, however, that this is only one example of such an image and such a cluster, and, for the purposes of this study it is not even the most important. Considering Darger's work on the whole, I believe the most important redundant image is that of the strangled girl, which appears constantly throughout his paintings and in various forms throughout his texts (see

Figs. 44-55). It is often the case that this theme dominates an entire canvas, as is the case with the painting entitled “Girls Running from Images of Strangled Girls in the Sky,” where we see clusters of the image that seem to emerge boiling out of the sky (see Figs. 53-55).

As already mentioned, this image of the strangled girl is the central image of *My Life*.

Like you told it also appeared to us like a little girl child's head turned sideways with clouds ~~from~~ <sup>from</sup> like hands around the neck in a strangling grip with her tongue sticking out and mouth wide open.

Coming from the wide open mouth and tongue was that coughing strangling sound. It at first was not discernible from what part of the main cloud it was at that distance but we soon saw it issued from the rear of the main cloud.

As I said before I cannot give an exact description of its figure than comparing it to the form of a child being strangled, head slightly lowered and tongue sticking out as far as it could go. (3111)

What I would like to suggest is that this image of the strangled girl is, in itself, equivalent to the vortex as an organizing force in the text, and perhaps even in the paintings. Numerous paintings contain a version of this strangulation cluster, which alone is an indication of its signifying function. I would like to point out that the strangled-girl image is never autonomous; it never stands alone. It is always dependent on arms to affect it. These arms curl towards the necks of the girls in a curve that joins the girl's head to other elements of the picture—the arms require men, the men require a battle scene, etc. My point is that certain pictorial clusters generate others and the paintings often seem to form in a self-generating manner. In many cases it seems the painting evolves as an excuse to recreate the image of the strangled girl and Darger as a painter creates scenes and visual dynamics that allow this reproduction. The narrative of *My Life* works in a similar fashion: in order to produce the image of the strangle-headed child cloud, the narrative has to generate the means of producing it and the easiest way to do this is to repeat the scene in which the image

was produced earlier.<sup>198</sup> The writing is driven forward to reproduce the tornado, which in turn produces the strangled girl's head. Each witness is overwhelmed by this vision, and the system collapses into a chaotic "sediment" that needs to be re-animated, re-infused with a dynamic that again allows the witness, Darger, to *feel himself* overwhelmed. In this case the total of Darger's narratives with all their strangulation images<sup>199</sup> produces a text that reproduces them. It is also worth noting that it is the image of the strangled girl (Annie/Elsie) that starts the war that generates the text that continues to reproduce the image of the strangled girl's head.<sup>200</sup>

### 3.6 Excess and the Drive to Meaning

This chapter has examined how Darger collects material according to a hierarchy of emotional valences, and repeats that material in a redundant process, which not only structures the text as vortex, but it also provides a circular vector toward which the text moves. Inasmuch as the redundancy that I have described is associated with meaning—the effort to make meaning—and the vortex is the shape of redundancy, especially under pressure or in excess. The vortex is the shape of Darger's "effort to mean." It suggests

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<sup>198</sup>. Admittedly there is a question here as to whether this process is one of top-down or bottom-up organization. Is the strangled girl produced because it is the telos, the already desired object of the text, or is it produced incidentally, as a result of the text? I will be exploring this further in the next chapter.

<sup>199</sup>. I include among these strangulation images all the instances of constriction, explosion, evisceration, wrapping and binding, as these elements repeat the basic strangulation and explosion dynamic of the central image of the strangled girl.

<sup>200</sup>. I would like to make a highly speculative suggestion or analogy, which entails interpreting Darger's work in terms of fractal structure, in which self-similar elements repeat themselves across scale. This serves to raise productive questions that are suggestive of some type of attractor underlying Darger's visual and written product, which I have previously described as a flow, in various states of approaching turbulence with the image of the strangled girl generating scenes around it that in turn exist to recreate it. This analysis would assume an underlying (neuro-psychological) algorithm that drives Darger's work, causing it to produce certain figures at certain intervals.

meaning by moving toward meaning, moving toward a center where meaning should exist. The meaning that lies at the center of the structure of the text, and indeed of the visual work as well, lies in the constantly repeated image of the strangled-headed girl child.

The storm takes the shape of the strangle-headed girl cloud and the focus on the tongue (The tongue that alternately rapes, gives birth, destroys, and writes). And here I return to “mystery” as the key. Each of the individual vortices can be seen from an above perspective as forming points on a spiral moving toward a central meaning to the narrative. This meaning, however, is increasingly a *lack* of meaning, which is then given the meaning of “mystery,” which is indicated when the characters admit they do not have an answer or even a proper explanation for the events they have been narrating. Mystery centers the overall vortex. I say this because the shape of the tornado as it is discussed in the latter parts of the book is said to be a mystery. In fact, as mentioned, the word “mystery” and its derivatives is one of the most frequently occurring words in *My Life*. It shows up three times in Book One, 165 times in Book Two, 37 times in Book Three, and 278 times in Book Four.

**Table 1: “Mystery” Variants by Book**

Book One		Book Two		Book Three		Book Four	
Mysterious	1	Myster	10	Myster	1	Mystery	1
Mysteriously	2	Mysteries	14	Mysteries	4	Mysteries	1
		Mysterious	19	Mysterious	24	Mysterious	53
		Mysteriously	17	Mysteriously	1	Mysteriously	33
		Mystery	94	Mystery	7	Mystery	191
		Mysteryin	1				
		Mystify	1				
<b>1/8,459</b>		<b>1/1,461</b>		<b>1/9,562</b>		<b>1 /1,371</b>	

The redundancy rate is comparable to that of “whirling, swirling,” etc., and other textually dense words. I would equate “mystery” with the meaning of the text, which is equated with the image of the strangle-headed girl child. The next chapter will examine in more detail how the structure works to manifest this meaning, this mystery, both for Darger and for us, as readers.

## **4.0 Chapter Four: The Girl Who Roared as Ten Thousand Howling Wolves: Sublimity, Catastrophe, and the Sacrificial Vortex**

### **4.1 Five Discussions**

In the previous chapter, I have shown how collection and re-collection are functions of vortical organization, which I have equated with Darger's "self-organization." In addition, I suggested that what causes the "on and on" forward progression of Darger's narrative work, *My Life*, is a drive toward "meaning" that is only partially gleaned in the symbolic resonance of the catastrophic imagery.<sup>201</sup> It has been the point of this study that a more complete and insightful perspective on Darger's meaning can be found in the dynamics of physical increase and affective excess with its resultant transformational constitution of the subject. This is the avenue of inquiry I will continue in the present chapter, framing the discussion of volume and increase in the context of redemption—a word that comes up often in Darger scholarship. Redemption in the religious sense is generally defined as deliverance from sin, or evil, a saving of oneself from one's own worst tendencies, be it past acts or current dispositions. Redemption involves a transition from one state to another, the latter state being a renewed context including atonement for past wrongs within a *relationship*, joined between the individual and his or her society or judge. In other words, redemption is about the re-making or re-contextualization of one's life through the creation or acceptance of a new organizational perspective. Therefore, a large part of this current chapter will reconcile this abstract "redemptive" purpose with the

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<sup>201</sup> The meaning I refer to is not necessarily one that is communicated, or communicable, to others, but one that is resonant to Darger himself in the act of writing. It is that which drives him to write because it is the satisfaction gained by writing.

physical/neurological engine driving Darger's excess textual production, examined in Chapter Two. I will proceed thus through five discussions:

The first discussion, "Catholicism and Transfiguration," will address Darger's engagement with Catholicism and its influence on his worldview. Darger was indoctrinated with Catholic dogma, and his understanding of redemption would be formulated in this context—confession, making amends, accepting Christ, etc. In addition, his atypical neurological state (obsessiveness, compromised identity, etc.) could have altered that understanding, for instance allowing him to frame his own condition, inasmuch as he was aware of it, within a Catholic master narrative. The public dialogue of his age, including its prominent themes, like catastrophe, social resurrection, war, critical mass, etc. (as described in Chapter One), would also have affected that understanding. With these factors in mind, I will establish a case for *My Life* being a redemptive narrative by comparing it to known categories of spiritual biography such as confession, conversion, and progress. I will also address acts of religious ritual and witnessing in relation to Darger's writing.

The second discussion, "Penetration, Pain and the Spiritual Real," will illuminate the *physical* processes by which Darger may have hoped to establish a "spiritual self" (as opposed to a mere functional self), which I will contend is synonymous with an augmented or enhanced self-awareness. I will examine the concept of redemption/ transcendence through physicality, emphasizing two (Catholic) modes by which this progress can be made: 1) the violation of limits and the transcendence of the flesh via the wound and the concurrent experience of pain; and 2) enumeration, the quasi-ritual counting or accumulation of redemptive artifacts and signs. The result of the first of these modes leads to a porosity of the subject and a subsequent opening up to excess sensation that can be interpreted as

contact with, or the experience of, transcendental being. This breakdown of containing structures can then stimulate the urge to re-containment via a second process of *enumeration*, by which I mean the reorganization of the excess—be it materiality, signification, or power—as number. The resultant numeration then serves as the sign of transition and is ritualized as such.

A third discussion, “Critical Mass and the Mathematical Sublime,” will readdress Darger’s own collecting and re-collecting (as described in Chapter Three) as a means of achieving what I will call a critical mass,<sup>202</sup> which is transformational in that it seeks to initiate a redemptive *phase change*.<sup>203</sup> This phase change can be read as a threshold event, made continually present via repetition/redundancy, and I will claim that this phase change is analogous to redemption in that it is at this threshold that Darger’s physical existence becomes (imitates) a spiritual existence, or at least a facsimile thereof.<sup>204</sup> I will propose here that (perhaps unwittingly) Darger replaces the absolute alterity of a God, a God that he finds difficult to comprehend as object or as moral force, with a theology of the sublime.<sup>205</sup> In other words, Darger substitutes the experience of sublimity for an unknowable or ineffective God, making his narrative project analogous to a theological one, manifest in the writing

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<sup>202</sup> Critical mass means the necessary amount or mass required to initiate a change in state, or the event of such a change. The term often implies a quantity so increased that it cannot be bound by the rules that govern smaller quantities.

<sup>203</sup> I am appropriating this term from the physical sciences in which it describes a change of state, for example, from liquid to solid. I am using it to describe a change in mental state in which the context of one’s life is changed, i.e., from one perceptual state to another. The purpose of using the term is to make an analogy between transformative physical processes and transformative mental processes, which I am claiming, are ultimately related.

<sup>204</sup> Phase shift is the process, which may already be complete. The threshold is the location of this process.

<sup>205</sup> In *A Theology of the Sublime*, Crockett coins this term to differentiate the experience of the divine alterity of God from the subjective experience of God, in which the sublime plays a role.

(i.e., writing the experience) of sublimity.<sup>206</sup> In other words, Darger’s art and writing, by its indulgence in excess, functions to maintain a threshold experience<sup>207</sup> equivalent to that of the sublime, specifically the Kantian mathematical sublime, because it is primarily through the “mathematical” means of addition, repetition, enumeration, and extension that the author creates his effects and, by extension, his “enhanced” subjectivity.<sup>208</sup> As an example, I will address how Darger’s concept of “wreckage”<sup>209</sup> suggests a world of object(s) or “pieces of the real”<sup>210</sup> in a state of fragmentation and disorder from which Darger must construct himself via vast acts of accumulation, mirroring, as it were, the collecting dynamics of the material world.

The fourth discussion, “Of Wreckage and the Piecemeal Real: The Structural Vortex,” will consider Darger’s narrative production as a physical manifestation of this spiritual threshold event, containing an “attractor,” an organizational shape to which Darger constantly returns—the vortex.<sup>211</sup> To this end, I will examine the two primary land/image-

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<sup>206.</sup> The submission required by the sublime experience (i.e., to be sublimated into) parallels the idea of submission to God required in religious conversion. Both require a submission or diminution of or acceptance of the self as inadequate or unequal to the object presented.

<sup>207.</sup> This threshold is brought about in the double movement of *excess narrative* and *fictionalization*, which are themselves related in that excess narrative may tend toward fiction as the repetition and drive for increasing detail exhausts memory and other non-fictive possibilities, forcing invention in order to continue the experience.

<sup>208.</sup> Enhanced subjectivity is here considered the desired effect of the experience of the sublime, as when Kant writes that we feel ourselves “elevated” by the experience.

<sup>209.</sup> Wreckage is a word that holds Darger’s interest both in its overuse and as a theater for his narrative drama.

<sup>210.</sup> I am taking this term from Žižek’s interpretation of Hegel. Žižek claims that the transcendental world can only be known in the concrete: “the Spirit *is* the inert dead skull; the subject’s Self *is* this small piece of metal [a coin] that I am holding in my hand” (207).

<sup>211.</sup> Again, I am using the notion of “attractor” here as a shape to which the narrative is continuously drawn within the dynamic of its self-ordering, a shape that can be presented graphically and which Darger recognizes in his presentation of the vortex.

scapes of *My Life*, as they are narrated via the sequential descriptions of multiple witnesses, and offered as the theater of sublime experience. The first of these landscapes is the violent, chaotic presence of the storm itself, Sweetie Pie, represented as a dynamic confrontation, an “overwhelming representation of nature,” or “nature as might” associated with the Romantic sublime (Kant, *Judgement* 109).<sup>212</sup> The second landscape is the aftermath of devastation caused by the storm, the representation of a world in ruins that highlights disorder, misery, destitution and the diminution of the human subject. This second landscape functions as the “apprehension of pain or death”, which, according to Burke, may lead to a sense of “extraordinary weakness” in the subject (119).<sup>213</sup> Throughout *My Life* these two representational modes alternate and contrast with one another in a manner that parallels what I will designate as the two prominent states of “wreckage”: the “dynamic,” or wreckage in motion (primarily circular, vortical motion), and the “sedimental,” or wreckage at rest (primarily as blockage, stasis, weight). In both states, the sublime (in which nature is a “schema for ideas” of transcendence) is fundamentally a product of the attempt to apprehend physical experience via numerical explanation, or extension. Darger’s output, his vor/text, thus operates as a threshold or bridge between these two states, which can also be

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<sup>212</sup> Kant’s formulations for the dynamical sublime experience include such passages as: “Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up in the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might” (110).

<sup>213</sup> Similar sentiments are found in Kant: “He will see in the evidences which the ravages of nature give of her dominion, and in all the vast scale of her might, compared with which his own is diminished to insignificance, only the misery, peril and distress that would compass the man who was thrown to its mercy” (115).

figured in Deleuzean (and Guattari) terms of the Molar vs. the Molecular: high homogeneity vs. fragmentation.<sup>214</sup>

The fifth discussion, “Turbulent Venus and the Sacrificial Tongue,” will return to vortex *Venus Turbulente*, Michel Serres’ figure for the initial ordering impulse discussed in Chapter One. Sweetie Pie, as a figure for *Venus Turbulente*, arises not only out of the described chaos of the winds, but also out of the accumulation of physical words that make up the repeating descriptions, an ongoing torrent of collected and re-collected linguistic artifacts that is driven to achieve a critical mass or transformational density. Darger is, in effect, pressuring himself into a redeemed existence via the quantity and weight of excess physical language. The figure of Sweetie Pie is a figure for that pressure, but she is also a sacrificial figure,<sup>215</sup> and it is on this sacrificial quality that I will conclude. Because of Darger’s identification with this figure, I will make the case that what is being sacrificed is and always has been Darger’s own voice, his tongue (his penned words), which he turns to positive effect through the meme and metaphor of sacrifice. In this sense, Darger’s suppressed voice is made relevant by the representation of its suppression. This transformation is figured in the storm Sweetie Pie, as well as in the imagery that surrounds her.

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<sup>214</sup> In chemistry molarity is the state of high homogeneity in a solution, i.e., one type of molecule as opposed to many types of molecules. In mechanics, molar properties are those of a mass of matter, as opposed to its parts—atoms or molecules. For Deleuze and Guattari, molarity is the site of coded wholes. It is a productive process: a making-the-same. Its attractor state is that of stable equilibrium. It is the mode of being, rather than becoming, of change rather than stasis. The molar is the state of the institution and the molecular state is that of animal.

<sup>215</sup> I will discuss the sacrificial qualities in more detail later; for now, we can consider the fact that the image the storm presents is that of an innocent victim being killed in a highly public manner, which affects a major change both to the identity of the community and the individual witnesses.

## 4.2 Catholicism and Transfiguration

### 4.2.1 The Argument for a Redemptive Life in *My Life*

Virtually all of Darger's critics have noted the religious themes in his work. In her study, *The Transubstantiation of Henry Darger*, Faith Ann Shields examines the history of this mode of interpretation. She notes how John MacGregor observed early on that the writing style of *The Realms* suggests "the poetic phrasing of the Bible [...] the oratory of sermons and the naïve religiosity of Christian tracts and moral tales" (qtd. in Shields 94). She then cites the critic Gerard Wertkins, who writes, "Often the epic [*The Realms*] reads like chapters from the lives of the saints. Even in its language—Calverinia, Angelinia, Abbieanna—is reminiscent of the Latin of the Catholic liturgy" (qtd. in Shields 94). Indeed, by all accounts, Darger was a devout Catholic, and in *My Life*, he says as much through the mouthpiece of his characters: "Am I am Catholic? You're Darn tooting I am, and proud of it" (244); "I'm a perfectly devout Catholic my brother is a priest, so you should know by heavens h name I'm not mad, and am telling you the plain full truth. Hope to die if I am not" (487-488). Another example of this claim can be found in this dialogue that takes place between two tornado witnesses worried about the direction the storm was taking.

To be sure I thought I strongly hoped by the desperate prayer I shouted God would cause it to turn away from there and spare my loved ones. there was some little hope in that, saying the Rosary, I'm a Cl Catholic you must know."

"I am one too" I answered. "Well the next moment I cursed myself for being such a fool to as to dream of such hope at all.... (543)

Indeed, we have little reason to doubt that Darger's art has a religious derivation and purpose, even if this is merely the reinforcement of the most basic of Catholic dogma with which he had been educated. His imagery and subject matter, as well as the facts of his life—especially the latter part of his life, with his obsessive attendance at Mass—are easily

read as signs of religious purpose. However, the intention behind such devotional activities is unclear.<sup>216</sup> They may, in fact, be inspired by fear of death or judgment, as MacGregor suggests—a survivalist, finger-in-the-dike rationale to Darger's writing, a holding at bay of the moment of reckoning.<sup>217</sup> To be sure, Darger does mention his advancing age on several occasions with introjections such as: “(still am old as I are)” (10), and “I wished to be young always. I am grown up now and an old lame man, darn it” (14). It is also true that he wrestled with his faith, and harbored doubts as to God’s engagement with, or interest in this world. MacGregor sees much of Darger’s work as a battle with God, or with his own wavering belief in God. Shields would agree, stressing that Darger never does become reconciled with God and thus the conflict is ever-present. We know from his writings that during much of the latter part of his life, Darger seems to have taken an adversarial position in relation to God, throwing balls of strings at pictures of Jesus, and cursing in anger that God did not relieve him of his pain. This is illustrated by the often-repeated sentiment: “Are you ashamed of me? You ask why? Its because of the pain, I shook my fist twards heaven, meaning it for God” (155). However, Darger’s doubts do not necessarily cancel his redemptive inclinations. He did see himself as a flawed person, and therefore in need. “Sure I not a saint—maybe a sorry one,” or “I should be ashamed of myself, but am not” (qtd. in Bonesteel 250).

While I will presently follow a path of inquiry that takes redemption as the objective of Darger’s writing of *My Life*, I wish to present two cautionary notes: first, it is important to acknowledge that no specific statement of redemptive purpose is ever made, and second, the

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<sup>216</sup> Regarding Chapter Two, we might see such activity as a product of OCD, Autism, or other neurological abnormality.

<sup>217</sup> As another literary example, we can think of Scheherazade from the Arabian Nights and her spinning of tales in order to fend off death.

religiously-inclined critic needs to be wary of using Darger to fulfill his or her own redemptive agendas. As to the first of these cautions, I emphasize that Darger rarely speaks directly to any issue or event of emotional significance, and so the lack of such a performative-redemptive statement is, in itself, no reason to doubt intention.<sup>218</sup> Darger uses the word redemption suspiciously few times—three times in the entire manuscript—and it is always referring to property and is always preceded by the adjective “beyond.”<sup>219</sup> The second objection is somewhat more complicated. By way of illustrating this complexity, I point out that previous critical responses to Darger are often broadly framed in three contexts: 1) the outsider savant/innocent visionary; 2) the sexually repressed/latent pedophile; and 3) the tortured Catholic whose iconography suggests redemptive desire.<sup>220</sup>

In terms of the first, we can note that the discovery of Darger’s *oeuvre* coincides with the rise of interest in “outsider art” and many people (critics, dealers, and art appreciators) needed or wanted to see in Darger a kind of noble savage, savant, or aesthetic savior—the embodiment of unmediated, uncorrupt creativity, as true to art as the saint is true to God. This search for “art saviors” is partly a reaction to the commercialization of the art market and partly an extension of the Romantic (and later Surrealist) traditions that saw a

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<sup>218</sup>. I will discuss the issue of Darger’s “intention” later in this chapter.

<sup>219</sup>. These three instances are: “factories and industries ruined beyond redemption they have gotten their distress before the country” (1042); “twenty eight miles of sheet asphalt streets twenty miles of sewers and the gas electric and water plants are wrecked beyond redemption and that all the homes and the great Sacred Heart Convent are in such ruined condition that their restoration is practically impossible” (2994); “We had fire but no tornado Insurance. We had many dear friends among the people there and a Grandfather Grandmother and a Aunt in Gleason City including the Mayor of Chesterbrown. All are gone. Our loss is great beyond redemption” (4710-4711).

We can note in these instances that redemption is physical, it has to do with a piece of the real and not with an abstract spiritual quality.

<sup>220</sup>. In his *Art in America* review, “Thank Heaven for little girls—watercolors; Henry Darger; traveling exhibition,” Richard Vine combines the contexts of redemption and pedophilia, when he claims that the calming of Darger’s sexual urges late in his life were part of his story of “redemption and acceptance” (Jan. 1998). This is also largely the context followed by Thévoz.

certain pure creative genius in madness and/or primitivism.<sup>221</sup> In regard to the second context mentioned above, that of repressed sexuality, Michel Thévoz suggests that it may well be our culture's pedophilia that we vicariously engage through our interest in Darger's work. As to the third context, the redemptive purpose pointed out by critics such as Bonesteel and Wertkin, I again refer to Shields, who has been critical of the need in Darger scholars to find these redemptive purposes in him, especially when religion becomes an easily available framework for appreciation. Shields claims that these critics are best able to appreciate Darger "by placing his life in a ready-made narrative of redemption," but in doing so they "falsify it, and posit the difficulties he experienced as necessary and unavoidable" (102). She also points out the possibility of normalizing Darger's shocking violence as part of a corporeal Catholic tradition,<sup>222</sup> a move which, according to Wertkin, allows us to see Darger's work as "less threatening and strange, more transformative and redemptive" (Shields 96).<sup>223</sup> It is not my intention to weigh in on these arguments; I do not wish to say that such latent pedophilia or redemptive purpose is not present, only that we must be careful in analyzing Darger to separate what we as observers and critics want from the material and what is actually offered. That said, I will maintain that the narrative of *My Life*

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<sup>221</sup> In any case, the context of "outsider" is today increasingly and rightfully challenged as being itself a marketing strategy and therefore economically driven. For the relationship between madness and artistic creativity, see: MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 1989; J.H. Matthews, *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry*, 1982. For a discussion of outsider art and the art market see: David Maclagan, *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace*, 2010.

<sup>222</sup> Admittedly, while I have presented this latter "caution," I myself will be following this path of analysis, not to normalize Darger, but rather to relate his stylistic uniqueness to physical causes.

<sup>223</sup> Indeed, there is an industry-wide tendency to "normalize" Darger so as not to devalue his creativity. An example of this is the overwhelming negative reaction to John MacGregor's suggestion that in researching Darger's work, he felt he was involved in the mind of a serial killer. I believe that this quote is often interpreted in a reactionary manner, that MacGregor is making a useful comparison, *and* that it is only from the perspective of later developments and market influences can the analogy be so handily dismissed. We also need to note that MacGregor is pointing out the subjective nature of this perception.

is redemptive. I believe that Darger's *physical act of writing* is where he felt or found his (re)making. This perspective shifts the explanation of Darger's narrative production from MacGregor's *defensive negative* interpretation (the staving off of death) to an *offensive positive* interpretation (a more aggressive, empowered move toward selfhood).<sup>224</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Categories of Spiritual Autobiography

The category of spiritual or religious autobiography is often differentiated from “normal” autobiography in the subject's overtly considered relationship to God. I would suggest, however, that the writing of any autobiography, despite whatever confessional or stated transformational element it may contain, is essentially a self-remaking (re-collecting), which is already structurally similar to a redemptive act, precisely because the narrative is edited “to a point,” or meaningful shape. Darger's narrative does not seem edited to any expected shape, and yet it does have a shape, which I will explore presently. However, I will first briefly look at *My Life* in terms of how it does or does not fit into the mold of “spiritual autobiography,” which in the Christian tradition does have its own particular structural and thematic traits, described by Robert Bell as often being modeled on the patterns of sainthood: Life of Christ, Confessions, Visions, Transformations, etc. (108). While it might be possible to find in *My Life* more specific analogies to these patterns, I will limit myself to the following three somewhat broader categories: 1) CONFESSION; 2) CONVERSION, and; 3) PROGRESS. Note these three patterns are not mutually exclusive; they are narrative modes that can exist coincidentally.

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<sup>224</sup> We might rightly question if there is a true difference here; the staving off of death is also the maintenance of one's self “in life.”

1) CONFESSION: A typical confession in the Christian tradition is addressed to an authority to whom it might matter, generally God. Darger's *My Life* is not addressed to God, although he does mention God regularly in the text, sometimes as mere exclamations, such as *Oh God, Thank God, My God*, etc.; sometimes in appreciation: "We had lost everything including the furniture beds and so on but were thankful to God that our lives were spared, though badly injured" (368); and sometimes in blame: "To blame God for this disaster would be rank rash blasphemy" (1071), or "'God didn't stop the tornado' suggested one of the rescuers" (1377). Sometimes God is used in the context of explanation:

The general burst of terrific grandeur was all that I was beholding. I have heard and read that all tornadoes are "devil born, I don't believe it, although maybe He could form one, only with God's permission. He and his whole legion of devils I believe would either fly or run away from one. I know he is a powerful evil spirit, but I even believe the twister would play the dickens with ~~him~~ him if he allowed himself to be caught by one. (651)

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"That's pretty bad" said Dorothy shaking her head, gravely. "I see we have a lot to do here Mr Darger in this tornado region of Illinois. First place we've got to learn where the tornado stuck its nose on the ground and see the remains of the Gleason Orphanage too. My idea is that the home supervisors were not fit to be over any children because they were cruel and hateful. That might have been God's way of punish-[br]ing them. But why the children? (1439)

It is safe to say that a good proportion of the time Darger speaks of God, he is questioning God's actions: Why is he [Darger] in pain? Why does such a destructive storm exist?

**Table 2: "God" Variants by Book**

Book One	Book Two	Book Three	Book Four
<b>God</b> 8	<b>God</b> 152	<b>God</b> 116	<b>God</b> 119
<b>Godless</b> 2	<b>Godless</b> 2	<b>Godly</b> 1	<b>Gods</b> 20
<b>Gods</b> 1	<b>Godly</b> 1	<b>Gods</b> 8	
	<b>Gods</b> 16		
<b>1/2,307</b>	<b>1/1,500</b>	<b>1/2,830</b>	<b>1/2,743</b>

There is as well, contrary to the confessional mode, a lack of self-reflection, or revelation, and Darger remains basically angry and cynical throughout the narrative, seeing the world as aligned against him, offering little pleasure and plenty of pain. The questions are always addressed, not to himself, but to forces outside of himself. There is nothing equivalent to Augustine's theft of the pears;<sup>225</sup> there is no moral mastication or self-evaluation; there is only the occasional admission of wrongheadedness or wrongdoing.<sup>226</sup> Darger seems to consider these wrongheaded attitudes as being examples of a valuable *willfulness* on his part, reflecting a basic survivalist attitude that he is proud of: "And that was not done that way to humble myself. For under no condition would I humble myself and Heaven help the one who would dare humble me" (68); "[I] always was and still am Self willed and also determined that at all costs, even at the expense of Sin that all things shall come my way at no matter what might try to interfere or stand in my way" (106); "I have had peculiar willful ways, and very independent nature" (164); "I did not and will not bear things going wrong. I wont stand for the slightest pain anywhere thoug most of my pains were very severe, and I want everything under any conditions to come my way" (117). Additionally, as pertains to confession, the question of truthfulness is always in play, for while Darger dwells on certain,

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<sup>225</sup> In the *Confessions*, the theft of pears episode operates as a reflective act across time by which Augustine, looking back at a seemingly harmless and purposeless act of youth, realizes his flaws and contextualizes his existence accordingly.

<sup>226</sup> Redemption for Darger is perhaps the redemption for his perceived thought crimes, for the violence (toward children), which he acknowledges, even if that violence is merely empathy for the violent act, or delectation of the imagined violent act, or an attraction to violence that is not understood. While Darger often claims no remorse and never asks for forgiveness, his desire to become the protector of children, is after all a redemptive move, especially for one who claimed to have once hated them. Darger does make confessions throughout *My Life*, small ones though they may be. He confesses to small crimes, etc.—striking children, setting fires, hating children, refusing to help others, etc. However, he sees most of these crimes as the result of headstrong qualities and good survival skills, etc. His diaries may be somewhat more confessional. In general, we cannot say empirically, that Darger felt guilt or remorse over some act in his past, nor can we say that he had a specific purpose in mind when writing.

often trivial, subjects he evades other important ones. Incidents that one might expect to be developed are quickly dropped. Events that normally would seem traumatic or life-changing, are passed over with little comment. The deaths of loved ones are only briefly mentioned. Darger does not speak of his landlords, David and Kyoko Lerner, who were probably the people closest to him during the time of the writing of *My Life*, nor does he mention, except in passing, his artwork or his writing, which were his life-long adult passions. The reader of *My Life* begins to suspect early on that much of what is most important or influential is only hinted at or actually absent, lending the narrative a tone of triviality and evasiveness, as if the author were hiding, as opposed to revealing, the relevant truth. This absence may be the product of what in Chapter Two I have called a decentered or unfixd self, a lack of self-regard, or the occultation of traumatic memory manifest in the insecurity of “knowing,” as opposed to “not knowing.”

2) CONVERSION: Confession does not necessarily incorporate conversion although it may lead to it; at the very least, it can be said to indicate a desire for conversion, which is another pattern of the spiritual autobiography. In the conversion narrative, the suffering or sinning man comes to see a transcendent reality and converts (makes a perspectival shift) in which the interpretation of his life’s events (which remain objectively the same) take place within a new subjective system, that being the dominion and judgment of God or some other source of authority. One of the more notable conversion scenes in Western literature again would be St. Augustine’s “Conversion in the Garden,” where at a crucial moment of unresolved anxiety, a seemingly mundane perception (a child’s voice in a neighboring building) causes a psychological phase change into the mindset of a believer. In *My Life*, there are no “ah-ha moments” of vision, no specific or even vague turning points in his life

that he recognizes, dwells upon or makes evident. I would point out, however, that we can indeed see a *version* of this kind of transition in *My Life*, and that is the transition on page 206: the “one really important thing I must write which I have forgotten.” This statement functions as a threshold in more ways than one, with the tornado, Sweetie Pie, as the figure of this threshold. I will examine the conversion aspect of *My Life* in greater detail later in this chapter.

3) PROGRESS: In spiritual autobiography, the subject’s narrative is often constituted as a “progress,” or spiritual journey from sin to grace, manifest as a series of real life trials or allegorical situations plotted in relation to moral growth. *My Life* does show a progress from dubious (i.e., the admission of violent and selfish tendencies) to partially apologetic, to heroic—this latter stage being the fictionalization of the author himself. As mentioned, this progress does not seem self-reflective and it is hard to say that it is “the point” of the narrative. It is also highly fantastic and increasingly fictional in a way that is seldom made relevant to the earlier “truthful” portion. However, in parallel to what I have said about conversion in *My Life*, the trajectory from sin to grace that a “progress” entails, can be mapped onto the move from biography to fiction, with sin being manifest in the real flawed and ineffective character, and grace being manifest in the fictional idealized effective characters.<sup>227</sup> Viewed in this context, we might say that *My Life* does share aspects of the spiritual journey or progress, as the heroic Darger(s), and therefore Henry Prime himself, journeys into the archetypal realm of catastrophe where the destruction of the City of Man is brought about by the Apocalyptic agency of Sweetie Pie, who may symbolize divine

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<sup>227</sup> I will discuss later how these characters, in fact, fail to be effective, but that failure does not change their functional intention as a potential attempt at progress.

retribution, divine vengeance, or merely divine (natural) excess.<sup>228</sup> Here is the first clue that redemption for Darger may be related to transcendence: first by the fact of the phase shift from reality to fiction, as I have described it, and second by Darger's method of producing what amounts to sublime experience, through the redundant accumulation of descriptions of apocalyptic landscapes and subsequent reactions, statistics, etc.<sup>229</sup> The progress then, if we choose to call it that, is into a fragmenting enumerated world of things, forces, etc. This world of things and forces takes the place of a world of revealed abstract truth, which is absent.

#### 4.2.3 From Progress to Ritual

As mentioned, Darger's position throughout the catastrophic books of *My Life* is one of either knowledgeable authority, heroic man of action, or secondary witness.<sup>230</sup> As much as Darger attempts to claim this affective/heroic persona, he still remains oddly ineffective, mirroring his real-life self-perception. This is true of his most basic role as witness, but also of his more authoritative self-characterizations. As engineer, he is unable to adequately explain the collapse of bridges and buildings. As meteorologist, his explanations of the storm seem equally inadequate. As master fire-fighter, he is unable to defeat the spreading fires.

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<sup>228</sup> Darger does not give his landscape any Bunyanesque allegorical names such as the City of Destruction, the Valley of the Shadow of Death or the Vanity Fair. Instead, his locations remain personal, mundane, if vast and shifting theaters, ravaged by destruction and death, in which the soul's self-searching is replaced by ineffectual attempts at scientific explanation. Science replaces soul, number replaces morality. There is good reason to believe that Darger owned and read *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a number of comparisons can be made between the two books. It is also possible to see much of Darger geography and characterizations as allegorical, with the various ruined cities standing for the vanity and hubris of man, and the characters as personifications of traits such as Bravery, Honor, Endurance, etc.

<sup>229</sup> Other elements of progress might be seen in smaller subsections of the narrative: the search for lost articles of faith, the rebuilding of the ruined world, etc.

<sup>230</sup> From the moment Darger breaks away from autobiographical fact on page 206, he begins to create new versions of himself, as hero and as witness. It is sometimes difficult to tell if it is a witness or one of Darger's alternative selves. These roles blur together until one comes to suspect that witnessing is itself heroic.

As general and coordinator of massive rescue attempts, he is unable to alleviate the misery of the masses. As witness and adventurer, he sets out to find lost objects and for the most part fails. As professor, he is unable to explain the mystery of the storm or its shape. The events are always larger and more *mysterious* than any attempt to explain or contain them. Still, Darger continues to witness, even if he is in fact merely witnessing the witnessing of others. We might say that the affect that is unavailable in action is gained through redundancy, in this case the *ritualistic recreation* of the witnessing act. In this sense, Sweetie Pie is most important in her role as facilitator of this ongoing ritualized dynamic. Because of Darger's Catholic upbringing, he would be inclined to pursue his interests ritualistically leading to an engagement in ritual for ritual's sake, via mechanistic repetition. Dennett believes that this is all any religious person does; in fact, this is all religion is—a series of repeated narrative presentations of foundational, mythological stories, acts, events, signs (*Breaking the Spell*, Chapter Five).<sup>231</sup> However, Darger, having no social or subjective constraints to his creativity, could pursue such ritual repetitions to an absurd degree and thus bring about his particularly compulsive version of Catholic transmutation. By pushing the catastrophic violence and the repeated accounting of this violence to an extreme, Darger forces, or hopes to force, the ritual to produce its promise, the amelioration of catastrophe in renewal.<sup>232</sup> After all, renewal must follow catastrophe, if the world is to be seen as having a

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<sup>231</sup>. Dennett suggests that religion is not only an evolved disposition, but that it is passed on *by imitation*, and therefore it is primarily through ritual that we learn (imitate) spirituality—rituals that are taught to us by our culture and which we adopt through imitation.

<sup>232</sup>. The foundation of this belief is the doctrine of *enantiodromia*, whereby every extreme turns into its opposite, manifest in Catholicism as the dialectic between sin and redemption, shame and grace. One cannot exist without the other and the greater amount of one leads to a greater amount of the other.

purpose, a telos.<sup>233</sup> Thus, I maintain that Darger's autobiography is at heart, intentionally or otherwise, a spiritual autobiography despite its slippery relationship to the normal marks of that genre. If, as I have maintained, redemption for Darger is linked to self-constitution,<sup>234</sup> his redemption/transcendence can be figured as a movement from a compromised, poorly figured, decentralized self, to a more fully realized self, a self that is pointed to, brought into relief, by the storm turbulence, and that is therefore identified with, and dependent upon, the figure of Sweetie Pie.<sup>235</sup> One might say that, in contrast to mystical transcendence away from the integral confined Self and toward God, Darger is transcending a position already outside of integral selfhood and *into Self*. However, if we consider both Self and God as meta-representations of a state of *being-in-itself*,<sup>236</sup> then the two movements are essentially the same—from an absence into a presence, from fragmentation to integrity—and both movements are brought about by the narrative process.<sup>237</sup> On the neurological level, this

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<sup>233</sup>. This is not uniquely biblical dogma; it would have been the dominant propaganda of Darger's era, especially considering the trauma of the great Chicago Fire, the two world wars, and the prevalent fear of social decay.

<sup>234</sup>. Redemption and transcendence are related by vector and by their integral dependence upon a threshold that exists and that should be passed.

<sup>235</sup>. As we will see Darger is made in opposition to Sweetie Pie at the same time that he identifies with her, is the same as her.

<sup>236</sup>. Being-in-itself refers to objects in the external world—a mode of non-conscious existence that simply is, it is neither active nor passive, and harbors no potentiality for transcendence. One of the problems of human existence for Sartre is the desire to attain being-in-itself, which he describes as the desire to be God—this is a longing for full control over one's destiny and for absolute identity, only attainable by achieving full control over the destiny of all existence.

<sup>237</sup>. We might also note a similar relationship in modernity between the lack of religious foundation and the proliferation of media-generated images, what marks the transition to a material society and an image-based culture.

transcendence would indicate a need to claim control or common purpose with the evolved neurological systems of the human brain to maintain a Self.<sup>238</sup>

This brings us back to the question of *intention* in relation to Darger. We can assemble evidence of Darger's general sense of spiritual inadequacy; we can speculate on his sense of compromised self-hood, what I have called an anxiety of centrality, and these would lead us to suspect intention. But then, there is a definite lack of self-reflexive, performative statements of intention: "I am confessing; I am trying to redeem myself." There are possible neurological issues as well: Darger's repetition of religious acts, his continuous visits to mass, may be merely obsessional or mechanistic. All this begs the question: Is Darger merely imitating or is he responding to a genuine need? I will argue here, along with Dennett, that this difference is largely irrelevant—the need for redemption is itself an imitation, be it genetic or memetic, it is the *copying* of a behavioral trait (manifest as a need) that has been shown to have societal and individual value. Intention need not be present for the redemptive or transcendent patterning to occur; these patterns will occur because they are already processes inherent to transitioning physical, not to mention cultural, systems. As Serres says: "Transcendence is all there is [...]; it is a question of physics and not feelings, of nature and not cruel hallucinations. [...] It is literally revolution. [...] Or is it the evolution towards something else other than what it is" (*Genesis 11*).<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> I here restate that religion—a belief in God or gods, and the resultant rituals, thought processes, memetic forms that accompany such beliefs—is a human disposition *selected for* by evolution, the product of the accumulation of millions of years of evolutionary small change, and is present today as the pattern maintenance biases of the human brain and human culture. The "Mystical Germ" of William James may suffer a scientific reduction into Dean Hamer's "God Gene," but in the end it is effectively a survival gene that binds the species in stable groups based around service to a higher power, a power that *need not exist* for the selection bias to be effective. The point I am making is, despite whatever affective resonances religion takes on, the drive toward religious redemption is the result of purely physical phenomena.

<sup>239</sup> Serres equates transcendence with the physical dynamics of the world because, barring a state of entropic stasis, all systems are transitioning, be they molecular systems or systems of "thinking."

Inasmuch as redemption is a transcendent movement of mind, and mind is a physical effect, the redemptive urge is an iteration or ramification of the larger natural processes of generation, increase and change. Darger’s artistic production and his “redemptive purpose” imitates an agenda common to both culture and biology, and this purpose need not be achieved in the *declamation* of itself—action alone is sufficient.<sup>240</sup> For Darger, that action is the narrativizing of experience in the physical production of images and text (a memetic, as opposed to genetic, mimesis) that is perhaps the only kind of transcendental experience available to him.<sup>241</sup>

### **4.3 Penetration/Pain and the Spiritual Realm**

#### **4.3.1 Pain, Catholicism and the Violation of the Body**

Again, I return to Catholicism, as Darger’s primary exposure to any idea of redemption would be through the doctrine of incarnation and transmutation—God in the flesh, the flesh as route to the spirit, the transfiguration of the Host, etc.—all of which amount to a purposeful confusion or conflation of the spiritual and material realm.<sup>242</sup> In fact, Catholicism can be said to facilitate or guide redemption directly through the engagement of the physical via the following paths: 1) the violation of limits and the related

transformational nature of pain; and 2) enumeration as a spiritual act. In regard to the first of

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<sup>240</sup> I recall what Roberta Culbertson says about trauma and transcendence: that the feeling of transcendence in humans may be an evolutionary mechanism selected for as a means of deflecting attention away from pain, or of transfiguring pain into a kind of pleasure (“Embodied Memory” 176-178). After all, this is what the chemical system does when it releases endorphins into the blood stream, creating what could be interpreted as a spiritual effect from a physical cause.

<sup>241</sup> Notwithstanding Dennett’s contention that all religion is memetic repetition, if Darger was indeed autistic, his notion of redemption may well be little more than imitative behavior due to a compromised subjectivity.

<sup>242</sup> It is worthwhile to remember that the Christian concept of the “Incarnate Word” is perhaps an ideal vehicle for the autistic, in that their conception of language may already be largely concrete.

these paths, we can look to the importance of Christ's wounds. In the Western tradition,<sup>243</sup> the basis for the equation between the wound and transcendence lies in the iconography of Christ's Passion, the central image of which is the body nailed to what Alan Watts calls the Tree of Life, or *axis mundi*, at the crossroads of time and space (159-163). The Tree of Life is generally figured as the Cross, which itself is a threshold sign. The Cross is equivalent to the infinite thickness of *time and space* (Weil, *Gravity and Grace* 81),<sup>244</sup> which are measureable dimensions in the physical universe. Crucifixion, then, is to be nailed, fixed to the material and temporal world *in the only manner that allows for the transcendence of that world*—i.e., via the very bodily wounds caused by the fixation. We can read this “fixation” as our dependence upon or enslavement to corporal reality. The wound works this wonder of transcendence (escape) through the *extension* of subjectivity as an effect of the violation of the body's integrity. In fact, Watts suggests that the five wounds of the Savior are metaphorically analogous to the five senses (162), by which the physical world enters the body and is transformed from “thing-in-itself” to “thing-as-we-know-it,” or, to put it somewhat more simply, from objective to subjective phenomena.<sup>245</sup>

As mentioned, Darger's interest in the violation of physical limits, in the turning of the inside outside, is everywhere apparent in his work. It is most obvious in the paintings (see Figs. 15, 16), several of which depict crucifixion scenes with the eviscerated bodies of girls. Bonesteel emphasizes the idea that Darger is: “A Catholic artist [working] firmly

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<sup>243</sup> There is an Eastern tradition of aestheticism (Hinduism, Buddhism) that also seeks transcendence through the mortification of the flesh.

<sup>244</sup> Weil stresses the significance of the Cross in similar terms of corporeal presence, describing the Cross as equivalent to the distance between God (eternal and wholly other) and man (*Gravity and Grace* 80–81).

<sup>245</sup> In general, the “thing-in-itself,” means the thing as it exists “by itself,” completely separate from our impression of it or our knowledge of it. This is opposed to the “thing-for-us,” which denotes the “phenomenon,” or the thing *as it appears* to us. The analogy with objective and subjective experience will be developed as we move forward.

within the tradition that has highly prized the physicality of experience—the Word, as it were, made flesh.” Bonesteel goes on to point out how this physicality can be found in 15<sup>th</sup> Century paintings of martyrs, etc., as well as “in the child-slave disembowelings of Henry Darger’s art” (30-31). These disembowelings are of a piece with the general theme of evisceration of both bodies and buildings in *My Life* as I have discussed it in Chapter One. Take, for example, the following passages:

We went on through the scene of awful devastation. Many houses, wooden or brick. Low or tall, remaining looked as almost completely torn down by men wreckers, with all the debris of all kinds flung far and wide. The wall of one brick structure four stories high and hundred and fifty feet wide, was totally blown off and even away resembling a bizarre interior of play doll house.

Yet too the rest of the structure behind this was a shambles. In this neighbored neighborhood my wooden houses were literally reduced into mere scattered timbers or torn inside what was left of the walls.

And wall paper was stripped of these walls. I even saw a small part of a brick wall that was left of a church.

A pointed end of some church steeple was also driven part way through a window of what was left of the fire station. We came upon what was left on one building, wooden or brick I do not know, its three section of walls resembling pieces of carbo-car board paper, partly standing, but perilously altd also with a mess of debris and broken timber of all sizes around it.

Survivors were there looking for what they could find of what was left of their belongings.

There were no vandals here. Curiosity seekers and others having no business here were very strictly barred, by many armed guards, only rescuers showing passes were admitted.

One building which had been a long wood wooden structure had only one section of first floor wall standing, one section of wall with wall papers stripped clean, and wall paper of beautiful design left on the other.

Also all about this shambles lay strewn broken timber of all sizes, and shattered debris.

One other structure close by had one section of a wall standing with <sup>a</sup> window in it, with a section leaning against it in a very steep slant. Debris of all sizes was strewn all about it. Pepe People were here too also searching for lost property. Two walls of this building also slanted very dangerously against the other. but also ripped apart, almost into mere broken boards. We saw also a good ~~new~~ number of one or two story brick houses or what was left of them, twisted in all sorts of crazy shapes with parts at a perilous slant though still standing.

Some part of one of them was all tumbled down, as if dynamited.

Scattered timbers all sorts of debris around here also. One two story wooden house had the remaining walls though still somewhat intact, literally gutted of all that was inside the rooms.

The lower floor though battered remained.

The whole large roof of this structure lay two hundred feet away amidst other debris.

How in the world could this tornado do this all in one minutes and sixteen seconds? Tell me that, What wild force and strength it surely had. (270-274)

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Even a fire hose was seen wrapped around a portion of a mazed buildings, wall like a huge long snake, with the nozzle directed towards you. A serious, but yet funny sight. It was wrapped so tight we couldn't all together prying it could not pull it loose. Many buildings were nothing but widely scattered timbers and other debris in the territory. One which had been a large wooden structure three story high was left with a one story room wall, with a window showing to its right, and a another shattered portion of a one story wall leaning in a great slant against it.

Wreckage around it from other shattered houses lay ~~tree~~ three to four feet deep.

Mostly timber, broken furniture, all sorts of clothing bedding and even broken bed steads and large shattered looking glasses.

A large hall grandfathers clock was among the wreckage of the shattered house spoken off and I heard it had been flung there by the twister.

What was left of one three story story <sup>buildings</sup> though badly and totally shattered showed amidst and above a large window of wreckage.

Somewhat near it was what was left of a three story building of brick, a one and half story junk pile with twisted timber and other debris around it. In these places we had found nothing but dead bodies of men, women and children. No survivors, and all badly mangled.

It was a horror beyond imagination. We saw also where many blocks of all sorts of buildings were all level scattered der debris timbers and the like. Later when I lived and still live in Chicago, Ive seen pictures of what tornadoes did in Omaha Murphysboro, Melrose park and also in Oak Lawn and Belvidere.

Chester brown just looked that but somewhat much worse. I cant exactly say how wide the path of devastation was in this medium city, but south of its sweep only thirty houses were missed including he barn with the windmill framework wrapped tightly around it. All sorts of wreckage or debris had various furniture mattress, bedsteads, broken chairs, and couches mingled with it. including roofs and side of houses, a verible conglomeration of debris. We finally decided to go and see the demolished Sacred Heart Convent. It was on St Clare street. We arrived here to see a sight we never expected.

The upper two stories of the four story building were gone, all scattered wreckage about the building, and I believe about three quarters length of its front, was all down in slanting ruins, as if it had been dynamited.

The destruction of this big brick building was far worse than reported.

And the floor of the rooms of the lower stories were down in sloping wreckage, and also a shambles.

Only the Chaple remained upright, but the big alter was topsy turvy and the tall candle sticks lying on he floor here and there. The pews were broken or splintered and the floor covered with debris from the building. The door of the tabernacle was intact.

The chapels pictured window, were gone however, and also the bell and its tower, Even an (earthquake) earthquake no matter how severe could do this.

All sorts of bedding nuns clothing were in the debris, even a number of the cornets the sisters wore on their head. (276-281)

Compare the above with the following descriptions, also from Book Two, of the destruction of the zoo in which the landscape is virtually littered with the bodies of animals that have been turned inside out.

Two tigers had the whole side of three window side of a wooden house lying down over them. A long sheaf or large splinter of glass had been driven through the head of one other tiger, whose teeth had also been knocked out of its mouth and its mouth badly broken at its jaw. Twenty six animals killed and mangled.

One leopard had a crushed in chest, with its organ protruding from what had been its belly and a long thin stick sticking through its left eye.

The other animals had their bodies torn apart or ripped open, heads crushed and thick pieces of wood also sticking through their bodies. [...]

Those in the animal house though had not torn mangled bodies or any objects sticking through them. (391-393)

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What animals remained lay dead, bodies ripped aparte twisted into horrid horrid shapes, with some having their bodies wide open and entrails all completly out, lying on the ground from them.

Six per cent of the big bears had all their thick hairy skin ripped complete-completely off and with badly smashed bodies. (398)

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Dead or injured they had all been found without one excepton stripped clearly naked of all their clothes, women and girls with long hair were "scalped" by the tornado and skin torn of their bodies. Many had severe eye

injuries, some broken arms. And all the injuries that can be fall tornado victims.

A good number of dead women, men and children were found disemboweled, or whole fronts of their bodies torn away by the awful force of that “Damn Shroud”. (404-405)<sup>246</sup>

It is important to note that one of the functions of the tornado and its funnel/tongue is to perpetrate this rupture or wounding of the physical world (i.e., bursting things open, turning bodies and buildings inside out), perpetually turning what is whole into a fragmentation of parts. I would further note that evisceration exposes the molar *quality* of a thing as being the product of molecular *quantity*. The skin of the animal, the clothing and skin of people, the brick façade of a building, the wallpaper of a room—these are stripped away, shredded, until number spills out as fragments of lumber, wire, bolts, bits, guts, bones—the real quantity of existence. What I wish to highlight here is that the *whole* always hides a state of *fragmentation*. This concept will become important later when we discuss Darger’s theological dynamic. For now, I return to the experience of this transition (whole to fragments, molar to molecular) as pain. I have already discussed the idea of pain in its role as a compromising neurological event in regards to Self. I will now discuss here the theological/spiritual effects of the experience of pain. The experience of pain is directly related to the violation of limits, in that pain opens the biological body out to the physical environment, making limits felt and known. Physical integrity and separate identity are both compromised in pain, with the possible spiritual result being that individual experience is devalued and humankind is shown to be all of a single flesh; the individual is porous to the

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<sup>246</sup> I call attention in the above passages to the imagery of piercing the flesh by glass and sticks, which can be read both as crucifixion nails and as instruments of sexual aggression. While I do not wish to dwell on the sexual overtones of this stripping-of-the-skin and piercing-of-the-flesh, it is important to remember, as has already been mentioned, that Darger associates rape with evisceration.

multiplicity, the pain of one man is akin to the pain of everyman, and the frailty of human corporeal existence is thus turned into a spiritual opportunity.

#### 4.3.2 Darger's Pains as Self-Definition

I would like to examine more closely the connection of pain to the spiritual realm in relation to Darger's writing. As mentioned, Darger's attention to pain can also be detected in his diaries (1968-1972), which are roughly concurrent to the writing of *My Life*. That Darger attaches an importance to the pain he feels in these instances is evident in two ways: 1) *Pain is often given a causal role in the related event*, initiating an action, most notably blasphemy or penance. "You ask why? Its because of the pain, I shook my fist towards heaven, meaning it for God" (155); "The knee pain at night I must confess and am not ashamed to tell of it. I actually shook my fist towards heaven"(160); "You I suppose would have been ashamed of me because of the terrible language and blasphemous words I said constantly during this pain" (166). In addition, pain causes Darger to sin: "I have committed sins because of [...] especially all sorts of childhood pains and miseries" (165). Sometimes the causality is oddly reversed, and it is Darger's state of mind that causes the pain as in this March 29, 1968 diary entry: "Leg pain still continues because of my ill humor" (qtd. in Bonesteel 250). Pain is also often the harbinger of bad events such as being drafted: "during the bad pain of my knee at night I had forgot to mention that in the early part of September 1917 I was drafted into the army" (158).<sup>247</sup>

In the tradition of Christian sainthood, pain does cause a connection to God, but for Darger this connection is mostly an angry one. We can note in the above quotations that the

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<sup>247</sup>. Admittedly, the causal link here is largely a function of missing or mistaken punctuation, but his mentioning of the draft directly following the night of pain is a fact in his thought process.

pains are often of an unknown cause—he knows where they are located but not *why* he has them—indeed, they are mysterious to the point of being a metaphysical condition. We can also notice that pain allows Darger to bring up the saint identification, i.e., pointing to his “sorry” saintliness, his cross of suffering: “To go back to my cross of suffering I would not bear I firmly believe There is no one not even you my reader who would Im sure, who would put up with such pains, my past severe toothaches, face pains, and side pains and other things I don’t find time to mention here” (160).

**Table 3: “Pain” Variants by Book**

<b>Book One</b>	<b>Book Two</b>	<b>Book Three</b>	<b>Book Four</b>
<b>Pain 30</b>	<b>Pain 24</b>	<b>Pain 16</b>	<b>Pain 21</b>
<b>Pains 11</b>	<b>Pained 1</b>	<b>Painful 4</b>	<b>Painds 1</b>
	<b>Painful 5</b>	<b>Painfully 4</b>	<b>Pained 1</b>
	<b>Painfully 4</b>	<b>Pains 2</b>	<b>Painful 1</b>
	<b>Pains 4</b>		<b>Painfully 8</b>
<b>1/619</b>	<b>1/3,344</b>	<b>1/13,608</b>	<b>1/11,915</b>

Perhaps most importantly, *Darger remembers pain, dwells upon it*; it is in fact one of the underlying themes of *My Life*, written in his later years when he was, as mentioned, subject to actual, present, physical pains.

Pain plays a transitional structural role in *My Life*, as Darger’s interest in pain is continued, *extended* into the “fictional” books in the excess attention given to physical violation—wounds, pain, and general destruction. Thus, the real can be said to rupture into the fictional in a painful way. In fact, we might with justification, read all of *My Life* as a narrative of pain displaced into the ritual of the continually (re)written catastrophe. This brings me back to *My Life* as a spiritual work. Christian hagiographies are often full of physical suffering. Both physical violation and pain are related in the Catholic doctrine of

incarnation and the mortification of the flesh. Pain renders the world as a flood of unorganized sensation. What I would like to highlight here is that the violation of limits, which is a major theme of *My Life*, can be related to an *increase* of sensory experience, an unwelcome *multiplication* of empirical uptake brought under control by enumeration. Thus, the ritualistic repetition of excess (scenes of excess, scenes of writing as excess) applies rhythm and pattern as a means of controlling (reading) excess sensation, which brings me to the next section.

### 4.3.3 Counting Chaos into Order

As violation and pain are subjects of Darger's writing, so is number. MacGregor tells us that not only did Darger keep meticulous track of materials and corpses throughout *The Realms*, the subject matter is, in fact, largely made of lists accompanied by numbers that are often absurdly large and unrealistic to the point "they are no longer believable" (104). Formal lists such as these in *The Realms*, are not part of *My Life*, although we do get frequent informal lists delivered as narratives.<sup>248</sup> And unlike *The Realms*, Darger is, in *My Life*, less given to statements of absolute numbers and more given to vagaries—hundreds, thousands, millions, quadrillions, zillions. We see this in later accounts of tornado damage,<sup>249</sup> as well as in descriptions of the storm itself.

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<sup>248.</sup> An example of this would be the passage describing the collection of lumber, etc., cited in the last chapter (see Appendix G).

<sup>249.</sup> A modern-day equivalent might be the common journalistic practice of describing storm damage in terms of dollars. Hurricane Katrina is measured by the fact that it caused \$96 billion dollars' worth of damage (foxnews.com.). This is, of course, almost meaningless except that it uses an ungraspable large number to stand-in for a number of other types of "costs." Often this kind of quantification is only vaguely separated from the human/emotional cost.

The fascination with increase and with number is continuous across Darger's works. In *My Life* it is introduced thematically at the very start, in what I have called *The Prologue* (see Appendix A). If read as part of *My Life*,<sup>250</sup> *The Prologue* suggests two important themes: the first is the idea of prophecy as represented by the Bible, and the second is the importance of number. Darger attributes a numerical importance to each of the books he names: "1 The act of the Apostles has 28 chapters./ 2 The life and Epistles of St Paul (has) The Apostile to the Romans has Sixteen Chapters" (see Appendix A). The manner of presentation suggests it is the number of chapters in each book, and not the content, that somehow signifies their importance. This emphasis parallels what I have called the association of spirituality and number, the conflation of symbolic resonance and the numerical resonance of ritual repetition. Therefore, to begin, I would like to state that numeration has two functions in Darger's text: 1) as ritual; and, 2) as generation.

#### **4.3.3.1 Ritual Numeration**

The idea of ritual numeration relates to Catholicism in the same manner as incarnation and mortification of the flesh; it is another physical route to spiritual existence. We see this most evidently in the quantification of penance by *number*, i.e., the number of "Hail Marys" and "Our Fathers" prescribed as penance, or the recitation of the rosary, which is accompanied by the fingering (numberless counting) of the rosary beads. Such acts, which are ritualistic and repetitive, are likely to validate the equating of number and repetition to redemption, and it is this use of ritual numeration as redeeming act that can provide a window for further understanding Darger's sense of writing as ritual. As mentioned, much of Darger's later life was highly ritualistic, a habitual going through the

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<sup>250</sup> See Introduction for my justification of including *The Prologue* material as part of the text of *My Life*.

motions of meaning—be it collecting, going to mass, rolling up balls of string, or writing. We see this in his Dairies (1968-1972), which describe each day in terms of a sameness, which is given added meaning through numeration or counting:

Monday April 1, 1968

No April Jokes. *Five masses* including the Miraculous Medal Novena. Over tanglement of twine, difficult to do. Some severe tantrums and swear words. Sorry saint I trule am. I should be ashamed of myself, but am not. (qtd. in Bonesteel 251)

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Tuesday 16, 1968

Had trouble again with twine. Mad enough to wish I was a bad tornado. Swore at God. Yet go to *three morning masses*. Only coled down by late afternoon. Am I a real enemy of the cross or a very very Sorry Saint? Used abusive words at Angels and Saints (not paints). (qtd. in Bonesteel 251)

Though these repeating activities may be generated by any of the neurological conditions mentioned in Chapter Two, they are ritualistic nonetheless in their devotional quality, a fact that is emphasized by Darger's obsessive recording of these activities, preserving them in concrete form, thus granting them a more than merely temporal importance. It is my contention that writing for Darger was not only of a piece with these other activities, but that its main importance to him was as a ritual, something that, like counting, could be redundantly re-engaged as a self-sustaining type of nourishment, a definitive act by which he could excessively write, or "overwrite" himself into "being himself."<sup>251</sup> An act or event gains symbolic importance by being done or acted over again and again—the repetition augmenting or even establishing the symbolic import. However, when the numerical import is too closely associated with, or supersedes, the symbolic import, the ritual of numeration may be carried to absurd extremes as a means of establishing "meaning."

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<sup>251</sup> This is likely true for any writer to some degree.

### 4.3.3.2 Generative Numeration

Numeration also functions as a means of generating the text. The following examples are taken from those used in Chapter 3 to illustrate 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancy. I use them again here to demonstrate the apprehension of the power of the tornado via enumerative metaphors. Note that numbers are often combined in phrases that use verbs of increase and motion: “into a *thousand* conflicting cloudy channels ~~also~~ all in the most fren frenzied convulsions, while the cloud connecting with the neck was gyration in ~~geag~~ gigantic and *unnumerable* vortices and all whirling and plunging”; “earsplitting howling more like *thousands* of wolves in one single voice below, such as even a *hundred* mighty cataract of Niagaras”; “the thunderous howl like bedlam seemed to be a *thousand* blasts from whistles all joined and then reverberating over the town” (my emphasis). The question arises as to why these descriptions occur over and over again, and I would answer that they serve as a text-generating device, a kind of generative enumeration that expands itself in the repetition of narrative elements, generating more text, which in turn generates more text. Instead of saying, “I heard a similar story from numerous survivors,” Darger actually tells the tale over again numerous times. Another aspect of generative enumeration is evident in Darger’s multiplication of self-similar characters and situations, mentioned as a type of 7<sup>th</sup> order redundancy in the Chapter Three. We might note especially his reproduction *of himself* in the various Henry Dargers of the narrative, a process, which coincides with the general reproduction of other characters.<sup>252</sup> Whether this multiplication is a rendering of different parts of his psyche, or merely a sort of repetition of a single character who mutates, it demonstrates that Darger’s narrative technique includes the multiplication of entities via an

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<sup>252</sup> Darger does this often by merely repeating, switching around or recombining parts of previous character names.

organic process that is a sort of splitting and recombining. The narrative produces more witnesses who in turn produce more narrative, which produces more witnesses and all of it producing the repeating transformational imagery, which verges on the biblically prophetic and the sublimely transformational.

As author/witness, Darger is most effective as this enumerator, a counter of (and thus accounting for) the artifacts of the dynamic of catastrophe and renewal. The enumerative narrative contains or controls chaos in prose,<sup>253</sup> collecting and re-collecting facts and artifacts into a knowable world of narrative. Inasmuch as the narrative fails to do this in any resolute manner, it continues. In this sense, Sweetie Pie (a figure for Darger himself) is of primary importance in her role as the transforming motor of the text, facilitating the dynamic of rupture, increase, numeration and transmutation. Like Darger the author/artist, Sweetie Pie physically fragments an ordered world, reorganizes it temporarily as vortex, and then drops it into a disorganized state that offers the possibility of rebirth. I will look at this process more thoroughly at the end of this chapter; for now I would like to turn the discussion to the transformational nature of increase. Sweetie Pie, both in her action and in her recurrence, is the figure of a specific type of ritual—the accumulation of excess and the perpetuation of increase. She is the engine of a critical sublimity that can be seen as analogous to a *critical mass* by which she (her image) performs her function as the sign of Darger's subjectivity.

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<sup>253</sup> One of the causes of this chaos is physical pain. It is important to remember that the story is one of destruction and pain, of evisceration and spillage, and that the volumes of fragmentation produced by the storm are the product of pain, of its breaking down the structures of containment, be they buildings or human bodies.

## 4.4 Critical Mass and the Mathematical Sublime

### 4.4.1 From Number to Phenomena

Writing about *The Realms*, John MacGregor makes the point that the reader and indeed the author is overwhelmed by this excess accumulation:

Too many battles, too many destructive natural events, too many cities besieged or destroyed, too many lists of dead and wounded with their impossible huge numbers, overwhelm the perceptual apparatus of the reader, who is buried beneath an avalanche of overwhelmingly obsessive and oppressive detail. (*In the Realms* 107)

I have been suggesting that this “overwhelming” quality may actually be the point of the text: it is Darger’s drive to overwhelm (his reader/self), to maintain the narration at the critical threshold—that place where transition might occur. To restate this: What Darger is writing toward, what he is collecting and recollecting linguistically toward, is a kind of critical mass by which his physical environment produces him *as a subject at the threshold*.

To understand how the creation of subjectivity in critical mass might be possible, we need to look at subjectivity as a product of quantity and not quality, or more accurately, we need to look at quality (qualities, *qualia*) as perceived phenomena produced by quantity—the interaction and dynamics of numbers. For example, the phenomenon we perceive as heat is, in fact, a difference of quantity, in this case the speed of moving molecules, which may then seem to produce qualities of pain, comfort, etc. Such an interpretation assumes a brain operating fundamentally as a computation/ quantification device, a matrix of yes/no switches, the functioning of which (the accumulation of millions of minute “decisions”) produces both the world *and* the subject who “knows” the world. The computational brain (that which registers data received through the senses) produces as an effect, a phenomenological mind (that which registers phenomena), which in turn produces a “self”

as the ground or assumed center for the integrated perception of those phenomena. Ray Jackendoff, in *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*, sums up this process: “Every phenomenological distinction is caused by/supported by/ projected from a corresponding computational distinction” (24).

Jackendoff cites the cognitive psychologist George Miller, who writes: “[the] fundamental aspects of the real world of our experience are adaptive interpretations of the really real world of physics,” leading Miller to conclude that, “the elements of the computational mind are sufficient to explain the character or quality of experience” (25).<sup>254</sup> While this argument may seem reductive, it is enlightening in its suggestion that the mechanical dynamics (physics) of what we perceive as thought are re-imaged or repackaged as we move up the organizational levels of cognition—for instance, physics to stamp collecting. Dennett has speculated that *qualia* (the qualities of perceived phenomena) are in fact nothing but processed data producing a *repeatable*, thus *learned* experience, which is precisely that “feeling” we associate with *qualia* (*Consciousness* 368–411).<sup>255</sup> In the same vein, Ramachandran suggests that the feeling of an integral “self” is, in many ways, equivalent to the experience of *qualia*; they are, essentially, two sides of the same coin (*A Brief Tour* 96–105).

I will now draw together several strands of argument that have occurred in this study—one of these is the idea of the self as being analogous to a quality, or *qualia*. It is “like something” to *experience* the color red; it is “like something” to exist; it is like

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<sup>254</sup>. By the real world of our experience, Miller means the phenomenological world of subjective experience. I would suggest then, that this “real world” corresponds to the “thing as it is perceived,” and the “really real world” corresponds to the “thing in itself.”

<sup>255</sup>. Also see the chapter “What RoboMary Knows” in Dennett, *Sweet Dreams* (103–131).

something to be a somebody, to be a “self,” to experience one’s unique “self” as existing. As noted, redundancy acts as a bulwark against the chaotic fragmentation of this experience; the more redundant the data accumulated (collected) and circulated (re-collected), the stronger or more stable the feeling of subjectivity. I am suggesting that at some point in the accumulation and repetition of data by the computational brain, a *critical mass* is arrived at by which a metarepresentation, or shorthand signifier, is produced, this being the assumed self, the central experiencer.<sup>256</sup> Whether it is failure, fatigue or facility that brings this about, the metarepresentation eliminates the need to re-accumulate the data each time a particular need for centrality arises. The metarepresentation is thus the “short-hand” aftermath of critical computational mass; it is produced by a transition, a phase change, from computation of “really real” physics to the perceived or “real” phenomena of the world. What is important here is the dependence of the real on a mathematic of accumulation and repetition, and this allows us to look at Darger’s writing in the context of the mathematical versus the dynamic sublime.

My intention in this discussion is to illustrate how Darger describes and repeats his catastrophic enumeration as a way of achieving transcendent (redeeming) experience of a particular sort—that of the sublime. The sublime, as aesthetic experience, functions at least

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<sup>256</sup> Ramachandran makes a similar equation between self and metarepresentation (*A Brief Tour* 96-105). A metarepresentation can be defined as a “representation of mental representations.” It is related to Theory of Mind, in that the latter is a metarepresentation or a “representation of mind” within the mind. Jackendoff suggests that the subject, the self, and God, are all meta-representational regulatory ideas, structures, fabricated systems, if you will, that allow us to experience a world. There is a certain “dog chasing its own tail” quality to this definition. I recall here Dennett’s suggestion that subjectivity is an assumption based on an assumption based on an assumption, i.e., an accumulation of assumptions in which it is assumed subjectivity exists. We can see in this circularity however, the form of the vortex, assumptions swirling around an empty center.

partly as a threat,<sup>257</sup> exposing the fragility of the metarepresentational “self” as it is positioned in relief against that which could destroy or negate it. This imagined loss of physical and psychological boundaries and a subsequent reassuring return to these boundaries is experienced as a self-enhancement (see 4.4.2 below). Darger pursues this effect in each of his repetitions of the catastrophic event: not only does he create and maintain a version of subjectivity via his excessive and pressurized writing, but that same excess simultaneously threatens what it creates.<sup>258</sup> Numeration is part of this unconscious strategy, acting both to generate and to subvert (by excess) the text. Inasmuch as text and self are linked, both are generated and subverted by volume in a paradoxical movement—self-annihilating, self-organizing—a movement that Darger perceives as a mystery, the mystery of his being, the mystery of life.

#### 4.4.2 Self-Enhancement via the Failure of Representation

Kant defines the difference between the dynamic and the mathematical sublime as the difference between the apprehension of power vs. the apprehension of extension. In the mathematical sublime, the mind confronts an object (nature) whose *extreme magnitude* challenges the imagination to apprehend it as a temporal series of discrete intuitions, a “mathematic,” which may be enumerative or, as I will contend, it may be narrative. In any case, “driven to a point of excess,” the overextended imagination is forced to recognize its inadequacy, but in doing so it is awakened by its participation, to a simultaneous

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<sup>257</sup> Kant calls the feeling of the sublime as imagining the point of excess, which is “like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself” (107). It is an aesthetic experience because it requires placing oneself imaginatively in a position in which one’s being is threatened.

<sup>258</sup> One aspect of this threat is repetition unto sameness, unto the point of no meaning, repetition as a form of the subversion of meaning.

transcendental pleasure, and is *therefore enhanced*.<sup>259</sup> It is in part due to our *inability* to estimate the magnitude of things that a “supersensible faculty” is awakened within us.<sup>260</sup> The point being that it is the rationalization of a failure that leads to the heightened, enhanced, transcendental feeling of self.

In Darger's *My Life*, the repetitive piling up of storm and damage descriptions is meant to measure an *event*, but as he admits, such attempts are doomed to fail. I contend that this event that Darger is measuring, is a *fabula*. The *fabula*, in the manner in which I am using the term, is analogous to the Kantian “thing-in-itself”; however, we could call it the “event-in-itself,”<sup>261</sup> inasmuch as the “event-in-itself” indicates an existence outside of any subject’s perception of the event. Here I will explain the analogy. According to Kant, the thing-in-itself cannot be presented *except as the inadequacy of the attempt to present it*. The same is true of the *fabula* in the sense that I am using the term—all attempts to tell it must fall short. The infinite details of chronology cannot be known. This inadequacy or failure of representation is everywhere evident in Darger’s continual admissions that language (and numbers are language in his usage) can never give an appropriate account. I have emphasized Darger’s awareness of this in the following quotes.

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<sup>259</sup> The sublime is a “cast of mind” in which the mind “feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas” (Kant *Judgment* 104). I am equating this elevation with enhancement. The expansiveness of sublime experience is an effect of this process. The self comes about at a critical mass, but it is also maintained by that critical mass, thus the greater the mass, the greater the self-enhancement. We can associate this enhancement with pleasure, with Wordsworth’s “a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply infused,” (“Lines Written above Tintern Abbey,” lls. 95, 96).

<sup>260</sup> This suprasensible faculty could be related to the supra narrator Henry Prime, a meta-self that is ungraspable, and must continually be reduced or apprehended in concrete reproductions.

<sup>261</sup> Kant was referring to the world in its existence independent of the mind, the noumenon as opposed to the phenomenon, the former being the world as it exists outside of our perception, and the latter being all that we can know of the world. Schopenhauer says, “Thing in itself signifies that which exists independently of our perception, that which actually is” (*Essays and Aphorisms* 55). I refer to the thing-in-itself as within the realm of absolute material existence, outside of subjective perceptions.

Our houses were directly in its path absolutely first but the crazy shroud turned away from us and hit the main part of the town like an immense explosion. *I cannot describe the confusion* of simultaneous deafening sounds of loud wolf like howling and all sorts of ripping crackling and slamming and banging sounds from all buildings being torn up. (245-246 my emphasis)

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*The ordinary accounts of these sorts of cloud vortexis had been by no prepared me for what I saw. That of a tornado expert which I once read over and over and which is perhaps the most circumstantial of any cannot impact the faintest conception either of the fierce magnificence or of the horror of the scene or of the wild bewild enbewildering sense of the tornado descriptions which confounds the beholder.* I tell you fellow, I'm not sure from what point of view the writer in question on tornadoes surveyed them nor at what time but it could neither have been descriptions of the fury of tornadoes that takes on that crazy ball or globular form at its bottom nor during its descent towards the ground.

There are some passages of their descriptions nevertheless which may be quoted for their details although in their effect it is exceedingly feeble in conveying an impression of this crazy wild of this awe inspiring spectacle. (519-520 my emphasis)

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*It was now impossible to describe the howling and bellowing of the tornado* as it rushed past my farm towards the northeast. (526 my emphasis)

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Of that train wrecks where two of the steel coaches were telescoped *words cannot depict the horror of it all nor can mind concieve the real loss.* (754 my emphasis)

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Awful fright distress deprivation and violent death by this storm affecting countless of our people in these cities property *loss beyond estimating all that the imagination can conjure from these words and more still* hung over the American public like a persistant nightmare filled with unusal unnamed horrors and has and is still strong the whole world with profound profound symathy for the victims and the crowds of waiting people who lost all in the razed convent (1058-1059 my emphasis)

Note the constant if clichéd insistence that these events are beyond representation.<sup>262</sup> For

Darger, this sentiment is more than a figure of speech, and his repetition of the sentiment

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<sup>262</sup> Admittedly, Darger is speaking of the emotional impact of the events as being unrepresentable, and not of the chronological details. But the latter is what causes the former. The inability of scientific explanations to mitigate the emotional effect links them in terms of the failure of representation.

(via the redundant orders of representation) scaffolds this meaning and provides him with a pleasure of his own enhanced, supersensible faculty. It is largely this awareness of the failure of writing that keeps him writing—a pressure to represent the unrepresentable.

We see here a similarity to the unclaimed and unrepresentable experience of trauma that also generates a repetitive telling that circles around but does not actually “tell.” This convergence of trauma and sublimity is further cemented in the metaphor of monstrosity common to both the discourse of trauma and of horror. The horror, the monstrosity of the Sweetie Pie event and its aftermath is an example of “the unrepresentable that clamors for representation [...] *that which exceeds language but provokes speech*” (Gomel xxviii).<sup>263</sup> What is left, or what is created in this gap, is an experience of mathematical sublimity, the attempt and failure of the units of measure and a subsequent enhancement of mind—a gaining of, or regaining of self—most often as action taken, the attempt to gain affective authority. To be an author is a means of claiming one form of authority over existence via the written word, the book: to author monstrous books is to contain monstrous existence.

This approach to the self, as being equivalent to representing the unrepresentable, is similar to the approach to cosmos. It attempts to apprehend a reality (*fabula*, event-in-itself), which is in fact beyond representation. In both cases, the inadequacy points to a reality beyond the subject by which the subject may feel him/herself elevated, making the sublime a desirable experience. This is a device often indulged by religious texts, and while there are examples in the Western tradition (Genesis, Exodus), I am thinking of the Eastern Tradition

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<sup>263</sup> Gomel is citing Lyotard in this statement. The metaphor of the monster is relevant to Sweetie Pie in a variety of ways. Sweetie Pie is not only often referred to as a “wind crazed merciless monster,” but the physical narrative that contains her is also a monster. Darger’s books, which seek to contain such monstrosity, themselves are often called monstrous in their foreboding volume and disorder. In fact, Michael Bonesteel relates *The Realms* to the Frankenstein monster—a great composite beast made of scavenged parts lumbering forward. *My Life* is similar.

in which incomprehensible vast numbers come to represent the incomprehensible universe—they attempt to represent Mystery. The vastness of time and space is often presented in narrative form as a metaphor. For instance, Hinduism measures time in divisions called yugas, four of which make up one mahayuga, which covers a period of four million, three hundred and twenty thousand years. One thousand mahayugas make up one Kalpa, or complete world system. (Perhaps a world system can be thought of as the time between two big bangs).

In the Hindu cosmology, one “world system” is equivalent to just one day in the life of their supreme deity, Brahma. One hundred years of these days, or 311,000 billion human years, completes the supreme deities life span. However, according to the Hindu text, the Brahmavaivarta Purana, not even Brahma, the creator, can lord it over time: “Brahma follows Brahma; one sinks, the next rises, the endless series cannot be told. (Isker 181-182)<sup>264</sup>

The above quote is a mythological and literary attempt to apprehend mystery. Compare this passage with the following from *My Life*, as one of Darger’s witnesses attempts to “apprehend” the quantity of the debris left by the storm.

The debris dust manufactured by the supreme convulsion of the twister ~~whirl~~ was whirled around a good part of the Country by the mighty atmospheric current of the tornado discharged it as the vast cloud from the debris was swirled along and hurled far upward by this most incomparable tornado tlike the eruption of Krakatoa showed its presence in the most glorious manner by decking the sun in cloudless part of the sky in hues of unaccustomed splendor and beauty.

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<sup>264</sup> Another example would be the following:

Vishnu sleeps in the cosmic ocean, and the lotus of the universe grows from his navel. On the lotus sits Brahma, the creator. Brahma opens his eyes and a world comes into being, governed by an Indra. Brahma closes his eyes and a world goes out of being. The life of a Brahma is four hundred and thirty-two thousand years. When he dies the lotus goes back, and another lotus is formed and another Brahma.

Think of all the galaxies beyond galaxies in infinite space, each a lotus, with a Brahma sitting on it, opening his eyes, closing his eyes. And Indras? There may be wise men in your court who would volunteer to count the drops of water in the oceans of the world or the grains of sand on the beaches, but no one would count those Brahmin, let alone those Indras. (Campbell 63)

Of course it ~~dot~~ did not like Krakatoa caused this all over the world but over the northern United States. The blue color in the sky under ordinary circumstances is due they say to particles in the air and when the ordinary motion produced ~~V~~ by this tornado of the most extreme ~~vot~~ violence even the sun itself showed a blue tint.

Thus the progress of the great dust cloud was traced out by the extraordinary sky effects it produced and from the progress of the dust cloud we inferred the violent movements of the tornado upward whirlpool current which swirled it out far out and carried it along.

*[Nor] need it be thought that the quantities of material projected by the immense suction of the tornado should have been inadequate to produce effects of this central country world wide description.*

*Imagine that which was blown to the winds of Heaven by the supreme Convulsion of this tornado could be all recovered and swept into one vast heap. Imagine that the heap were to ~~hat~~ have its bulk measured by a vessel consisting of a cube a third of a mile long and two inches deep it has been estimated that even this prodigious vessel would have to be filled to the brim be for all the products of the tornado been measured. Do you believe it Mr. Darger or not?"*

"I do not know what to say about that kind of measure," I answered. "If the debris dust is only from Chesterbrown then all right! You must remember though Cheterbrown Jane Ville and so on not counting the Gleason Orphange and La Salle.

*I believe even as the papers say to imagine that this heap were to have its bulk measured by a vessel consisting of a cube one mile long one mile broad and sixty feet deep, it has been estimated that even this prodigious measure ~~or-i~~ in this prodigious vessel would have to be filled to the brim at least ten times before all the product of this awfully strong twister had been measured!"*

"Are you not exaggerating Henry?"

"I know no more about it than a hen knows about the Geographies of this country or the moon!" I answered. "I do not state this, the papers do. With the blind rage of this wild cat tornado no one had the slightest sort of suspicion that the top of this wind moske Strom *was the mightiest tempest ever known probably more than a hundred times stronger than that awful hurricane* which once laid so large a part of Calcutta India on the ground and slew so many of its inhabitants.

But it sucked up no dust nothing was preserved from this utmost fearful unbelievable destruction that this tornado produced. It is true as the papers say and still say no earthquake no matter how violent could do as much damage to there cities as happened from the Gleason Asylum to New York State.

When this great whirling wind crazed merciless monster had become charged with the dust it sucked up, then for the first and I may add for the only time it stood revealed to human vision. (3142-3145 my emphasis)

Moving as it does between a dynamic and mathematical sublimity, the above quote is typical in its description of the inability to estimate the power of Sweetie Pie. It is also typical, in its imagery of containment and failure (as signified by the prodigious vessel)<sup>265</sup> suggesting a sublime movement of mind. While Darger is not trying to present cosmic time as in the cited religious examples, his method of producing the incomprehensible of the sublime is similar. These types of images work partly because, based in physical numeration they point to a critical mass beyond which the mind cannot go without creating metarepresentations—the cosmos, eternity, body, self, etc.<sup>266</sup> My contention is that this excess is intimately linked to Darger’s self-generation, or rather what I would call an “anxiety of selfhood”<sup>267</sup> shared by his postmodern age. Remember that Mark Taylor suggests the “Disappearance of the Self” as one of the characteristics of postmodernity. This “disappearance” can be read as a diffusion, a breakdown of borders, which Taylor calls an “irreducible complexity and plurality.” In fact, what is especially apparent in the postmodern condition is that “there is no identity without repetition. Something can only be itself by doubling itself” (Taylor 48). The doubled self then redoubles, chasing existence down a rabbit hole of redoubling excess. Excess in representation, which is the *excess of things and their reproduction*, is intrinsic to being a subject, and *being a subject is always the reproduction of the idea of (or*

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<sup>265</sup> We could find an obvious analogy between Darger’s prodigious vessel and Noah’s Ark, which Darger may well have been referencing.

<sup>266</sup> Narrative is a technology (of story units) for this knowing, this being aware; it is the creation of sequential signs “in time,” a temporal dynamic of marks, sounds, objects, which want to point to something beyond itself—this something is a *fabula*, an “event-in-itself” which in turn suggests a “world-in-itself.” But as a form for the representation of something that cannot be known, narrative is bound to fail, leaving nothing for it but to tell the story again, or to continue to tell the story.

<sup>267</sup> This “anxiety of self,” or a decentered self, connects to the current discussion. As Marvin Minsky says, “whatever we mean to say we will not say exactly that” (qtd. in Dennett, *Consciousness* 242). And that, precisely, is the problem. What *we mean*, in some manner, is always “I”; I have an idea; I exist differently than you. This drive to establish “I,” indicates that underlying every act of language is an anxiety that “I,” in fact, may not exist, or at least cannot exist without “you,” or without audience.

*metarepresentation of) the subject.* If not properly contextualized within the accepted cultural codes, such excess appears as pressured language: hypergraphia or graphomania.<sup>268</sup>

We might correctly observe that whatever symbolic power Darger's text may intend to impart, its volume defeats it, rendering the rhetoric, the sublimity of its representations, diluted, even unreadable. However, the hypergraphic presence of the work, if seen as a form of narrative "mathematic," produces a perpetual *threshold* at which Darger attempts to resolve his crisis of subjectivity (however we choose to configure it: as neurological compromise, as postmodern anxiety, or as the root condition of humanity). Darger accomplished this through an organic/industrial productivity, resulting in a text, *My Life*, that bursts its bindings, a vor/text through which Darger strives to be more than he feels he is—an affective entity capable of initiating change or passage. Thus, I repeat, what Darger is writing toward, what he is collecting and recollecting his artifacts of language toward, is a kind of critical mass by which his physical environment, including his writing, will produce him *as a subject at the threshold*. The self/vortex of Sweetie Pie is thus primarily a *threshold* event; it is Darger's coming into "being" between two planes of non-being—birth and death, chaos and stasis, the material and the spiritual. If we look at how the narrative is structured, we can see how these limits take figurative form, which I will now address.

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<sup>268</sup> I would add here that the failure of language suggested by these terms is not strictly the province of the graphomane; it is a condition of self-conscious life seeking its transcendental being-in-itself in a world of concrete things, and configured aesthetically in the mind's "progress towards infinity," manifest as an ongoing accumulation of words and text as wreckage.

## 4.5 Of Wreckage and the Piecemeal Real: The Structural Vor/Text

### 4.5.1 A Tale of Two Landscapes

In order to understand how sublimity and transition function, we can look at *My Life*, as a tale of two landscapes, both of which might be considered sublime. The first landscape is the presence of the tornado itself—a confrontation with power and immensity. The second landscape is the scene of ruination that follows the tornado—a confrontation with the weakness or failure of the body and mind. In the one case, we are faced with the cause of devastation; in the other case, it is the devastation itself. Both attempt to represent what cannot be contained or represented in words, and both bring about a certain diminution of the individual before the specter of an overwhelming and indifferent nature, effectively confronting the human subject with the fact of its materiality. After describing the landscapes I will show how they parallel the dynamic and sedimental states of wreckage that exist in the text.

#### 4.5.1.1 The Landscape of Power

The first and perhaps more prominent landscape is that of the presence of the storm itself and its awe-inspiring power, beginning with the formation of the clouds and winds, and continuing on to the destruction of buildings and other structures. Often these descriptions depict the witness as being caught up in the storm, pulled into its dynamic. Large sections of *My Life* describe scenes of natural catastrophic turbulence that in some ways could be seen as narrative equivalents of a J.M.W. Turner painting.<sup>269</sup> Darger describes

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<sup>269</sup> Turner created many landscapes depicting meteorological turbulence, often combined with catastrophic destruction, and his paintings are often built around a vortex that has similarities to Darger's descriptions of the tornado Sweetie Pie. There are also comparisons to be made between the painted images of the two artists,

the storm in various ways, often concentrating on the movements of winds, clouds, and detritus within the vortex. In the following paragraphs, note that Darger is using what we might call the language of the sublime to describe the confrontation of man and vortex:

Also something strange now appeared to being as if my *magic midway* down from the main cloud near the now stationary funnel which was whirling now most fiercely forming on the outer bosom and near this *immense funnel vast in circumference* where it connected with its main cloud rear, *prodigious in length* from its parent cloud and whose perfectly smooth smooth sides not obscured by its upside umbrella might have been mistaken for ebony but for the most *bewildering rapidity* with which it spun around and for the *gleaming and ghastly radiance* it now shot forth, as the ~~ra~~ rays of the full sun from that circular wider upper churn which I never observed before *streaming in a golden glory* along the upper whirling wider portion, and far away across the under surface of the main rear cloud. (568-569, my emphasis)

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Clouds upon clouds of dashing own *onward rushing scattering wreckage* were seen moving in the craziest wildest and strangest manner admid the clouds clamor of all in what ~~looknow~~ looked now in the central *current of the immesurable tempest which carried along with it most mighty masses of all sorts of house fragments and all other debris that complete completely obscured the view* as far down down the ~~strek~~ stretch of *roaring flying wreckage* as you could see. The dark cloud above could see. The dark cloud above acted like the described big ~~whilpool whilpo~~ whilpool north of either Sweden or Norway. It droned a horrible ~~hum~~ hum. All tall brick building that could be seen were all them seen disappearing in swirling writhing clouds of mortar brick and thick dust before the force of this stupendous gale, others went swiftly away in dust and clouds of rubble with the ~~erazies~~ craziest sounds and many others after a momentary resistance were no more.

Some of the widest tallest trees were seen writhing bending swaying wildly before the wind with a *mingled mass of branches twigs and foliage being fiercely torn from them as to obscure the view*. The wind also roared like deafening thunder through theses trees. Many big trees snapped across, and still many others all these trees on the edge of the town after a few seconds of resistance either fell uprooted to the ground or were carried through the air swiftly as if the storm intended to use them as battering rams.

*Even the massive clouds of houses wreckage, dust and all sorts of the heaviest or lighter household goods, and bedding sides and whole fronts of houses, and big roofs and large section of flooring moved through the air was u sent flying in all directions and swiftly onward as to my sight, like a cloud of feathers, and on passing onward within a minute and sixteen minutes*

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especially a shared interest in mounting, coruscating cloud lines, winds, the turbulent seas, all of it heaping up, growing, ever-threatening.

revealed miles of towns length of leveled and shattered tangled wreckage which marked the path of the terrible most inconceivable tempest.

Between that last part of the minute as I timed by my watch, and the sixteen ~~min~~ seconds the tempest was added ten times worse and all of sudden as quick an explosion, it passed on, but the sudden calm was worse than the wind.

*All remaining wrecks of all the ~~r~~ brick buildings within sight went to fiercely flying pieces and clouds of debris and clouds of dust, as if they were big exploding bombshells.*

Wooden house fragments every where, appeared as myriads of explosion in this sudden calm, and trees remaining in *shattered skeletons seemed to dance the very shimmy*. All sorts of stuff was wrapped around them or hung ~~on~~ on what was left of their branches.

Even though the principal force of the mighty gale was now over and it grew more calm with the sound of the twister going off into the distance with at shroud still with ~~in~~ it in an extensive proportion, *millions of house fragments* small or big, clouds of twigs, tree branches, and all sort of clothing window frames and smaller ~~bar~~ boards and planks which had been brought from distant parts of the large and long town were to my view following the terrific blast as if drawn swiftly onward by some unseen mysterious power, near as strong as the twister. (488-492, my emphasis)

In the passages above, there is a concentration on movement, violence and fragmentation, and the attempt to describe the sensation often takes place as a kind of numeration. The following examples are taken from those used in Chapter 3 to illustrate 4<sup>th</sup> order redundancy; I use them again here to demonstrate the apprehension of the power of the tornado via enumerative metaphors such as thousands of howling dogs, thousands of train whistles etc.: “into a thousand conflicting cloudy channels ~~also~~ all in the most fren frenzied convulsions, while the cloud connecting with the neck was gyration in ~~geag~~ gigantic and unnumerable vortices and all whirling and plunging”; “awful loud earsplitting howling sounds, such a sound as you might imagine given out by many thousands of dogs or wolves”; “thunderous thundering howl like an army of dogs and like a thousand blasts from whistles”; “earsplitting howling more like thousands of wolves in one single voice below, such as even a hundred mighty cataract of Niagaras”; “the thunderous howl like bedlam

seemed to be a thousand blasts from whistles all joined and then reverberating over the town.”<sup>270</sup>

Confronted with the tornado’s dynamic of number and movement, witnesses often experience a temporary loss of self as part of the sublime experience, as we can see in this particular narrator: “At first I was too much confused to observe anything too accurately. The general burst of terrific grandeur was all that I and my son beheld When I did recover myself a little from *this uncanny sight* however my gaze came instinctively upward because of a new *appalling sound*” (520, my emphasis). In other passages Darger writes:

If you had never seen this twister before, you could never have formed no *idea of the confusion of my mind* occasioned by the awful myriads of bedlam and roar, and all the noise of the racket of of millions of wreckage debris continually flung ~~toget~~ together, among and against each other. (560 my emphasis)

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‘It’s all right he said, Well all that worse noise now going on almost blinded, deafen, and strangled us, *and seemed to take away from me and my son all power of further movement, or reflection.* (561 my emphasis)

There are many other examples of this effect: “Never shall I forget *the sensations of awe terror horror and admiration* which I gaze at the twister when for a minute it seemed from the awful speed of its whirl to cam come to a complete standstill” (568); “The strange cloud, “instead of alarming the foolish people fascinated them” (3054). The chaos and the dynamic of the tornado seems to draw the witnesses into this state of fascination by attracting them: “The distant tornado did it by its strange attraction,” and the people “were stunned by the awful suddenness of the passing disaster and stood rooted to the ground” (3107). One witness admits: “It was like the sky was going berserk and where a fraction of a second before there had been a perfect calm, I felt myself drawn in a strange vortex and I had to brace myself

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<sup>270</sup> See Appendix H for passages illustrating this particular landscape.

firmly. Then I saw the “terror of the skies” coming with the speed of an express train rushing by and I was drawn by the force of its strange attracting condition” (3051–3052).

These scenes accomplish several effects, one being the creation of a sensory overload due in part to the fragmentation of the quotidian world. Another effect is the presentation of a dynamic object of nature that attracts at the same time that it produces (an aesthetic) fear. There is a kind of pleasure in this attraction, associated with the loss of decision-making ability. We could, along with Kant, call this a negative pleasure, a sense of sacrifice and deprivation tied to an “astonishment amounting almost to terror, the awe and thrill of devout feeling, that takes hold of one when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there” (120–121).<sup>271</sup> In other words, the power and elevation of nature becomes equivalent to a presentation of, or schema for ideas, and, as idea, it becomes a source of pleasure, even as it requires the entertainment of a threat.

#### 4.5.1.2 The Landscape of Ruin

The second primary “landscape of sublimity” is that of the ruins left in the aftermath of the storm, a landscape that can be divided into three subcategories: 1) the descriptions of wreckage, eviscerated buildings, piles of rubble, and the general ruination of the ordered, civilized world; 2) the descriptions of ruined humanity, i.e., masses of the displaced, the burned, the mangled, the naked and the destitute as they wander through ruined landscapes

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<sup>271</sup>. “Thus too, the delight in the sublime in nature is only negative (whereas that in the beautiful is *positive*): that is to say it is a feeling of imagination by its own act depriving itself of its freedom by receiving a final determination in accordance with a law other than that of its empirical employment. In this way it gains an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices. But the ground of this is concealed from it, and in its place it *feels* the sacrifice and deprivation, as well as its cause, to which it is subjected” (120). Of course Kant does not fail to remind us that these effects are valid *as art*, specifically, “when we are assured of our own safety” (120).

and vast tent cities,<sup>272</sup> and; 3) the descriptions of the vast mobilization of aid, in the form of supply trains, volunteers, workers, gawkers, and the general masses of people who seek to make sense of the ruins and return them to a state of order.<sup>273</sup> I will concentrate primarily on the scenes of human wreckage in the following quotes.

And what awful stories of sorrows of heart anguish lay behind the putting away so many bodies of these three wiped out towns, whole families laid away together brothers and sisters, husband and wives and other relations separated. husband and wives torn asunder children turned into orphans and parents made childless because all us menkind in all our wisdom and glory knowledge and so on, and also power can neither cope with the angry elements nor quell it by supplication.

There were so much devastation by the storm as to prevent bodies being used for burial services and there fore the bodies are being sent to out of town relatives.

These three towns were actually towns of the dead, there so many killed. (315-316)

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Taken to hospitals of Lincoln Ill Springfield and Alton and even to St. Louis, they became emergencies and received immedial surgery and medical care Among the many wounded even of children were those of crippling for life of severe spinal injuries. Those with spinal fractures did not live long. Dead or injured they had all been found without one exception stripped clearly naked of all their clothes, women and girls with long hair were “scalped” by the tornado and skin torn of their bodies. Many had severe eye injuries, some broken arms. And all the injuries that can be fall tornado victims.

A good number of dead women, men and children were found disemboweled, or whole fronts of their bodies torn away by he awful force of that “Damn Shroud”. (404-405)

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When I arived near the university building I heard all the rest of the injured had been removed by hundreds of rescue workers who worked all day and all s last night with torches and lanterns and even large candles. Some were put in tents and shelter who from what could be put up from wreckage that could be used. I seen them but sick at heart I did not go near them.

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<sup>272</sup>. There is a relationship between these scenes and the descriptions of the disemboweled and eviscerated animals in the zoo scenes quoted earlier.

<sup>273</sup>. This third category is obviously different from the previous two in that it represents a return to order, and yet I include it within the category landscape of ruin for the obvious reason that it occurs in this landscape but also because these scenes contain the same excess enumerative qualities, the same sense of awe and the incomprehensible.

I frequently came across knots of more slightly injured injured persons, gathered here and there waiting their turn for shelter and medical treatment, besides provisions of and food. Here and there I saw some men, women or children sitting on wreckage, all covered with bandages waiting their turn, and yet crying or wailing not from pain, but for some one who had been lost. The children cried the most

This surely was a territory of awful grief distress, and misery beyond measure.

We know now what a tornado can do, when it once gets started full sway.

I also again came upon the pathetic sight of a nine year old girl keeping watch over the body of her dead mother.

The mother had been ~~killed~~ killed instantly as the body lay loose among the wreckage near her waiting suitable burial arrangements the daughter who never told me her name told her experiences. (454-467 *sic*)

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Thousands of refugees were for by the so city who had been made homeless by the tornado, in two big schoolhouses which also manly of the injured. Even the groan of the dying there were mixed with woeful lamentation from those who had lost loved ones. It was said one lost his reason because of the loss of home, wife and child and for a time fought off a rescue party. Then he collapsed and died. At Berlen street where there is an intersection an odd freak of the storm was to destroy all the buildings except the small wooden church. Here seven souls went to their death. And twenty one were injured. One at Council Street and in the surrounding districts the same story of devastation was in the papers with countless sad and striking features.

All the heartaches in the city could not end with the burial of the victims of this awful storm. The most unheard of ~~har~~ hardship and awful tribulation follow in the wake of such devastation. Refugees must be ~~clothed~~, housed, clothing provided and food supplied to all those left homeless through the effects of this twister. (702-703)

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Yet relief workers had come back nerve wracked to tell of most pitiable appeals made to them by many hundreds to try and locate their missing children. ~~He~~ Hundred were camped close to the city wreckage

Four hundred men women and children were crowded about sixty feet away from where I stood. They were screaming screaming to relief parties for an in locating their missing relatives of the convent.

Twelve hundred people camped along the railroad bed, Six hundred more were in an old abandoned railroad station waiting desperately for news. Even the militia men were besieged on all sides from early morning till night by these frenzied ralitives of the missing children for news. They were even wandering about as if in a trance. Bound for no place anywhere they walked about the camp peering closely into the faces of each other and asking about

the children who were missing. I thought to myself “You would not need to die to go to Hell Hell is right here”

I saw many of these people screaming madly for their missing ones with their arms stretched out in an appeal for them. I and my followers dared to pass through a section of this camp, all within sight were asking for their missing ones. It seemed the women were more violent in their request. At one spot a man pulled a revolver and ~~dece~~ declared if he were not given news he would shoot. The gun was taken from him, and he was placed under restraint. Another half crazed man held up a doll “Bring us some news of our missing little girl for “Gods sake” he cried. “Don’t tell us the storm killed our child.”

Around me came hundreds of women wringing their hands in awful anguish. I was besieged by every sufferer I could not tell them where the tornado took their children. Absolutely there is not hope for them. Everybody is in mourning. A large Country school housed nearly a thousand of the grief stricken people.

Scenes of horrifying grief and the ~~regin rein~~ reign of terror and indescribable sorrow are depicted almost endlessly these people but there could be no more heartrending more tragic moment in the entire history of tornado horrors than that presented when these crowds could get no news of their missing children, and these people stood by helpless. (1165-1167)

This catastrophic landscape of ruin is itself sublime in that, like the confrontation with the storm's power, it threatens to diminish or dissolve the human into a material and indifferent world. People are missing or helpless; they have lost the borders of their homes, community, even their own skin. While the temporary loss of subjectivity, as seen in the "landscape of power" above, is due to the witnessing of an overwhelming force, in the "landscape of ruin" the loss of subjectivity is due to the witnessing of a weakness, an extreme vulnerability ending in madness. The misery and pain of the victims is an experience that leaves them “screaming madly [...] half crazed [...] wringing their hands” (1166), etc. Of one man, "It was said one lost his reason because of the loss of home, wife and child and for a time fought off a rescue party. Then he collapsed and died” (703); and of the masses of refugees, “They were even wandering about as if in a trance”(1165). This experience is shared vicariously by those who, while not victims themselves, witness secondary scenes, as relief workers come back “nerve wracked” and stunned.

This leads me to my next point. If the storm's power causes humanity to revert to a more fundamental, reactionary, animal existence, thus compromising their subjectivity, witnesses to the ruin experience something similar in their exposure to human frailty. David Lloyd calls this experience the "indigent sublime." In his examination of literary and pictorial representations of the victims of the Irish potato famine, Lloyd writes: "the excessive spectacle of these starving bodies forces the viewer to the very threshold of humanity, to the sill that divides the human and the non-human, or, rather, to the boundary that marks the division between the human and the non-human within the human" (Lloyd 163). I take this division to be that of subjectivity and non-subjectivity. Lloyd writes:

It is not so much the limit posed by the numerical *excess* of famine deaths, by the "mathematical sublime" of literally countless victims, but the limit that emerges at the very point where the human ceases to exist for the observer as a subject that can be recognized as such. It is to this form of the unrepresentable in representation that I have appropriated the term "indigent sublime." This limit is linked to, but is not identical with, the much theorized unrepresentability of the *traumatic event*, being registered as a shock suffered by observers who do not themselves undergo the perils of starvation. (156, my emphasis)<sup>274</sup>

What I wish to draw attention to is the creation of a threshold between the human and the non-human. Lloyd says that, "the famine victim becomes the index of the always imminent and immanent lapse of the subject into object, of the autonomous spirit into the dependence of corporeal existence" (163). In other words, it is the appreciation of the survival of humanity in the face of its (inevitable) dissolution into materiality that allows for the "appreciation" of such scenes.<sup>275</sup> Jahan Ramazani claims that such depictions are affective

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<sup>274</sup> Note that Lloyd mentions the connection of the sublime to trauma, as I did above and in Chapter Two.

<sup>275</sup> Note that this moves in the opposite direction from the argument about sublimity and transcendence. Admittedly there seems to be a conflation here of the positions of those brutalized by nature's power and those awed by its grandeur, making the "indigent sublime" seem to move in the opposite direction from transcendence. Indeed, Lloyd writes that the indigent sublime "is the inverse of that Romantic sublimity whose function is to bring forth the powers of the human subject" (Lloyd 162). What is important here is the

partly due to what Yeats' calls "tragic joy," whereby the sublime transforms the painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence (163). Again we see the Catholic (and not only Catholic) transformation of wreckage, ruin, vulnerability, and weakness into strength.

These two landscapes—the landscape of *power* and the landscape of *ruin*—dominate the narrative of *My Life*, as witnesses recount one, then the other, each with its threat to subjectivity. The alternation provides for the overall progress of the narrative with each landscape leading to a repeat of the other.<sup>276</sup> Keep in mind that both landscapes are generally described in terms that include a great deal of numerical excess, augmenting what I have called their mathematical sublimity. The two alternating landscapes of *power* and *ruin* can be seen as analogous to the two states of wreckage, what I will call the *dynamic* and the *sedimental*.

#### 4.5.2 Two States of Wreckage in Two Landscapes

The word "wreckage" as used by Darger basically refers to the detritus, the fragmentation of the ordered world brought about by the storm. As such, wreckage is present both in *power* and in *ruin*. It was a common word used in newspaper descriptions of tornados in Darger's time. Indeed, the word *wreckage* itself is a major presence throughout *My Life*, appearing approximately 1119 times, with a 1/738.5 density, as high or higher than any other significant word in Darger's *My Life* vocabulary.

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overwhelming of the boundaries of the subject threatened by the representation. The descent into the "animalistic" and the inhuman accomplishes this effect albeit with a negative connotation. We might also consider that, especially in Darger's case, this indigent "animalism" is brought about as a consequence of the awe-inspiring storm.

<sup>276</sup> A witness in the landscape of ruin is almost always asked what he saw, or how did the ruin come about. The witness then repeats his experience of the storm, which then leads to another description of the landscape of ruin and another witness who must tell of the storm and so on.

**Table 4: “Wreckage” and Variants by Book**

<b>Book One</b>	<b>Book Two</b>	<b>Book Three</b>	<b>Book Four</b>
<b>Wreckage 1</b>	<b>Wreck 119</b>	<b>Wreck 13</b>	<b>Wrecking 1</b>
	<b>Wreckage 599</b>	<b>Wreckage 126</b>	<b>Wrechage 2</b>
	<b>Wreckages 4</b>	<b>Wreckages 2</b>	<b>Wreched 2</b>
	<b>Wrecked 112</b>	<b>Wrecked 14</b>	<b>Wreck 72</b>
	<b>Wreckers 1</b>	<b>Wrecking 2</b>	<b>Wreckagage 1</b>
	<b>Wreckeg 1</b>	<b>Wrecks 2</b>	<b>Wreckage 394</b>
	<b>Wrecking 17</b>		<b>Wrecked 64</b>
	<b>Wrecks 8</b>		<b>Wreckers 1</b>
			<b>Wrecking 14</b>
			<b>Wrecks 8</b>
<b>1/25,395</b>	<b>1/280</b>	<b>1/2,225</b>	<b>1/682</b>

This table does not include related words such as debris, refuse, etc., which would, if considered, add to the density.

One might ask why the word-density is important. One way to conceive of how the repetition of a word or word group affects the narrative is to think of the text as a painting wherein the frequency of various words and word types could be considered analogous to a color, as suggested earlier. In this case, wreckage would be one of the more prominent “colors” of the text, sometimes occurring as many as ten times on a manuscript page. I will return to this discussion soon. For now I wish to briefly examine the development of Darger’s fascination with wreckage as it appears early in the “The Autobiography” section of *My Life*, specifically in the explosions and the fire damaged-buildings of his childhood.

I remembered the big moonshine explosion on Webster and South port ave’s that completely leveled that big long and wide three story brick building to the ground and broke all the big windows of every house for many blocks around.

Roofs were shaken from from houses, even more than a block away.

The terrible blast said to have been heard six miles away happened January 30<sup>th</sup> 1930 at night just after I go into bed.

A lot of people living there were killed or injured. Some of the bodies lay on the sidewalk across the street and some half a block down Southport

ave according to the papers. I saw myself the debris laying across and on both Southport and Webster Streets blocking the middle of the streets.

It was a good thing for all the people living in the houses, where all the window glass went out from the shock. There was no cold wave weather.

Remembering this and seeing all that made me afraid, and I moved away to a new place it 851 Webster ave.

[...]

The scene was worse than what I heard. I had seen and known the building.

It had been a large three and half and half story building. It had been a quarter block long, and also as wide. Of pink red brick. A very handsome sort of building.

I could not believe my eyes for what I observed. And no exaggeration either.

There was nothing at all left of the building but scattered debris.

A lot of the wreckage blocked both streets in that neighborhood.

(179-180)

In this scene, we see the typical Dargerian fascination with an exploded world and the resultant landscape of debris, architectural and human wreckage—it is, in fact, sort of a mini-version of the entire tale of *My Life*.<sup>277</sup> It is not the only, nor is it the first, iteration of this scene in “The Autobiography.” Several other instances of things falling apart or being reduced to wreckage occur. One telling example can be found on page 16 in Darger’s description of the ruins of a fire-damaged building, a fire of which he may have been the cause: “I could not (belive) believe my little bonfire so far from there could cause it, but the shebang including the side of the house, was one high towering mass of singing flame. Some of the blazing crates crashed down, bouncing and covered the spot where I made the little one eracing evidence against me” (16–17).<sup>278</sup> Later he witnesses another fire in a broom factory: “When I arived there some of the upper part of the building had caved in a portion of the south wall by a hundred feet length had fallen across a part of the street and the

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<sup>277</sup>. We could see this as an example of self-similarity at various organizational levels in the text. The structure and content of a small local level of organization reflects that of much larger levels of organization.

<sup>278</sup>. Note that in this instance the fire wreckage covers up evidence of his crime.

building was now like a smoking blazing volcano” (115–116). These instances point to what is at least an early fascination with wreckage; however, as we approach the end of Book One, we arrive at what we could call a more transformational example of wreckage. As “The Autobiography” is coming to a close, we read:

I remember a night at Mrs Anschutz which I really believe she and her husband would never forget either. The ceiling of my room in the south end had been gradually loosened by a leak.

I suspected something might happen so I pulled the head of my bed which was in that location away from under.

But yet I did not lie in bed with my head there but the other I end with my feet towards the head of the bed.

Im telling you that section of the ceiling coming down created some sensation.

Mrs Anchutz cried to her husband “Amiel Henry fell out of bed” If I did I must have been awfully heavy to make that terrible noise that was so loudly to be heard by neighbors who thought it was an explosion. The fire department came, but there was no explosion.

A piece of the plaster bouncing off the top of the beds head, or hit the top of my right foot toes, and though not injured was a horrid pain I will never forget.

They came up to my room, and I had a hard time to convince them that I did not fall out of bed.

I cleaned off of my bed enough plaster fragments to fill a bushel basket.

I almost nevertheless had a difficult time to convince her I did not fall out of bed.

But here husband saw the large vacancy in the part of the ceiling. the amount of plaster fragments on the floor behind (of) the head of my bed, and knew I told the truth.

During the latest time I worked still at Grant Hospital a disaster occurred which I or even the Hospital Baker will never forget.

There had been a very leak from the eastern ceiling of the Hospital Kitchen. At the north side (also east) of the kitchen was the dishwashing machine.

Lucky for me I was at the housekeepers desk that morning. Something I was asking for which I badly needed.

Before I received her answer to my request there came from the distant kitchen a loud thundering noise that startled both of us. We hastened to the Kitchen and an awful sight met our eyes.

All the ceiling plaster over that part of the Kitchen had crashed down near the Baking Oven stretched a long wide wooden table, and it beside the

floor was cover covered with inch thick plaster. So was the top of the dishwashing machine. Lucky none was inside.

The plaster was falling on that long ~~wode~~ wooden table made that deafing deafing noise.

The Baker had been hit on the head by a big piece of plaster and was hospitalized.

He had more than 30 pies which he had baked on that long table, and they were all ruined. They too were covered who with plaster fragments.

Had I been by the dishwashing maching at that time I might have got a piece on my head too.

The kitchen ceiling I believe is 25 feet above the floor.

The main cook was sick from shock, at witnessing the disaster.

The ceiling over his part of the kitchen did not fall however.

Unless I am mistaken I believe the Baker sued the Hospital for damages, declared the condition of the ceiling was known, and nothing was being done about it. He had a slight skull fracture and a badly cut head. He was in bed there for a month.

I do not know if he ever collected as I never heard, but he recieved his Hospital care free of charge.

By Hospital workers more than half a ton of plaster was wheeled out on carts.<sup>279</sup> (200-206)

Immediately after this scene comes the transformational line: “There is one more thing I forgot to tell you.” At this point the narrative shifts into the “fictional” mode of Book Two, although the reader cannot know this yet. Indeed, Darger himself probably did not know it.

These early examples are missing the absurd numeration and amplification so common in the later catastrophic books. They are telling however, in that they illustrate Darger’s early fascination with destruction and his image of himself as somehow in the center of a fragmenting world. I would also emphasize that, in the last instance, at the end of “The Autobiography,” the presence of the wreckage serves to instigate the coming phase shift or transition into the fictional catastrophic books, where these small local episodes will be amplified into end-of-the-world scenarios, as if “spinning up” from a local to a global

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<sup>279</sup> It is interesting to note in the fifth paragraph of this quote that Darger associates the sound he makes falling out of bed with an explosion heard by neighbors. He does this as a joke, of course, but it goes along with his tendency to associate himself with explosive events, that they are somehow related to his presence and personality.

significance. As mentioned, wreckage indeed becomes a major concern in the catastrophic books, where we begin to see it taking the two distinct states. The *dynamic* state, or “wreckage in motion,” corresponds to the *Landscape of Power*, and is accompanied by adjectives such as: whirling, swirling, gyrating, plunging, swaying, revolving, etc. While it may appear initially chaotic, in truth, this wreckage-in-motion is actually moving toward, or already exists within, the primary organizational form of the vortex as figured by the storm. The *sedimentary state*, or “wreckage in stasis,” corresponds to the *Landscape of Ruin*, and is accompanied by adjectives of density, confusion and blockage: piled up, strewn about, knotted, twisted, tangled, etc. This stasis presents not only the ruin of the ordered world and the evisceration of its institutions, but also a form of blockage to the re-organization of society. Roads are blocked with wreckage so that vehicles cannot pass. Communication cannot take place because people are separated by wreckage. The means of communication are often themselves reduced to wreckage, as in the case of the tangles of telephone wire and the blocked roads and disabled modes of transportation.

More than anything else, however, the presence of wreckage signifies the physicality of fragmentation and excess; be it human or material, it is number without container or certifiable count, item without name. Wreckage is that to which every structural system will return. Amongst such systems we can include constituted cultural institutions and their manifestation in magnificent architecture as well as constructed human qualities such as morality, integrity, etc. The storm renders such constructions into miserable little pieces of the real,<sup>280</sup> which at their furthest remove from human meaning, lack any distinguishing

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<sup>280</sup> The pieces of the real are the objects, as Slavoj Žižek claims in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, that occupy the empty space where the transcendental thing-in-itself is missing. In fact, Žižek, following Hegel, suggests that there is *nothing but* this vulgar materialism of signs; the abstract transcendental world, because it cannot be grasped, must continually repeatedly collapse or spiral down into the concrete world of objects,

specificity. In other words, once rendered as wreckage, no one piece of wreckage has any more significance than another; it is thus a landscape of dehumanizing sameness, a world of useless parts, approaching what Deleuze and Guattari call the Plane of Consistency.<sup>281</sup> It is not the Plane of Consistency *per se*, but it *is* matter without meaning; in other words, there are shapes, objects, things-in-themselves, but they have no meaning, no symbolic relationships other than position and speed.

Finally, I would make one more analogy—this being between the Landscape of Power (with Dynamic Wreckage) and the Landscape of Ruin (with Sedimentary Wreckage), in relation to what I will call the pulse of order and disorder. The relationship is not one-to-one; both Power and Ruin correspond to disorder, disorder as motion and disorder as stasis. Darger is fascinated by the movement between order and disorder, and his work manifests the flow between them. Disorder or chaos underlies all perception and order underlies all apparent chaos. Thus, the false order of institutions and of civilization itself may be shown

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precisely because objects can be grasped (204-209). Žižek goes on to claim that “being-for-itself must embody itself again [and again] in some miserable, radically contingent corporal leftover” (207). We do not have to enter too deeply into this metaphysical debate to see that these “pieces of the real” can themselves, by their overwhelming physical presence, suggest the transcendent *by being invested*, but in the failure of that investment, or maybe despite it, there is repetition, accumulation. This seems to be Darger’s project. These pieces of the real are the wreckage Darger continuously spins up in his narrative wreckage, and that is to be counted and by being counted, to be organized. Darger desires the transcendent through the *miserable real* by manifesting the latter in excess—in this case, excess writing. The subject of the writing is the subjectivity of the writer, with Sweetie Pie being ultimately nothing but the physical words that continue to point to her.

<sup>281</sup> The Plane of Consistency is a term used by Deleuze and Guattari to indicate a state of primordial flow, which is, for the most part, molecular and without objects:

The plane of consistency knows nothing of differences in level, orders of magnitude, or distances. It knows nothing of the difference between the artificial and the natural. It knows nothing of the distinction between contents and expressions, or that between forms and formed substances; these things exist only by means of and in relation to the strata. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 69-70)

I am using the term to indicate a state of physical existence in which objects may exist, but there is no meaningful difference that can be attached to objects; an ox is worth a kitchen knife is worth a diamond is worth a grain of salt. They are merely objects (things-in-themselves) without human or other systemic valuation. As such, my conception of the Plane of Consistency might be closer to total entropy or heat death, in that it is “after the fact” of subjective valuation.

to have chaos lurking within its very structure. Darger is effectively dealing with an anxiety of disorder, the overbearing presence of disorder, by creating a *bridge of form*—writing himself into the vortex, between all such disordered states.

#### 4.2.3 The Vortex as Bridge

Although it might be easy to read the catastrophic books of *My Life* as mere revenge fantasy, it is far more complicated than that. By doing violence to the institutional/systemic world, which has failed him, Darger, as subject, is transported to the sedimental world of fragments and pieces, a chaos out of which renewal can take place—and this renewal is manifest in the reordering of the world *as narrative*. What I wish to point out here is the function of Sweetie Pie (the vortex) and *My Life* (the vor/text) each as a bridge between these two states, a transitional or threshold experience by which one state is transformed into another and vice versa.<sup>282</sup> I recall here my earlier discussion of the vortex archetype as one of passage, and transformation (see Chapter One). To view the vortex is thus to behold a “vision of the threshold” (Twitchell, 83), thus the vortex becomes a vehicle of transcendence, a path, or bridge from one state of being to another. Indeed, Darger does, on occasion, portray Sweetie Pie as a kind of bridge.

The strange rays of the tornadoes strange fire phenomenon seemed to reach the very bottom of the slanting funnel but I could make out nothing distinctly on account of the umbrellas and stuff still swirling far out around the funnel, which still on that slant was moving forward again and also of a thick strange mist around it in which everything whirling there was now enveloped and over which there hung another funnel trying to descend in a form *like that*

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<sup>282</sup> James Twitchell, in his study of Romantic landscape (*Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850*), devotes a chapter to Turner’s paintings with much attention paid to the role of the “dissolving vortex” within them. Twitchell considers this vortex, at least in Turner, to be an event forming at (or formed by) a horizon line, either between earth and sky or sea and sky, the meeting place of two flows, two systems, if you will, whose distinctions are dissolved where they meet and then resolved in vortical organization, i.e., the formation of the vortex that functions in a way that is transformational.

*narrow and tottering bridge which Mr Musnul mans say is the only path way between time and Eternity.* Fortunately it did not descend but remained suspended, This mist of spray was no ~~deb~~ doubt occasioned by the clashing of the great walls of the inner part of the funnel as they all met together at the tearing bar through Chester brown but the yell that now went up to the very heavens from out of that mist I dare not attempt to describe. (572-573, my emphasis)<sup>283</sup>

What I wish to point out here is that Sweetie Pie can be seen as a mode of *being between* two states of wreckage. I have been discussing Sweetie Pie, in the discourse of the sublime, as a threshold event, and I will now elaborate on this conception. The two states of wreckage are related to Sweetie Pie in that she both *causes them* and she is *the mode of being between* them; each state is transformed to the other *through* her. She is thus a bridge, or rather a sublime transitional shape,<sup>284</sup> and like other such shapes she exists in service to the universal pulse of order and disorder. I further emphasize that this pulse, this proximity of opposing conditions is one of Darger's obsessions. We only need to look at the constant juxtaposition throughout his work of war and beauty, catastrophe and innocence, fragmentation and integrity. He is drawn to, fascinated by, what I would call the sublimity of these transitional

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<sup>283</sup>. Admittedly, Darger borrows this image from Poe's "Maelstrom," whose narrator also refers to the Bridge of the Musselmans:

there hung a magnificent rainbow, like that narrow and tottering bridge which Mussulmen say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity. This mist, or spray, was no doubt occasioned by the clashing of the great walls of the funnel, as they all met together at the bottom—but the yell that went up to the Heavens from out of that mist, I dare not attempt to describe. (137)

It is important to note how Darger changes the image. Poe's metaphor of the bridge is referring to the rainbow created in the spray of the funnel. For Darger, it is the funnel of the tornado itself that seems to be a bridge between time and eternity.

<sup>284</sup>. Other such shapes would include the flowers, explosions, storms, that appear and reappear across the field of Darger's work, all of which certain common qualities: explosive dynamics, vortical organization and transitional/bridging affect. My point in highlighting these common qualities is to demonstrate that each of these three forms exists in service to the universal pulse of order and disorder.

shapes, and it is through their repetition that he, in a sense, takes up aesthetic arms in the service of order.

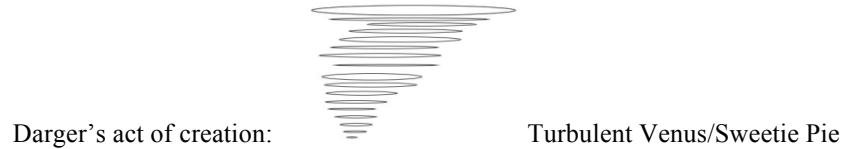
At this point, I would like to return to the terms molar and molecular, connecting them to the states of order as they appear in Darger landscapes. Order is a state we barely see in *My Life*; we only see the aftermath of its destruction, what we might call the molecular state of ruin. Deleuze and Guattari define the molecular as an animal state of existence, non-subjective, reactionary. As we have seen above, humans confronted with the “indigent sublime” are returned to this molecular animal or molecular existence. However, disorder exists both in states of high molarity and molecularity. This may seem counterintuitive. In truth, the molar state, signifying order, is always merely the temporary concentration (a state of high redundancy) of what is fundamentally already wreckage (the molecular). We might, for instance, speculate that the molar plane is in fact deeply disordered, and that the molecular plane is deeply ordered. In fact this is what chaos theory would suggest—that there is both an order in apparent disorder, and disorder in apparent order. Sweetie Pie exposes this, and this exposure takes the form of the evisceration and explosion of molar entities.

In its relation to Darger’s *My Life*, this relationship can be graphed as follows in Fig. 16, with Sweetie Pie existing as the transitional state between the two planes, two extremes of disorder.

**Fig. 11.**  
(Vortex as bridge between molar and molecular planes)

Molar: Culture/The City/Social Institutions Intact (order in which chaos is hidden to be exposed)

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Molecular: Culture/The City/Social Institutions in Ruins (chaos in which order is hidden to be activated)

In fact, I believe that Darger's narrative dynamic rests on this coexistence or interpenetration of the two states. The tornado exposes a disorder that is always already there in potential. The molarity of institutions, including the institution of the "foundational story" itself, be it myth, *fabula*, history, etc.,<sup>285</sup> is a high-redundancy identity that can be seen as already intrinsically fragmented based on observational perspective or intensity. Thus molar institutions, as Darger well knew, can be shown to incorporate corruption, dysfunction, etc., leading to social fragmentation, war, catastrophe—in short, the Darger universe. I mentioned earlier how, in *My Life*, Darger idealizes these institutions. In fact, he often finds their ideality indescribable. It is important to note, however, that this "ideality" is always

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<sup>285</sup> In regard to those instances which we might designate as molar, the further one looks into it, the more elusive it becomes, fragmenting upon inspection, the way a hard edge fragments into a jagged series of squiggles and even particles the closer it is examined. This could be said to be the case with any form of order: the closer you examine it, the more a hidden, unacknowledged disorder appears to underlie it.

Therefore what I would like to do here is to draw an analogy between the molar plane, suggesting absolute systemic integrity, and the elusive qualities of the "signified," suggesting absolute "thing-in-itself" that cannot be reached by any form of representation.

In regard to this we might consider the human *self* as a form of mental molarity, a supra-biological consolidation of agency, which is highly redundant and pattern based. The self is the perpetual re-collection of fragments (fragmented perceptions) into an organizational center, which, like the absolute integrity of the molar institution, is largely an illusion. And this is the self that Serres speculates upon when he calls the self, a vortex, a center created by repetitions and patterns.

speaking of a *structure* (building) that serves as a *sign* of the institution. The institution itself may be flawed; remember that in the context of *My Life*, these are *fictional* institutions, existing on a high molar plane not possible in the real perceived world. As such they are emphatically *not* the institutions of Darger's real world experience, which is one of dysfunction and corruption. Therefore, it is not odd that he would interpret the so-called ordered world as flawed.<sup>286</sup> He states as much in various ways: "the dignity (the worst to think of) of grownups and did not amount to much, where as to my opinion or feeling, all grownups, and especially all types of strangers, and those I did not like were less than the dust or mud beneath my feet" (15). "The Autobiography" is full of evidence of the failures of molar institutions. Indeed, while Darger's personal reflections tend to revolve around specific incidents, we know from the facts of his life that he was generally distrustful of molar institutions and official organizations, partly due to his self-defined defiant streak and partly due to his genuine sense of recurring imprisonment. Much of *My Life*, in turn, makes targets of these institutions, repeatedly recreating the violence that renders them into what they, in fact, are—temporary states of illusory order, which Darger/Sweetie Pie exposes as illusion by eviscerating them, revealing their true interior chaotic fragmentation, bringing it out into the open, to be seen.

#### **4.5.2 A Sacrificial Venus of Things and Tongues**

##### **4.6.1 The End Point of the Sacrifice is the Subject**

Finally, having established Sweetie Pie as threshold event, as bridge between chaotic states, I would like to return to an idea which I touched upon in Chapter One, the idea of

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<sup>286</sup> The contradiction can perhaps be summed up by stating that Darger's idealization is confined to the physical structures, and not the law or morality that the structure symbolizes. Again we can see that it is the physical world that provides him with a ground or handle on experience.

Sweetie Pie as an image analogous to the Turbulent Venus of Michel Serres—that figure for the initial organizational form out of which all order and eventually, beauty emerges as relief or pattern against background noise.<sup>287</sup> According to the Serres scholar Marie Assad, this background noise is implied in such Serresian expressions as: *the multiple*, *arche-* or *Ur-noise*, (*bruit de fond*), *turbulence*, and *furor* (“Portrait of a Nonlinear Dynamical System” 142-143). For Serres, this noise is most accurately figured as a sea (disorganization) and the first form of organization appearing in this sea is the vortex/Venus who separates (or is separated by observation) from the sea.<sup>288</sup> Turbulent Venus (*Venus Turbulente*) is one of a number of roughly equivalent figures used by Serres to indicate the transition from *bruit de fond* (noise) to form,<sup>289</sup> the beginning of patterns that signify order and beauty (“Portrait” 142).<sup>290</sup>

The Turbulent Venus is especially applicable to the current study in its combination of potential beauty, eroticism, attraction, even innocence, but mostly in its structure or presence as vortex. Serres even describes her as being like a tornado, a storm. It is also possible to compare this fundamental Serrian cosmology of Chaos and Venus to the

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<sup>287</sup> Serres calls the vortex, “the pre-order of all things.” It arises thus: “The minimal angle of turbulence produces the first spirals, here and there. [...] These are the sweet vortices of the physics of Venus,” the revolutions of voluptuousness making themselves apparent within the straight linearity of (Mars’) laminar flow (*Hermes* 1–101).

<sup>288</sup> Venus/Aphrodite indeed arises from the sea. According to Serres, the name Aphrodite is etymologically linked to sea foam, suggesting foam-born, which we can read as born from chaos or turbulence. Thus Venus is a product of the sea foam or arch-noise.

<sup>289</sup> Note that this arch-noise, this *bruit de fond*, is not equivalent to laminar flow; it is laminar flow already corrupted, i.e., *driven to turbulence* by accumulating deviation. Chaos need not be turbulent; it may be static, as in the case of entropy or heat death.

<sup>290</sup> The other terms, according to Assad, are “Hermes,” “the parasite,” “the beautiful troublemaker” (*la belle noiseuse*), and “inverted babel.” All are paradigms that surge up, from the “arch-noise” (*bruit de fond*) (“Portrait” 142). Hermes is the messenger god between the living and the dead, he is also the god of writing, of messages. The parasite is figured in relation to the third person, who is both assumed and excluded from any conversation.

Dargarian “cosmology” of war/storm/social chaos and Sweetie Pie. Venus and Sweetie Pie can be related by four common qualities: 1) their common shape as vortex, and the significance of this shape; 2) their common emergence from flow and excess in a fluid environment; 3) their common powers of attraction as related to their “divinity” or “beauty,”<sup>291</sup> and; 4) their common destructive (transitioning) potential. In the process of describing these parallels I will sum up much of what this study has so far covered in regard to Darger’s writing. I will then focus the discussion on the sacrificial qualities of the Sweetie Pie image and the relation of sacrifice to identity, and I will conclude by relating the sacrificial act to the explosion of language, which is concurrent with, and perhaps caused by, strangulation and the protruding tongue of Darger’s seminal image.

It may seem a leap from the initial meaningless swerve or clinamen to a highly aesthetic judgment of beauty, especially since what we perceive as beauty is a learned perception. However, if we understand beauty fundamentally as attraction—be it neurological, biological, or aesthetic—then the swerve can be said to attract simply by its *differing* from what is expected, be it laminar flow, invariant molarity, or the state of any steady homogenous system. Such a variation would draw or attract the attention of the system itself, or other sentient reading entity, as a disturbance of the system. To attract, there has to be a viewer, or reader to be attracted.<sup>292</sup> The system, in swerving, regards itself; it begins to read itself. This can be seen as a disturbance of flow, or of the time as it is measured by the system. Serres himself gives much credit to the quality of the *swerve*, that it

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<sup>291</sup>. This divinity and/or beauty is, of course, imaged in one case in the figure of woman and in the other case in the figure of the divine and innocent child.

<sup>292</sup>. I am using the term attraction here to designate a general sense of being drawn toward, or to be influenced by, and it is meant to include both purely physical attractions based on physical laws and needs that result from such laws, as well as aesthetic or emotional attractions, which are, at root, physically based.

eventually leads back or contrary to, i.e. back in time, back against the flow, thus drawing the reading eye back to the un-noticed previous state of the system. This previous state becomes, or is formed into an “event,” via this repetition and the re-reading, re-seeing. In other words, beauty must *re-seen*. Noise (out of which beauty arises) is not re-seen. To re-see noise adds pattern to noise (in the sense that a unit of noise is doubled, tripled, etc.) and *as pattern* it ceases to be noise.<sup>293</sup> At higher levels of complexity, the simple attraction of the curve re-seen leads to complex forms of beauty and order. At the level of the organism, the beautiful individual is the one that stands out, attracts by difference. At the level of systems, the beautiful system is that which stands out in its elegance, its purity of function, its perfect stability, compared to dysfunctional semi-chaotic systems. Venus stands out, she is re-seen, against background noise; she stands out against that which is *not* re-seen, re-viewed, re-collected. We might also add that their exclusionary character, their *exclusion* of discordant elements, is what relates the highest orders of organization. Beauty, morality, civilization, divinity: these are states of *high molarity*—the inviolable integrity of a system, the pure homogeneity of a substance, excludes all difference or deviation. High molarity is therefore associated with authority, stability, the unchangeable, the eternal, the golden, the pure, and the true. The higher the molarity, the higher the dominance; however, a highly dominant order that fosters or enforces sameness, also *invites* the inevitable swerve or variation.<sup>294</sup> In other words, as order becomes absolutely dominant, it approaches the homogeneity of

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<sup>293</sup>. It is worthwhile to keep in mind the flexibility of terms. If we think of chaos as the opposite of information, in one sense, it is also true that chaos (as minimum predictability) provides the maximum information. It is also true that an invariable pattern is itself a form of chaos; it is a state out of which nothing can be distinguished.

<sup>294</sup>. True sameness or consistency can never be total; if it were, the universe would be stagnant. The structure itself becomes equivalent to containment. Every containing structure must eventually be breached in a dynamic world. Therefore, any highly stable or exclusive system is inevitably ripe for the intrusion of the differing serve.

laminar flow, thus insuring the eventual variation, or swerve. Because the swerve differs, it attracts—creating the possibility for beauty.<sup>295</sup> What I am highlighting in this process is the pulse between order and disorder in which the vortex acts as bridge, as transitional event, but which can be, in certain interpretations, seen as sacrifice, and it is to sacrifice as structural event that I now turn.

#### 4.6.2 The Sacrificial Paradox

Before getting into the structure of sacrifice itself, it is necessary to point out the paradox of beauty's destructive quality and how that quality is put in high relief by the figure of Sweetie Pie/Venus. I use the term beauty here in the sense of the attraction of form, but also in the context of various qualities that are attached to this attraction in various cultures: innocence, class, divinity, etc. Aside from the sublime magnificence of the storm, there is the gradual anthropomorphic change into the form of a little girl, the strangle-headed child cloud. Darger revered and adored children and it was especially the little girl (the nymph) that most evoked his fascination. This is evident both by his statements to that effect, and by his obsessive re-presentations of little girls (see Figs. 34–45) in his work. I refer back to the earlier discussion in this section on the analogies between Sweetie Pie and

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<sup>295</sup> Serres juxtaposes to the straight-line linearity of the Martian laminar flow, an energy vector that begets domination and violence, which in its extreme form is submission, submersion to the point that attraction to (an Other) ceases to exist. We might note that the contrast between Mars and Venus made by Serres is applicable to the Dargerian universe as well; Darger's earlier works contrast the war-like world of the Glandolineans to the Venus-like world of the Angelineans. In other words, the (Venus-like) beauty of the child is constantly threatened, in conflict with the violence of the male Martian world—the machinery of production, slavery. In *The Realms of the Unreal*, the children are enslaved, and it is this enslavement they rebel against. The great war in *The Realms of the Unreal* is essentially this basic conflict writ large. Mars is the god of war—a redundant repetitive and catastrophic dynamic of control and mastery. The wars that Darger creates in the realms are Martian. Venus is a different form of catastrophe.

the Vivian Girls (who were *divine or semi-divine*),<sup>296</sup> and between Sweetie Pie and the Virgin Mary<sup>297</sup> (who, in Catholicism, is the most perfect woman, alone of her sex), and between Sweetie Pie and Mother Nature (who is the supreme power of the natural world). That the tornado should take the form of a girl-child is thus symbolically important, not simply because Darger idealized girls, but also because in the girl-child vulnerability and beauty are combined, and vulnerability in the form of innocence is, in many ways, a virtue in the Catholic perspective. At the same time, the beauty, innocence, divinity of the child is paradoxically destructive precisely by its attraction.

It is a cliché that beauty has a destructive potential, which can lead to the fall of men, women, or even of civilizations. Beauty can hypnotize, it can distract from forward purpose. There are numerous cultural narratives that reiterate this quality. I bring this up only to illustrate the idea that beauty often leads to destruction, which can be of a very high order.<sup>298</sup> Civilization itself may fall into the worship of beauty as opposed to order, or power. The individual subject may fall into decadence or aestheticism. The notion of the sublime experience, which may be an experience of beauty *in extremis*—overwhelming, magnificent, “too much”—threatens the subject with destruction. Thus a paradox inhabits the experience of such an aesthetic in that what provokes the greatest feeling of self is that which could destroy self.

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<sup>296.</sup> The Vivian Girls were often said to be nearly saint-like or angelic in the courage and purity. Like Joan of Arc, they were depicted as warriors of a higher cause.

<sup>297.</sup> The storm occurs on the Feast of the Assumption, and it is even called a “Marian storm” at one point. Comparison between Sweetie Pie and various qualities of the Virgin Mary could constitute a separate study; for now it is sufficient to mention that the analogy exists, both for the reader and to Darger.

<sup>298.</sup> Helen of Troy, for instance, caused a war that lasted 15 years.

The Turbulent Venus/the vortex embodies this paradox in the sense that, while it emerges as the beginning of form, it also functions as a destroyer of form. When Venus arises amongst or within an ordered state, she/it indicates that the ordered state is either not fully codified, or it is already falling into turbulence through excess. The vortex will accelerate that process. We might say thus that the vortex arises in a field that it is destined to upset, to reconfigure, to destroy. Again I quote De Landa:

[T]he exquisite internal structure of turbulent weather phenomena (hurricanes, for example) are an instance of order emerging out of chaos. But we are all familiar with the destruction that hurricanes can bring about in their surroundings. They are a form of spontaneously emerging order, created at critical points in atmospheric flow, while at the same time they are a source of apparent disorder for other systems. (*War* 8)

De Landa is pointing to the paradox of order causing disorder. This paradox of relationship is reflected in a paradox of internal form, in the structure of the vortex itself, which, as suggested by Serres, is simultaneously stable and unstable, moving and stationary, always changing and always the same.<sup>299</sup> The vortex is a synthesis of contradictions, and Sweetie Pie, as tornado, harbors exactly these contradictions. She is a form of both natural and anthropomorphic order, while at the same time destroying all order around her. The primary attribute of Sweetie Pie, redundantly described, is her destructive effect on civilization, a destruction that can be read in two ways: 1) as revenge; and, 2) as sacrifice, in that sacrifice requires destruction. It is easy to read the storm as Darger's anger, his getting back at the world for his difficult life. To read the storm as an act of sacrifice is somewhat more problematic, as much as the image itself might suggest it. Darger's catastrophic narrative is

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<sup>299</sup>. The vortex has the power to transition the molar to the molecular, and in this way she may appropriate the molar to herself and restructure it. In a similar manner the molecular is taken up and restructured, given molarity. The idea of appropriation is important. Recall here the bridge function of the vortex in the previous discussion; the bridge function contains both sides, both extremes of what it bridges.

vengeful, yes, but it is also sacrificial in an Old Testament sense; it is the destruction of the world with the hope of its remaking. It is also sacrificial in the remaking of the author himself.

#### **4.6.3 The Sacrificial Sublimity**

I have mentioned several times that the image of Sweetie Pie is a sacrificial Image. The image of the storm is achieved out of the creation of a critical mass, itself achieved in excess collection and recollection. Critical mass is a transitional concept by which an excess of material brings about a change in the quality or structure of that material; the original material becomes effectively something else. I am therefore making an analogy between critical mass and sublimity in that a self-transformation or self-enhancement is the result of the creation and confrontation with these events. I have outlined how Darger's creation and recreation of the sublime event serves as identity construction and enhancement. What I now wish to do is to point out the structural similarities between sacrifice and sublimity and their relation to identity formation. First, I will examine sacrifice, and how it constructs identity on two fronts: identification between agent (sacrificer) and victim, and identification between victim and divine or transcendental otherness.

The anthropological theorist Rene Girard sees in the sacrificial act a mechanism by which a society seeks to deflect upon an appropriate victim the violence (human or natural) that would otherwise be vented on itself (4). The greater the threat to the community, the more critical the situation, the more "precious" the sacrificial victim must be (18). Very often some form of communal guilt is involved, or even "original sin." Gerard cites Joseph de Maistre, who defines the victim as "an 'innocent' creature who pays a debt for the

‘guilty’ party” (4). To accomplish this, the victim must be in some sense “like” the group: “The sacrificial animals were always the gentlest, most innocent creatures [i.e., without guilt], whose habits and instincts brought them most closely into harmony with man”(2).<sup>300</sup> Maistre extrapolates from this that the animals most likely to be sacrificed were those most human in nature, especially *in their innocence*. We can argue that it could be some other trait such as bravery, fertility, etc., that establishes this likeness. What is important is that the identification of the animal with man is what makes the sacrifice work. In the case of human sacrifice, human likeness is intrinsic, yet the victim still must represent a quality that serves the sacrificial function, from whatever part of the society the victim comes. Prisoners of war (bravery), slaves (servitude), small children (innocence), unmarried adolescents (virginity), and the handicapped (vulnerability) all fit this requirement.<sup>301</sup> However, according to Marcel Mauss, there must also be “some affinity between [the God’s] nature and that of the victim,” so that the God may empathize with it (79).<sup>302</sup> By “localizing, concentrating, and accumulating a sacred character,” the victim is “exalted,” invested with the highest degree of sanctity” (79-80).<sup>303</sup> In other words, in the sacrifice, the victim becomes, in effect, both human and divine. Thus the victim, through a process of identification, acts as a bridge between two worlds; the sacrifice, a violent physical event, is placed (bridges a gap) between the human and the transcendental other (God, the Divine, the Transcendent Realm).

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<sup>300</sup> Jesus as Lamb of God is an iconic example that comes to mind, and it is one that, being in the Christian tradition, Darger would have been well aware of.

<sup>301</sup> It may even be the king himself as in certain festivals where the king is bred to be sacrificed, often this is a case of role reversal with a fool playing the king.

<sup>302</sup> According to Mauss, this affinity is essential: “So that he may come to submit himself to destruction by sacrifice, his own [God’s] origins must be in the sacrifice itself” (77).

<sup>303</sup> Note the word accumulation in regards to the sacred character of the victim. This accumulation takes place in the longevity of the tradition, the accumulated consent of the community and the repetition of the act over time (generations) leading to the emergent organization and temporal stability of the sacrificial meme.

In the sublime, a violent physicality/overwhelming event is placed between the self and its *transcendent Self* or *Other*, creating what Twitchell calls a temporary bridge. Individuals must put themselves (i.e., imagine themselves) in the position of being overwhelmed, diminished, or even destroyed by what is effectively an aesthetic experience.<sup>304</sup> This projected, imagined (threatened) self is similar to the sacrificial victim in that a relationship of empathy or identification is conducted through it, a relationship that bridges a gap between agent and transcendent other, creating an enhanced sense of identity.<sup>305</sup> The sublime landscape is, in this sense, functionally analogous to the sacrificial landscape, and in this context, the “self” that experiences the sublime is analogous to the “self” that witnesses the sacrifice.<sup>306</sup> Both fold an *aesthetic* experience of the possibility of their own annihilation (via empathetic engagement) into the structure of their subjectivity.<sup>307</sup> However, it is important to note that, unless the encounter is repeated (be it in narrative or in action) the single act will merely pass into the flow of time and will fail to aid the constitution of memory or identity. Thus both encounters require the redundancy of ritual. If the effects of sublimity are to be harnessed, the experience must be revisited or re-

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<sup>304</sup>. Kant establishes that the subject must feel safe, must not, in fact, be threatened, but only able to imagine himself in the position that he might be threatened. This imagining is effectively an aesthetic experience. In the sacrifice, the agent’s potential annihilation is reified in the object sacrificed, allowing the agent to appropriate that self-destruction as part of his/her identity (which also incorporates God’s essence) and to be therefore stronger for that reason. A similar situation obtains in the experience of the sublime. In the sublime, the possible loss of subjectivity becomes part of the subject—therefore strengthening it, and expanding it.

<sup>305</sup>. By “enhanced” I mean more secure, more securely felt, i.e., located and thus more definitive, more intense, etc.; it is a self that is also larger for having included its own demise in its construction. We could say such enhancement is simply based on the knowledge of death, what Derrida calls “the gift of death,” by which life gains heightened meaning.

<sup>306</sup>. For the sake of this argument, I am considering the identity of culture and of individuals as being equivalent, albeit at different levels of organization.

<sup>307</sup>. The sacrifice is an aesthetic experience, it is a drama acted out for the appeasement (viewing) of both the population who enacts it and the Gods who watch it or accept it.

membered—the paragraph is reread, the picture re-examined, the emotion felt again. If the sacrifice is to have lasting effect, it must be re-enacted weekly, monthly, seasonally, yearly. My point here is that the redundancy is part of the effect. As mentioned in relation to knowledge: you cannot know something once, you must re-know it. The same holds true with knowing the self; the self is always a redoubled self: “there is no identity without repetition” (Taylor 48).

#### 4.6.4 The Sacrificial Sweetie Pie

Having established a relationship between the aesthetic “landscape” of sacrifice and sublimity in the construction of identity, I will now turn to sacrificial/sublime event *as passage*. Remember that Sweetie Pie—whom I contend is a sacrificial figure—is both the constructor and de-creator of the sublime landscapes of power and of ruin that dominate *My Life*. She is not only the “maker” of each landscape but the bridge between them, and this bridging function further supports her role as sacrificial event.

Prepubescent children obviously have the qualities of innocence and fringe status that the sacrificial victim needs,<sup>308</sup> and Darger may well have seen his little girls precisely in this role.<sup>309</sup> All of Darger’s creative life revolved around the dilemma of the child, and he invested his own worth as a human being on the preservation and protection of the qualities of children—those qualities, which, ironically, made them “sacrificial,” just as Christ’s

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<sup>308</sup>. This fringe status comes from the fact that, as prepubescents, they have as yet no proper place in the social order (Gerard 12).

<sup>309</sup>. I am referring here to Darger’s attention to the sexualized nature of children in advertising, an idea that MacGregor brings up in his study (*In the Realms* 121–124).

innocence made of him a sacrificial “lamb.”<sup>310</sup> As I discussed in the first chapter, the world of the 60s in which Darger began to write *My Life* seemed to be a fragile society collapsing into crisis and chaos, one in which a misunderstood gesture or minor dispute could lead to the firing of a nuclear weapon. Taking his cue from imagery like that of the Daisy Ad,<sup>311</sup> or the sexualized image of children prominent in the commercial advertising of his time, he might have seen little girls as the ideal (if unintentional) sacrificial victims of the warring, industrial society he lived in. In this light, just as Christ is sacrificed for all mankind, a little girl, Sweetie Pie, is offered up by Darger for all the threatened little girls of his cultural moment (see Figs. 18 and 19 for images of crucified girls), perhaps to stop the violence the society was doing to itself, or more self-consciously, perhaps to stop the slaughter of all the little girls in his (Darger's) own narratives.<sup>312</sup>

The structure of sacrifice provides us with a means of reconciling the conflicts inherent in Darger’s obsessions (destruction and salvation, innocence and violence); and, given Darger’s Catholicism, sacrifice would be a high-valence narrative decision. In this context, the Sweetie Pie image becomes the final condensation of this tendency. Darger spent his artistic life accumulating sanctity to the girl-child, as in the semi-divinity of the Vivians. This status is further raised in the context of *My Life*, where the importance of the

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<sup>310</sup> Darger spent his artistic life accumulating sanctity to the girl-child (the semi-divinity of the Vivians), and through his identification with her, he accumulates a certain amount of sanctity to himself. What is important here, despite any sacrificial motif that Darger may be channeling, is his identification with the victim, an identification that ramifies, existing not only between Darger and “the little girl” but between Darger and the storm which is conflated with the little girl in the figure of Sweetie Pie. It is also important to note that within that identification are entangled a number of other conflicting emotions – the relish of violence, and the possible violation of sexual innocence.

<sup>311</sup> This ad was discussed in Chapter One, and it is important because it juxtaposes the image of a little girl with the image of an atomic explosion.

<sup>312</sup> This suggests that Darger’s sacrifice in the Sweetie Pie image is a gesture of saving himself from his worse tendencies as an artist.

Marian associations of the storm date and image should not be undervalued. The Assumption of Mary is already analogous to the crucifixion in the sense that both Mary and Christ are freed from death and delivered to a transcendent realm. The image of the strangled Sweetie Pie in the sky oddly and violently reflects the divine Mary/Christ in its rising. In addition, by the child's association with the storm's power, the most vulnerable member of society is empowered as an agent of both vengeance and sublime experience. This redemption, as it were, takes place by the *child's appropriation of what could destroy it*.<sup>313</sup>

Darger often painted scenes in which groups of young girls run in fear from an approaching storm. In the image of the storm Sweetie Pie, that which the children fear (Figs. 20, 21), the war/storm, is appropriated to their own image (Fig. 26). Sweetie Pie, as a combination of child *and* storm, however, does not (importantly) present the child at her strongest; she is not a warrior child, but the child at its weakest—*the child at the point of annihilation*. It is at this point of annihilation that the *vulnerable child* becomes, is merged with, the *violent child* who now possesses the properties of the storm, both in its destructive apocalyptic power and in its sublime possibilities.<sup>314</sup>

It is the vulnerability of the child (the fact that it is being strangled, murdered) that makes the image sacrificial. If we are familiar with Darger's past imagery, we might wonder why, after all, does the tornado not morph into a triumphant Vivian-style warrior with sword

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<sup>313</sup>. I use the word redemption here purposely, to illustrate that the sacrificial victim "redeems" the agent, remaking the agent's life, by itself being remade, i.e., taking what is outside of its limits into its limits, thus changing its phenomenal framework.

<sup>314</sup>. This is similar to Christ's crucifixion; an innocent born to a time of extreme crisis, annihilated in His vulnerable flesh, and thereby merges back, returns to the all-powerful bodiless God. In a similar progression, Sweetie Pie arises out of the turbulence of elements in a time of extreme crisis, takes the form of a child, and is sacrificed, killed in a highly public manner, after which we assume she returns to the elements, out of which the world is or can be reborn.

or rifle in hand come to “wreak vengeance on the land.” I would answer that it is unlikely Darger was aware of making a choice here; the image that appears is the image that seems appropriate to him,<sup>315</sup> the natural outcome of a series of choices, determined by emotional valences. We might choose to read this sacrificial presentation of weakness as a sign of philosophical resignation on Darger’s part—a resignation to the brutal reality of the world. Or we might read it as a foregrounding of a basic Christian formula, by which that which is *weakest in the child*, her vulnerability,<sup>316</sup> is raised to *apocalyptic power*. This sort of inversion—the weakest shall be the strongest, the meek shall inherit the earth—is, in fact, a typically Christian formulation, whereby martyrdom, self-sacrifice, physical “weakness” becomes a metaphysical or spiritual strength, the highest type of power, which, in Christianity, is generally associated with the capacity for love, the giving of oneself for the greater good. This is likely how Darger would have understood it, and it is also the formulation that would allow for the greatest identification between Darger and the storm-child.<sup>317</sup>

It is on this relationship between sacrifice and identity that I now wish to focus. *Selfless* Christian love may well be involved in Darger’s conception of his sacrificial victims; however, I believe *Selfness* (in the form of identity construction) is equally important. One result of communal sacrifice is the solidification of communal identity, and

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<sup>315</sup> In fact, these two aspects of the girl-child, the vulnerable and the triumphant, are mere faces of the same thing.

<sup>316</sup> Their vulnerability is always present in his work and not only at the hands of violent adults. Many of Darger’s paintings show children threatened by the weather: mounting or present storms, etc.

<sup>317</sup> In regard to Darger’s images of crucified girls, Faith Ann Shields addresses the concept of love in sacrifice, stating that the ultimate act of violence (the crucifixion of Christ/God) is understood as an absolute and fundamental act of love (104). The concept of absolute love, as used by Shields refers to a love that transcends individual instances and is involved with the greater good; it is only with such a love that a sacrifice can be made.

this is also true at the level of the individual—sacrifice solidifies and enhances the individual's identity. In sacrifice, a formula is enacted by which a weakness-of-self (*absence from the center*) is turned into a strength-of-self (*presence at the very center*). Thus a compromised or *decentered self* (which I have suggested to be Darger's state) can become an enhanced, *centered self* via the ritual sacrifice. The tornado, Sweetie Pie, is the ultimate sign of this process. It is even possible to say that all the sacrificed children of Darger's earlier works find their image constituted, concentrated, focused in this supreme and relatively final image of his creative life.

#### **4.6.5 The Enhanced Sacrificial Identity**

This analysis hinges on the identification of the agent with the victim. I have already discussed how the sacrificial victim must be invested with qualities of both the agent and the divine. The double identification allows it to *act as a bridge* between the two realms. I have also discussed how Sweetie Pie meets these criteria, being an image of cultural innocence and vulnerability as well as being invested with recognizable qualities of the divine. What I wish to do now is to highlight Darger's personal identification with the Sweetie Pie storm, thus allowing us to see how Darger himself becomes the sacrificial victim through Sweetie Pie, implicating himself as both agent and victim in the sacrificial act. He affects this identification through language; in other words, it is not his body so much as his language, that by which he both creates the image and participates in it, that is offered as sacrificial object. Essentially, Darger's tongue becomes the victim by being the agent of the victim's creation—its presence as image and its plight. Through this triangle of identification in the sacrificial act (agent, victim, other) the agent becomes identified with both the victim and

the other. Darger's act of writing is largely a semi-voluntary act of self-sacrifice in the figure of Sweetie Pie.

This idea of the sacrifice of the voice does not come out of nowhere; it can be traced in the evolution of Darger's identification with Sweetie Pie, an identification that is long-running, going back to his childhood fascination with storms and storm imagery. Early on in "The Autobiography" he writes:

You remember I wrote that I hated baby kids. So indeed I did.  
 yet what a change came in me though when I grew somewhat older.  
*Then babies at that were more to me than anything, more than the world.*

I would fondle them and love them. At that time just any bigger boy or even grown up dare molest or harm then in any – way.

I will have to say all my child hood days with my father who was very busy everyday, except sundays and holidays were sort of uneventful except *I was very interested in summer thunderstorms (still am old as I am [are?])* and during winter (cold) could and would stand by the window all day, watching it snow, especially if there was a great big blizzard raging.

*I would watch it rain with great interest,* also short or long showers.

Once not knowing any better I put lots of newspaper beside the stove near the wall and set it on fire I got my ears boxed good and propter. I got it good once again from my father when he thought from my action that I was going to do it again.

But I had no intention of doing so.

Every 4 of July I shot off all types of firecrackers and never was hurt or burned once, I was so overcareful.

*I was also crazy about making bonfires* but was so careful I was never scorched, singed or burned. (9-11)

Note in the above passage that Darger drifts from the subject of his admiration for babies to his admiration for storms to his fascination for fires. This drift indicates, I believe, the narrative valences concerning subject matter, guiding Darger's thought and tying together various themes into an associational network or web.

As to the storms themselves, critics often see these storms as exteriorizations of what happens in Darger's mind—an exteriorization of inner conflict and rage. Darger does admit

to rage and makes a similar connection in diary entries, such as this Tuesday 16 1968 entry, in which he declares himself, “Mad enough to *wish I was a bad tornado*. Swore at God” (qtd. in Bonesteel 251, my emphasis). Such statements indicate that Darger saw the violence of the tornado as *other than* God and thus a possible weapon to be used against God.<sup>318</sup>

What is perhaps more important is the fact that, in addition to rage, Darger does correlate his own coming into being with a tornado in a kind of revisionist birth story in which he situates his birth with the coming of a tornado. He does this in Book Two, in a conversation in which a “delegate” at a tornado panel discussion speaks of a missing house:

“Permit me to say” returned the delegate that you are rather right, knowing that none of us can find trace even of its owner. We consider also the way its smashed up should he come he would not recognize what’s left of his house either. We also consider ourselves hoodwinked by the twister, for all symptoms tells us so, and now we all know. And we are of an excellent idea, that unless it comes from La Salle he’ll never receive news of this. As I’ve discovered its not in any of La Salls news or any where else. Can we find means to match that mystery?”

“Well” said I. “I was born in Chicago in April 12 19 1892 in a ramshakle house, not because of my parents being short of funds, because it was their only shelter during a the coming of a storm, on their way to a doctor, and I guess that being just as espectable and haughty or a crazy tornado carrying a house away from some unknown territory. If it isnt Ill have to stand it thats all.” (1363-1364)<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup>. A similar statement could be made in regard to the balls of string that Darger assembled and collected. These balls of string are like a little hand-made tornado and he threw them at pictures of Jesus.

<sup>319</sup>. Admittedly, the storm that Darger speaks of is not named as a tornado *per se*, but that is the context of the exchange. What is also notable here, among the several layers of unknowing in this paragraph, is the failure of communication, a theme I have pointed out earlier. The tornado, which seems to have tricked, or “hoodwinked” them, is not in the news, an absence which seems odd given its newsworthy nature. The situation of Darger’s birth is as “espectable and haughty” as a tornado carrying away a house from an unknown territory. Thus it is possible here to read the “mystery” in two ways: the tornado’s ability to hoodwink them, and/or the fact that no news of the tornado appears in the media. The statement, “I was born” comes out of and shares in the situation of the mystery.

Note that Darger follows the query “match that mystery,” with “I was born,” thus matching the story of his birth to *the mystery of the tornado’s* destructive power.<sup>320</sup> We might assume that Darger’s deep identification with the tornado Sweetie Pie is beyond mere empathy with “her” anger and destructive capability—rather it is an identification bordering on subjective dependence.<sup>321</sup> In other words, Darger, the writer, becomes Henry Darger, the man, via the creation of Sweetie Pie, which, as mentioned, is a ritualized repetitive process. The author’s “self,” is defined by, or in relation to, his creation of her. When Sweetie Pie tears about civilization, so does he (virtually, we might say); when she is on trial, so is he. She is the creator and collector of wreckage, and so is he. Not only is she part of, or a version of himself, she is also what enables him to further transition into more satisfying versions of himself—all the heroic Dargers of the fire-wars and rescue squads. In this sense, Sweetie Pie is, or at least creates, the inner better Henry; she is an amplification of an absence *as*

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<sup>320.</sup> We know that Darger’s real birthdate coincides with no known tornado. However, in 1913 there is an Easter Sunday tornado on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, which strikes in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Terre Haute, Ind. This could be the tornado that Darger originally refers to when he says late March. Darger would have been 21 that year, living in Chicago, and he may have saved and referred to newspaper accounts of this storm. It is also true that accounts of this tornado have several themes and locations that are similar to Darger’s tale: railroad tracks, train cars, a Telephone Exchange building, and a Sacred Heart Convent, suggesting that Darger got some of his ideas from reading these media accounts. Darger in fact claims to have a picture book about this storm.

We went with newspaper photographers, who took various photos of the unbelievable desvastaion. As of now Ive got a book, with photograpgs of what the tornado on Easter Sunday March 23 1913 did, and now have photos of the twister horror of Oak lawn, and Belvidere of April ~~27~~ 21 1967. (249)

It was a horror beyond imagination. We saw also where many blocks of all sorts of buildings were all leveled scattered der debris timbers and the like. Later when I lived and still live in Chicago, Ive seen pictures of what tornadoes did in Omaha Murphysboro, Melrose park and also in Oak Lawn and Belvidere. (278-279)

<sup>321.</sup> Indeed, Darger ties himself into the world via a web of identifications: Darger and Storm, Darger and Sweetie Pie, Darger and Annie Aronburg, Sweetie Pie and Mary, Sweetie Pie and Christ, Darger and Christ. These identifications are one of the *accumulations* that take place in the text, the building up of excess in the form of an excess of identification.

*presence*.<sup>322</sup> This amplification is brought about through an entity created in and by words, which, whether written or spoken, are the effects of a voice, a production of linguistic artifacts: sounds, letters, words, that eventually shape themselves into a unique, as opposed to a generalized voice, by which Darger names the world and claims his agency, his subjectivity.

#### 4.6.6 The Sacrificial Tongue

By way of conclusion, I will now look at Sweetie Pie as a figure for Darger's voice, and, as such, she is Darger's voice sanctified and sacrificed. Evidence for this identification is found first in Darger's identification with girls and storms as already discussed. Second, it is found in the largely vocal/aural quality of the storm; the storm is as much an aural experience as it is a visual or visceral one, and Darger concentrates many of his descriptions on its overwhelming sound—a thousand locomotives, a million howling dogs, etc. (see Appendix H/2) Thirdly, it is found in Darger's figuration of the funnel cloud as a tongue, which is not simply the choked-off tongue of the children whom Sweetie Pie represents;<sup>323</sup> it is Darger's own tongue, which in the case of the written word becomes his pen.

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<sup>322</sup>. To anthropomorphize something is the ultimate end of the process of identifying it, or, more to the point, identifying with it, making it as close to 'self' as possible. Darger's identification with the storm is of a piece with his identification with the missing child motif mentioned earlier. Here I return to the lineage of the image of Sweetie Pie in Elsie Paroubek/Annie Aronberg, the latter being the child rebel and martyr who was, or would have been the leading role of *The Realms*. Bonesteel says, "At one point his identification with Annie became so intense that he took her name," and erected an altar to Annie Aronburg in his friend Schloeder's barn" (11). Bonesteel believes, and rightfully so, that because the photo was never returned, Darger turned his fictional war toward the side of the Glandolineans, and that he began to create Glandolinean Darger's. This identification is especially interesting because, as Bonesteel suggests, Darger may not have actually intended to use the Paroubek picture and might have made this decision *after the fact of the loss*, meaning that the artistic and psychological value of the photo was in its disappearance, its *absence*, leading to the possible speculation that it is Darger's own "absence" of (or compromised) self that he is identifying with in the photo, an absence that generates an endless series of images that cannot find or fix it, perpetuating an ongoing narrative vor/text.

<sup>323</sup>. I refer here to the numerous images of the strangled children that can be seen throughout his pictorial work.

**Table 5: “Tongue” Variants by Book**

<b>Book One</b>	<b>Book Two</b>	<b>Book Three</b>	<b>Book Four</b>
	<b>Tongue 14</b> <b>Tongues 4</b>	<b>Tongue 18</b> <b>Tongues 7</b>	<b>Tongue 350</b> <b>Tongues 7</b>
	<b>1/13,392</b>	<b>1/14,152</b>	<b>1/1,068</b>

The protruding tongue, like the writing pen producing hypergraphic text, is a vehicle of pressurized language, pressurized voice. The tongue explodes out of the body, or head; it is *pressured* out.

As I said before I cannot give an exact description of its figure than comparing it to the form of a child being strangled, head slightly lowered and tongue sticking out as far as it could go.

The lower part of the cloud connected to the neck was in awful convulsions like a strangling child would be, another section of the cloud seem to rise up to a great length like struggling arms and legs.

The abdominal part of the cloud spread or bulged outward as if it was going to burst open by a sudden gust of too much air that compelled it.

Then it seemed pressed back by its own inward motion. Finally the tongue seemed to come to protrude out more, and at that instant from its connecting with the belly shot forth a snake twister form of lightning the lightning of which I never saw before and turned the unusual coming darkness to light as the most brightest day. Oh my God, I never in all my life heard such heaven splitting thunder. It shook the trees and windows of my house and the porch swayed. (3111-3112)

In Books Two and Three, the word “tongue” is primarily a reference to tongues of electricity or flame, and the adjectives that accompany the word are *long, longue, hot, fiery*, etc. In Book Four, however, the adjectives that commonly occur with the word tongue are: *overwhelming, immeasurable, protruding, lag, swelled, sticking, wild, terrible, destructive, dire, immense, horrid, fatal, quivering, exploding, explosive, flashing (with lightening), wrought, havoc (making), delicate, little, incredible, tornado, churning, notable*. With few exceptions, the overall connotation is of frightening, overpowering events. Indeed, the coming of the tongue is tied to the coming of Armageddon (a tongue Armageddon), which

we could read as the Apocalyptic War of the Voice.

The following quote gives us some indication of the importance of the tongue image and the mystery that surrounds it.

The very force of the wind was instantly fatal. The wind too became so hot that even the heat was dangerous. If the path of destruction is anything like that of other great tornados no vegetable or animal or human life can survive them for a minute.

“How come that darn tornado is called the tongue?” someone at the meeting asked. “It seems strange and ridiculas that word “tongue.”

“Because the tongue became the tornado the professor answered.) “Besides the name is not my idea. Many have called it. Ive just taken that word up. Besides it still protruded from the open clouds mouth, and witnesses say that darn cloud seemed to retain that odd shape as far as the terrific storm traveled.

It is stated that “tongue” from eñ Gleason, not counting Johnson town, all the way to Terre Haute, killed injured and fatally injured or crippled for life tons of thousands of men women and children many swept to a sudden and most terrible death.

Beautiful cities and towns, and many farms from Johnson town, to Terre Haute laid waste as long as it took the tornado to travel that distance. That “tongue” horror caused scenes of suffering and devastation that overwhelm all description.

It horrified our whole nation and the rest of the civilized world.

Horrified by the appalling news of this greatest tornado calamity ever known before, many people all over the Country everywhere became afraid of all coming black clouds of thunderstorms for fear a tornado would be in the rear of one.

You ask why the tornado was called the “tongue?” If you men and women, and a few children here wouldnt object me using, <sup>them</sup> there are a few words I could call that “Tongue” which you wouldnt find in Websters Dictionary or a prayer book.”

At this a murmer of giggle resounded throughout the large room, including mine also. Then one woman said, “For what it did, wed all call it profane words if God permitted it.”

She continued “Such is the tragic story of Chesterbrown and other cities towns and farms. There have been many disasters by flood wind and fire in recent times but none of them put together can equal this. The Johnson town Calamity was the beginning of this. The dreadful Gleason city and Gleason orphange yet did not result in an eighth part of the loss of life that, visited Chesterbrown and other cities where ~~dorm~~ doom was sealed by this dire “tongue” calamity. In a moment in the twinkling of an eye as it were a mulitude of human beings in Chesterbrown alone were plunged into the jaws of death or crippled for all their lives.

Fine residences shared the fate of the humbler dwellings of the poor Buildings devoted to businesses five magnificent most costly banks churches the great Sacred Convent big markets including the super market, the parks, ships in the river were destroyed by this worst of all tornados. Respect for truth obliges me to confess that I have no superior wisdom or am I so very wise ‡ to explain in perfection what caused the tornado to assume such an odd shape and remain that way for all the distance it traveled.

Neither have I had any practical experience in all my studies and knowledge in knowing too well the cause of the phenomenon. But let us consider this case. The “protruding tongue” was a renegade twister and its fury is not an ordinary tornado like the other kinds and is much above their strength. In this case the “tongue” if I must say it again has been of an overwhelming immeasurable force and fury and carried all before it as far as it traveled and it was a more dangerous one of all.

Yet with all its arts of horror at its command it is still a tornado and surely there are ways in which the mystery of the strangling child's head shape may be solved. How do you say how?

Allow me to state that I don't know. Also I wasn't there to see the phenomenon. In my judgement we cannot decide how best to act carefully until we get pictures of the phenomenon, if any had been taken.

None so far have been seen in any of the news papers and none so far have been sketched from any description. So if only we had a picture or camera shot of it we could take a look at it and study it. If we had such a photograph or even a sketch we may discover an idea that will guide us to victory. Anyone here heard of any one who ever took a picture of it?”

“The overwhelming disaster brought awe inspiring news that came as a shock to people everywhere so I believe anyone was too excited or panicky to find out if the papers had any photographs of it.” I myself said. “I have plenty of newspapers in the committee office and a few with me now in my inside pocket but none of them has any picture of the odd shaped cloud. (3342—3348)

In the tongue metaphor, the sacrificial paradox is put to personal use at the end of *My Life*. If we associate both *tornado* and *tongue* with voice, then the voice of Sweetie Pie, (identified as Darger's voice) is *produced* coincidentally, ironically, *by the attempt to strangle it*. This is to say that the heightened affect of the voice is produced through its being sacrificed, an idea that resonates with the particulars of Darger's personal life in that Darger's own voice, his pen,<sup>324</sup> is produced by its own “strangulation,” be it the social constraints of institutional

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<sup>324</sup> A fourth association can be added to the chain of voice, tongue, pen, and that is penis. The phallic associations of the destructive tongue are evident in what we might term Darger's revenge for his frustrated

dysfunction under which he was raised, or the neurological constraints mentioned in Chapter Two, or both.<sup>325</sup> Admittedly, this is a rather obvious psychological analysis of Darger's desire to write as destructive act of revenge. However, notwithstanding whatever validity such an analysis might have, I would like to suggest a different perspective: I will look at the constriction of the voice, what might be seen as a form of destruction, as, actually, a form of imposing order—containing, ordering the disparate chaotic objects in the turbulent flow of the world.

If, in an absolutely materialist framework, there is no transcendent realm, there is only a “vulgar materialism of signs,” these pieces of the real, as they have been called, are everyday collected organized and generated into the receptacles or mirrors of selves. Darger manifests his desire for transcendence by manifesting that vulgar real in excess—in this case, excess material writing. Serres suggests this *materialism of meaning* when he says the only thing that is important is the relations between things, be they letters or atoms—the space between things and languages is, in effect, zero:

The laws of nature come from conjugation; there is no nature but that of compounds. In the same way, there are the laws of putting together letters-atoms to produce a text. [...] Language is born with the birth of things and by the very same process. [...] My text, my word, my body, the collective with its agreements and struggles [...], all these are only a network of primordial elements in communication with each other. (Hermes 114)<sup>326</sup>

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sexuality. It is also the case, as has been mentioned earlier, that a libidinal impulse is attached to writing and thus the pen. In addition, the choking of the throat that produces the tongue can be associated with castration anxiety or with masturbation. Admittedly I am avoiding any lengthy engagement with Freudian psychology in this study for the benefits of reasonable focus and length.

<sup>325</sup> This is not to say that Darger would not have been a writer were his circumstances different, but that the particular tone and quality of his actual work-as-it-is is deeply indebted to and dependent upon these constraints.

<sup>326</sup> In *Hermes*, Serres suggests the materialism of meaning in such phrases as: “History flows around physics”(116); “History is only the translation or transposition of this material principle” (118); or: “Morality is physics,” (121), or “Through the orpus of these concrete extensions, idealism is kept and transmitted to us. Materialism is always hidden behind it” (112).

Sweetie Pie (Venus)/Darger (Sweetie Pie) is, in fact, the temporary albeit regenerated product of (produced by) physical words—Darger’s written words, which include the spoken words of his characters. These words are presented and represented, spun up (organized) in the urge to point to something beyond themselves, beyond mere words, beyond mere things. This “beyond,” in Darger’s case (as in everyone’s), is the ungraspable Self at the center of experience, a stable meta-representational,<sup>327</sup> sense of self as affecting agent. To this end, the subject of the writing augments (becomes) the subjectivity of the writer, with Sweetie Pie being ultimately nothing but the physical words that continue to point to her. To restate: Sweetie Pie is composed of a surplus, an over-accumulation, an over-collection of *things*, and inasmuch as Darger identifies with Sweetie Pie, he himself becomes the sum total of this accumulation, or more accurately, what that accumulation points to—the ultimate signifier of Self, the last (and always missing) item of a collection process that never ends because it never achieves its goal.<sup>328</sup> Furthermore, in facilitating the emergence of the storm Sweetie Pie, Darger co-incidentally emerges as witness to her, Darger himself emerges out of the crushing weight of the accumulated material. Darger’s supra-narrator (Henry Prime) identifies with the vortex because the narrator/narration is as well always organizing itself into a vortex, a redundant structure that serves as a means of *contrasting itself* against the turbulence of an uncentered existence undefined. Serres writes: “Men no less than things are composed of atoms, both in their soul and in their consciousness” (*Hermes* 112); “The fall of atoms and of bodies not at equilibrium, the

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<sup>327</sup>. Like other metarepresentations (God, the whole symbolic world), all such metarepresentations can be considered as appendages, ungraspable limbs by, and with, which the self is made. They must constantly be represented to their agent as a sign of his/her agency.

<sup>328</sup>. The last item of the collection is always the self; it is always the item that is never gained.

formation of flows, turbulent fluxions, fire. They are charged with the birth of everything and everyone. What is a living thing? A thing in equilibrium and in disequilibrium, a flow, a vortex, heat—perhaps like any other object” (*Hermes* 113), therefore, “Who am I? A vortex” (*Physics* 37)<sup>329</sup>

#### 4.6.7 The Sacrificial Mystery

“‘Could no one solve the mystery of why the cloud assumed that form?’ asked the president of the meeting.”

—*My Life* (3351)

The fact that Sweetie Pie/Venus/Darger is being strangled by anonymous arms, literally choking off her throat and her voice,<sup>330</sup> creates a public sacrificial scenario (of voice) that mutates into a kind of mathematical sublimity—an excessive writing of the voice which keeps the voice present and in play. It is in the nature of sacrifice that fragmentation leads to fruitfulness and proliferation comes from destruction—therefore the sacrifice of the girl creates a material and verbal fruitfulness, an opening up of the material world into a vast multiplicity, a fecund molecularity. The world may then be re-numerated, re-written, re-scribed, re-described through the accumulation of its detritus, its corpses, its objects. It is, in effect, reborn out of its own detritus *by the act of its being written*. Writing as detritus becomes the writing of detritus and vice-versa, spiraling on in the vortex of self-making.

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<sup>329</sup> Much of Serres’ writing has to do with the construction of the “I” out of the primordial flow. “The I is nobody in particular, it is not a singularity, it has no contours, it is the blankness of all colors and all nuances, an open and translucent welcome of a multiplicity of thoughts, it is therefore the possible. I am indeterminately, nobody [...] Who am I? [...] I am just the plain whore of the thoughts that accost me, I wait for them, morning and evening, at the crossroads, under the statue of the angel Hermes, all wind and all weather” (*Genesis* 31).

<sup>330</sup> We could say that by extension she is being decapitated, as Darger himself may have felt decapitated, or, by extension, castrated by the world.

The sacrifice, figured by strangulation, allows the tongue (pen) to explode into a flurry (fury) of words, and the tongue/pen/tornado-funnel, in the destruction of the constricting and failed molar institutions,<sup>331</sup> opens them up to a new possibility, whatever might arise out of the multiplicity, the detritus of destruction.<sup>332</sup>

As mentioned, the voice that is produced or written is an extreme voice, a scream rendered in terms of multitudes.<sup>333</sup> This is everywhere apparent, not only by the action of the voice, but in its matter. What I would like to suggest is that despite other sacrificial concerns Darger may be attuned to (Catholic, etc.), his primary concern is that of the voice, the loss of voice and the consequent flood of rhetorical “things” (words, marks, objects) by which he seeks to make himself “heard.”<sup>334</sup>

“No one I believe” declared another member of the meeting, “can surely identify the cause of the forming of the strange odd shaped cloud. Any one now knows that this (head of the strangling child cloud though it had hitherto appeared was soon to compell by its immense tongue” the whole world to pay it instant attention. [...] The protruding of tongue of that cloud head was to become the scene of a tornado so appalling that is destined to be remembered throughout the ages.” (3351)

The voice demands attention, it demands to be remembered. The thousand wolves, dogs, and freight trains of Sweetie Pie's voice are analogous to the thousands of words written by

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<sup>331.</sup> The sacrifice of the voice grows the voice, extends it, as Sweetie Pie herself grows, into the landscape of civilization. In that Sweetie Pie is the destroyer of that landscape, the sacrifice is extended (by her muted tongue) into the world.

<sup>332.</sup> Whether Darger intended her image to transmit this is unknowable. Again, his references to biblical apocalypse are instructive as framing devices for reading the destruction of the storm.

<sup>333.</sup> Darger concentrates many of his descriptions of the tongue/storm in its overwhelming sound—a thousand locomotives, a million howling dogs.

<sup>334.</sup> This is true even if the noise one makes is essentially to put an end to noise. “But one must make more noise than the others in order for one’s shout of *no more noise* to be heard and for others to obey. One must demonstrate more fury to strike fear into fury. Neither noise nor fury ever ceases even under the dominion of those who claim to eliminate them” (*Genesis* 74). In this statement Serres is pointing to the paradox that in order to put an end to noise, fury, violence, one must participate in them, add to them. The sacrifice adds violence to violence in order to bring about an end to violence. In order to bring an end to catastrophe one must create catastrophe.

Darger, the immensely redundant text by which his self-presence, his being is maintained. This continued growth, this expansion *ad infinitum*, is the mode of being, and absolutely necessary to being as the alternative is non-existence, non-presence, or death. Growth and expansion is integral to the process. Indeed, one must make *more* noise than all the others in order to be heard. Darger's voice is noise seeking form through growth and pattern. Serres writes: "noise goes round choosing to get bigger or die" (*Genesis* 59).<sup>335</sup> This ever-growing noise is analogous with the multiplicity, the crowd of elements in collision that creates the world. "The forest is multiplicity. The sea, again is multiplicity. The increasing deluge, fire, multiplicity always returns. Forest, sea, fire, deluge, figures of the crowd. From the crowd comes fury" (*Genesis* 56). The hero, who is a member of the crowd, a member of the multiplicity, channels the noise; he recreates it to direct it. This fury, this rage at things as they are, were, or will be, only recreates itself, even when the attempt is one of cessation, and here is where the growth of noise and violence, the continuation of fury, is related to sacrifice. The sacrificial act is implicit in the very work of matter.

In addition to the cyclical growth of noise, fury, violence and its redirection through war, sacrifice, I would draw attention to the "laws of nature from conjugation" that governs such noise and fury (*Hermes* 113). This conjugation begins at the clinamen where the possibility of atoms meeting atoms begins, and from which all of nature and textuality descends. Darger's text (his voice), too, is one of "conjunctive turbulence," following the natural laws of fluid mechanics. In fact, Darger's/Sweetie Pie's voice is a *conjunctive/conjoining* action, an act that collects everything that comes into its vortex of influence. It joins voice to voice; it is, in fact, unable to keep voices separate, as proper

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<sup>335</sup> In other words, and by the way of parallel: "if you wish to save your soul, your breath, your voice, venture to loose them; if you wish to loose them, try to save them, to keep them in the cocoon of redundancy" (*Genesis* 59).

literary fiction needs to do. Thus, what we are seeing constantly in Darger is a turbulent conflation of voices: his own voice with the voice of all children, with the voice of Sweetie Pie, with the elemental howls of wolves, with the voice of Mary, with that of Christ, with the prophecy of witnesses, with the explanations of experts, etc. This mixing and mingling of accumulating voices and symbolic resonance is a sign of the very turbulence that the text is engaged in, and from which it seeks not so much to escape (it cannot, because it is part of it, adding to it), but rather to give meaning to, by producing pattern, by producing the vor/text. By introducing the pattern, by adding redundancy to the turbulence, Darger channels the noise, he becomes the hero in his fury, the hero on the stage, on the boards, before the crowd. But more to the point, Darger appropriates that very turbulence which has disempowered him and turns it into a form of power, and this brings me back to the idea of redemption.

My position, as described in the last chapter, is that Sweetie Pie is the image of the vortex, the meaning of the text, and that toward which the text is perpetually moving. She is that by which Darger feels/makes himself. When Darger says, "I wish I was a bad tornado," he is saying more than "I want to wreak some vengeance" (though he is undoubtedly saying that). He is also saying, "I desire agency, I demand attention, I demand to be remembered," and he does so through the creation of a vor/text that both binds and organizes his Self, and this binding can be said to take place through accumulating physical words in sentences, phrases, pages, volumes. Here it is worthwhile to recall the evolution of Darger's vortex via the imagery of his story. We could begin with the circularity and violence of his own life, a dynamic of capture and escape. The telling of that circularity in Book One leads to the emergence of the Maelstrom in Book Two, which disintegrates into a turbulence of fire

tornadoes and chaotic smaller vortices in Book Three, all of it re-coalescing again in the personification of the vortex of Sweetie Pie in Book Four. We can trace a concurrent evolution of agency as we move toward this personification, in fact it is the agency of the tornado that is the subject of many of the debates surrounding it, with Darger's own agency somehow constantly in play with that of the tornado, the tongue that not only causes the destruction of the landscape but that oddly participates in its own birth: "the protruding tongue forming into the twister first penetrated the chest and the burst out of the belly" (4821). In the following extended quote we can see not only the sacrificial quality of the image, but the metaphorical combination of voice, tongue, serpent, birth, vortex, death, and the anguished cries of most of humanity.

As I said before I cannot give an exact description of its figure than comparing it to the form of a child being strangled, head slightly lowered and tongue sticking out as far as it could go.

The lower part of the cloud connected to the neck was in awful convulsions like a strangling child would be, another section of the cloud seem to rise up to a great length like struggling arms and legs.

The abdominal part of the cloud spread or bulged outward as if it was going to burst open by a sudden gust of too much air that impelled it.

Then it seemed pressed back by its own inward motion. Finally the tongue seemed to come to protrude out more, and at that instant from it connecting with the belly shot forth a snake twister form of lightning the lightning of which I never saw before and turned the unusual coming darkness on bright as the most brightest day. Oh my God, I never in all my life heard such heaven splitting thunder. It shook the trees and windows of my house and the porch swayed."

"That is something, I forgot to mention," put in Jasneff. That lightning flash temporally blinded me, and two thousand of the biggest cannon going off at one time at that spot. I believe couldnt haer have roared or banged half as loud as that thunder crash. And it was no short uproar either and lasted a minute without even stopping."

Thats right said John. When I looked again the tongue though the mouth was open somewhat under was gone completely.

The tongue had suddenly very very suddenly assumed a different distinct and different definite existance in a long revolving writhing column of a more than mile and a half in diameter near the ground.

It seemed to be inclined to the horizon at an angle of forty or more degrees speeding dizzily around faster than an electric motor with some kind of swaying and sweltering motion and sending forth every where an appalling round which even a legion of the loudest ~~shreak~~ shrieking demons could not make, with a howling round of thousands of dogs at once, also like shrieking of thousands of children yelling at their utmost and a confusion of other rounds.

The upper part of the funnel shrouded up or below gave forth the worst type of humming round ever imagined and so loud loud as thunder.

Even the lower part of the main cloud directly above the connecting funnel assumed a monstrous volicity.

Each movement added to its to its speed to its most head long ~~impetuosity~~ impetuously. The part of the cloud that had formed like the head of a child being strangled was in awful convulsion, or lashed in the most ungovernable fury but it was it and also the cloud part that had connected with the neck that the main uproar held its sway.

That whole what had been the head, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting cloudy channels ~~also~~ all in the most fren frenzied convulsions, while the cloud connecting with the neck was gyration in ~~geag~~ gigantic and unnumerable vortices and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity ~~wh~~ which even water never else where assumes except in very swift precipitous descents. I cannot dare to describe even to save my life the terrible shrieks and yells that went up ~~from~~ to heaven and skies from the upper cloud connected with the revolving terror.

Oh God help those who are in its path" I cried. I never saw a storm that raving mad before and its forward movement was being retracted badly by the speed of its whirl.

All those who ever experience or saw tornadoes ever saw anything like it. Before it got very dark the great horrid beautiful or ~~bu~~ beauty of the scene revealed itself. The column seemed higher longer and more massive near seeming to be longer three times longer than any tornado before. It had a strange yes very strange concentric motion where it connected with the main cloud showing exquisite churning surfaces due to the upper moving currents. It was like the decoration of the rock of a great whirling sarcophagus.

The roaring of the twister coming nearer was deafening and the electric display of lightning was terrifying constant clap of thunder following the flash of lightning which gave the darkening sky a dazzling electrical brightness. And this vast mass of tumult roundness was beautifully accentuated by these lightning flashes. Then there came again one of those most awful lightning flashes. The frightful explosion of thunder that followed I felt sure was the worst of all the dreadful display of lightning the thunder diminishing in intensity for two minutes.

That thunder crash again shook our house to its very foundation the door and windows swinging upon their hinges.

This thunder was immensely more louder than the loudest thunder of any violent storm I ever heard. Later I heard that roar of thunder was heard as

far as Chicago, Bloomington, Kankakee, La Salle and Moline, and violently vibrated all windows in those cities and caused great consternation.

I was greatly excited by this extraordinary phenomenon which appeared to head for our town, the base on the ground like a large convulsed high black shroud. People seeing it coming left their homes in utmost consternation and as to a mind distracted with terror every suggestion seemed more prudent than its own pressed in great crowds about our house.

We still remained on our porch on the midst of a most dangerous and dreadful scene. On the other hand a black and most dreadful cloud bursting with an igneous serpentine flash of lightning but the largest and longest lightning ever seen. It was followed by a thunderbolt that seemed to split earth and sky together.

At this moment the cloud seemed to descend and cover the whole countryside.

A terrible darkness overspread us not like that of a dark cloud night, or when there is no moon but of a small room when it is all shut up, the window curtains drawn down and all the light are extinct. Nothing then was to be heard but the ~~shreks~~ shrieks of woman, the screams of children the cries of man, a tumultuous barking and howling of dogs and the mad roar of the storm. (3111–3115)

I mentioned early on that “mystery” is a major theme of the book, or, if not exactly a theme, it is a fall-back position: when meaning fails, when textuality fails, there is always mystery,<sup>336</sup> manifesting itself in the act of writing. Mystery shows itself in the conflict of perceptions and explanations, presence and absence, integrity and fragmentation. It is the pulse of order and disorder that Darger is attuned to. Darger gleaned that to make his flood of words, and the flood of the world, mean something, he would add redundancy to its forward flow, thus reproducing the paradox, the conflict, the mystery over and over again, keeping it present, even as the world does. Indeed, we could say that for all its non-conformity, its ugliness, its redundancy, Darger’s gargantuan text does imitate the pulse and flow of this world. When immersed in Darger’s words we are immersed in his theology of things; things from which the phenomenon of the subject comes to be, just as life comes to

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<sup>336</sup> We could say that Mystery is another metarepresentation, like the Self, like God, etc., Mystery is a word that *stands in*, and yet it is a word whose meaning is actually *absence*; it is the metarepresentation of absence in absence.

be from fire and stone and water and hurricanes. From “a network of primordial elements in communication with each other,” Serres writes in *Genesis*, “the poem has the shape of a vortex” (114). In this phrase, Serres indicates the birth of poetry, mythology, and nonsense from bodies, things, and signs. Sweetie Pie, the Turbulent Venus, arises as does all human “meaning” from mere matter. To make a world, or to save a world, and to make a man at its center, this is her (Venus’s) project, perhaps despite herself. Like a natural poet, Darger has collected his “things” before him (and before us); perhaps, despite himself, he has thus turned a suppressed voice into a sacrificial voice; he has aligned his sacrifice with that of all innocence, toward a reborn world. Inasmuch as Darger recreates the world’s renewal (read: redemption), it is his own.

## **5.0 Conclusion:** **Vor/Text = Self/Text: A System of the Self**

This study has been devoted to finding a key to Darger's writing, especially his autobiographical *History of My Life*. The form by which I have sought to manifest this key has been through Darger's primary metaphor of the vortex as it is used consciously in the text, and unconsciously as the structure of the text. To begin I have shown that the vortex has a long history, literary and otherwise, of being an image for creation and chaos. By extension, the vortex can also figure the transition from one state to another—acting as the form of passage, a tunnel or bridge between order and disorder. The vortex can be said to come into being via excess volume or speed in a fluid-dynamic environment. It is the excess that necessitates the change of state. In the case of Darger's *My Life*, that excess is one of words, of unbound narrative, propagated by both individual (neurological) and cultural (postmodern) conditions, each leading to an anxiety of identity, what I have called a dislocation of self. This self-conscious "self" is the ultimate ground of meaning(ful) experience, and without it there can be no meaning in any abstract or emotional sense.

I have stated that Darger, like everyone to some degree, seeks an organizational metaphor by which to construct or reconstruct or constitute his "self" as an affective entity in a fragmenting world. He is thus given to a number of "behaviors" that seek to "materialize" or "objectify" his compromised subjectivity. These behaviors, outlined in Chapter Two—obsessional and constant production, obsessional repetition, lack of closure, hypergraphia, collecting, recollecting—are a way of *being in the world*. Because one individual (Darger) pursues them (naturally or mechanically), *in excess* (partly due to lack of constraints, etc.), vortical patterns of organization emerge, and these patterns *are* the

patterns of the natural world: the currents of oceans, the outbreaks of weather, the shape of water draining away in a sink, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires.

I have made the claim that the many vortices that appear in Darger's writing accumulate until they are finally objectified in one figure—the tornado, Sweetie Pie, which I have identified with Michel Serres' Venus Turbulente, a figure of transition and becoming, both in the natural world and in the world of symbols. Part of this world of symbols is that of language which is composed of physical signs—sounds, marks, etc., structuring themselves in a manner that provides stability and meaning to experience. As Serres says, Venus Turbulente, rising as she does out of the elements of turbulent materiality is analogous to the poem structuring itself out of the elements of language: “My text, my word, my body [...] all these are only a network of primordial elements in communication with each other” (114), and it is out of this communication, “that the poem, in the form of a double cone, has the shape of a vortex [...] the nascent form of Aphrodite” (*Genesis* 70). In such a manner, Darger's *My Life* produces Sweetie Pie; his text, his word, his body—for all its flaws of fragmentation and repetition, is that which provides the linguistic-molecular material for the emerging shape of the storm. I have noted that the vortex is a transitional shape. Sweetie Pie, who, affectively figures Darger's own voice, transitions Henry Darger, the eccentric, reclusive writer, into “Henry Darger,” the man who takes his mission from catastrophe and his agency from turbulence, the man who creates a heroic affective self from the material world outside of that self.

I have stated that Sweetie Pie figures Darger's own voice; I have also made the claim that Sweetie Pie is both a sublime and a sacrificial image. Sacrifice and the sublime are both technologies of identity; they are *systems* or affects of thought that seek to produce or

stabilize identity precisely through some form of threat to that identity (the threat should be purely aesthetic if the identity is to abide). It therefore follows that the representation of the sublime (primarily mathematical) and the sacrificial play a part in Darger's self-generation. The "sacrificial" value of Darger's vortex image, Sweetie Pie, equals the sacrificial intention of Darger's writing. Because the constitution of self, and the creation of the self's voice are linked, and because Darger's voice can be considered obstructed, or denied (due to neurological and social constraints), Darger's triumph is that he turns the obstruction of voice into a sacrificial scene in his ongoing effort to enhance and grow the experience of his self.

There are, of course several arguments that can be brought to bear against the ideas in this study; the first, and most obvious, being that I seem to be making much of what many would see as an amateurish and undirected narrative, one that does not strive for literary status and may be little more than an odd exercise in distraction. This is, however, largely *the point* of this study—to find in a borderline, non-literary, "outsider" text, the tools for understanding the narrative impulse at its most basic, functional (or dysfunctional) level. This understanding can then be brought back into the analysis of literature proper to expand our understanding of its production. Furthermore, far from being inconsequential, we must consider the passion with which Darger, in the course of his life, pursued his work, especially the image of the strangled child (in Sweetie Pie, one form of vortex)—recopying, reiterating, rewriting, recollecting—from the hundreds of instances in his paintings to the numerous narrative scenes of his writings. The importance of the image brings me back to Christopher Bollas and his idea of constructing one's self-idiom out of objects, either physical objects invested with our desires, or mental objects of our own creation. Darger like

any author/artist is creating his self-idiom in his work in the material world.

A second accusation can be made that my discussion has veered toward the symbolism of, and not the materialism of, the mental processes that drive the imagery and the text's shape. My response to this argument is that if one accepts at the outset a non-dualist (modern, scientific) world view, in which mind and self are products of material dynamics, then symbolism, indeed all abstract thought, is fundamentally a material event (albeit however complex) produced and read by material computations in material brains and is therefore the proper subject of material study. Indeed, there is a growing field of research into the material mind and human creative output. This may well be the field into which this study best fits. Thus I reiterate what I have been saying all along, that the formative dynamics of the material world work toward the emergence of structures and systems that self-complicate in the process of self-constitution and self-preservation. Self-preservation is, of course, without other agenda until such time as human subjectivity is the outcome of this dynamic, and subjectivity *as a system* will attempt to maintain itself against chaos. Creative activity is part of this attempt.

Here I would like to contextualize my discussion within the field of systems science. "Thinking systems" (or thinking as system) are systems of identity constitution and maintenance, and like all systems they are subject to analysis as such. Contemporary systems science, "tends increasingly to concentrate on organization: not the thing or person *per se*, nor how one thing produces an effect on one other thing, but rather how sets of events are structured and how they function in relation" to other sets of events and things (Lazlo 20-21). In such a view the commonly held distinctions between the organic and inorganic lose much of their usefulness. Yet we can still separate human from natural

systems if only to show their continuity. Ervin Lazlo writes that “Any system that does not owe its existence to human planning and execution is a natural system—including man himself, and many of the multi-person systems in which he participates. Atoms molecules, cells, organs, families, communities, institutions, organizations, states, and nations are natural systems” (23). A human being as a contained entity, an aggregate of subsystems (mostly unaware of the larger system of which they are a part)<sup>337</sup> is “a natural phenomenon of organized complexity—a natural system: his sense organs are communities of lower-level systems designed to bring him information about [...] his environment” (70). The sole purpose of this information, is to maintain the system in the face of inevitable decline (entropy, chaos) and as a long-term extension of this maintenance, to reproduce itself. We can extend the idea of reproduction from the physical to the mental, from the reproduction of bodies and material patterns, to the reproduction of symbols and thought patterns.<sup>338</sup> The latter is not solely the province of consciousness, but it is by consciousness that the process is amplified, and consciousness itself is the product of systemic growth and evolution.

Lazlo writes that, “Man’s phylogenetic development called for consciousness as a means of *species survival*. But consciousness, when evolved, took over the direction of man’s evolution. The means became the end” (99 my emphasis). However, the underlying processes governing organization and creation do not change, and the individual and the group, despite this diversion of the end, can be seen as emerging in the natural world and “*reflecting* its general character” (79 my emphasis). Therefore, within human activity, the re-iterating pattern repetition of the dynamic material world emerges, or is transformed, into

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<sup>337</sup>. The brain is one these organs, a system for organizing incoming and outgoing information. We might even say that no subsystem of the brain<sup>337</sup> is entirely aware of the entity of the individual, the self.

<sup>338</sup>. Again I stress that we are speaking of the same thing the mental is the physical.

reproduction on a symbolic level, what we commonly call creative reproduction, or art.

Human consciousness can be seen as a system for making sure this happens. A primary part of consciousness, perhaps the only really important element of self-consciousness, is narrative. Self-narrative (self-storytelling) functions as a system of subjective self-reproduction,<sup>339</sup> an evolutionarily-derived, materially-based system of symbolic production and reproduction that functions dynamically via the construction and maintenance of mental patterns, which become and maintain the self, the identity.

As we move from the establishment and maintenance of individual identity to cultural identity, we also move from inner monologue to familial and tribal story-telling to cultural literature. The literary system is a meaning-making system; it is a means of re-producing narratives that stabilize identities, both of groups and of individuals. Canonical literatures (national histories, cultural mythologies, traditional stories, etc.) define a culture and provide the temporal and narrative glue to keep that definition (identity) intact over time. Popular literatures play a similar role while also feeding the economic system with opportunities for reproducing “the new.” What creates feedback and circularity is the fact that individual or personal literatures (the inner monologue, the stories one tells oneself about one’s own life) are inevitably modeled on canonical and popular literatures, and work as they do to maintain a self-image that is unified and whole across time. Religion of course is another type of system, also based on stable transferable narratives, and in this sense it is a subset of literary systems.

Darger’s autobiography participates in various systemic forms. It participates in the literature system by imitating and appropriating literary forms, therefore borrowing both

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<sup>339</sup> I contend that self-reproduction and self-maintenance are the same as the self is remade (maintained) constantly via self-narrative.

authority and coherence. This study has also made the case that *My Life* participates in the religious system via its blatantly religious iconography of sacrifice and judgment, and its movement toward transcendence and redemption. My view has been that Darger writes, and indeed produces all of his art (and collection) as a means of participating in these global and local systems of identity, as do we all. However, it is because of a lack or inability to constrain his work to the pre-existing rules of these systems that we, as outsiders to his mindset, find it odd or perhaps unmeaningful. Indeed, as I've often mentioned, the work breaks out of the very molds that are intended to give it meaning and it therefore tends towards turbulence. However, the *History of My Life*, even as it tends toward turbulence (and this is the point of this study), can also be said to be the construction of a subject *out of turbulence*. In *My Life*, identity, revenge, renewal are not separate functions or categories of experience; Darger's production is not compartmentalized—it is all one great narrative project rolling forward in a vortex of things (words, images), gathering up the ruins of the world he perceives and reshaping them into a narrative shape that serves all these functions as if they were, or wanted to be, one, which, for the author, they are.

Finally we arrive back at the question why studies such as this can be important to the study of literature. Modern literary criticism is already tending toward the exploration of the non-canonical, the fringe, indeed the blatantly non-literary. The application of systems theory will become increasingly important in the analysis of texts as literary criticism progresses into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the computer analysis of literature grows apace. Indeed, the statistical analysis of digitalized texts is becoming a growing field in literary studies and is no longer considered eccentric or radical. Journals such as *Computers and the Humanities* (CHum) are devoted to an emerging generation of literary critic/scientists working free of

traditional academic prejudice. In addition, new data-mining and data-visualization software programs are in constant development which will allow critics to plumb the depths of all types of texts, exposing patterns and relationships that previously could not be considered. When we are able to see each individual instance of narrative as part of a systemic matrix that operates across varying degrees of scale, we will be able to relate individual works, authors, periods, and genres to broader and broader fields of textual production, yielding information that can only contribute to a greater understanding of human narratives and human consciousness. We will perhaps get a glimpse of how narrative does not so much free us from physical nature as illustrate our complex bonds to it—from the machines we build to the weather that we watch—and we can begin to look seriously at the so-called outsiders of the narrative universe, authors like Darger and his ilk, as threshold figures in this new understanding.

## Appendix A

### **Prologue to *My Life*, selections (pages 18–37)**

Holy Bible

The Book of Paralipomenon.

Chapter 13 Pages 198 to 499.

Abias victory over wicked Jeroboam.

Battle of Mt Semeron. between Juda and Israel armies. Probably worst conflict in all History. Isralites are whipped by Juda armies with the stupendous loss of five hundred <sup>thousand</sup> wounded valiant men.

The remaining men of Israel fled. And Abia persued after Jeroboam and took cities from him.

Then Jeroboam was not able to resist any more in the days of Abia, and the Lord struck him, and he died.

Moses articles

Book of Deuteronomy Page 240 of Bible.

Chapter 22, Second section. On, various precepts.

A woman shall not wear an article or any clothing proper to a man, nor shall a man put on a womans dress, for any one who does such things is an abomination to the lord your God.

Book of Numbers

Chapter 16 Page 185

Punishment of Dathan and Abiram.

Moses followed by the elders of Israel arose and went to Datham and Abriram. Then he warned the Community.

“Keep away from the tents of these wicked men and do not touch anything that is theirs, otherwise you too will be swept away because of all their sins.

When Dathan and Abriram had come out and were standing at the entrances of their tents with their wives and sons and little ones. Moses said,

“This is how you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all I have done and that it was not I who planned it, if these men die an ordinary death, merely

Book of Numbers

page 186

continued from chapter 16

merely suffering the fate common to all mankind then it was not the Lord who sent me.

But if the Lord does something entirely new and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them alive down into the neither world with all belonging to them then you will know that these men have defied the Lord.

No sooner had he finished saying <sup>all</sup> this then the ground beneath them split open and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, and their families and all their possessions.

They went down alive to the neither world with all belonging to them, the earth closed

It was said there was no room for the Mother of God and St Joseph at the Inn. Yes there was.

If St Joseph had been like the Rich n young man in the Gospels, and she had been bedecked in expensive jewelry and dressed like the Queen of England, they would have been admitted without question. What chance do poor people have?"

Ive read that sometime later God punished the Inn keeper.

There are one hundred fifty psalms in the Holy Catholic Bible.

There are 19 Chapters in the Book of Wisdom.

There are fifty 2 two chapters in the first book of Jeremias.

There are five chapters in the book of the lementations of Jeremias.

The Book of Baruch. It has (not gas) Six chapters.

The Book of the Prophecy of Ezechial has 48 chapters.

10 Page

8 Four chapters of the Book of Ruth.

9 The first Book of Kings had 31 Chapters

10 The second Book of Kings has 24 Chapters.

11 The 3 Book of Kings a has 22 Chapters.

12 The Fourth Book of Kings has 25 Chapters.

13 The Book of Paralipomenon has 36 chapters.

14 The Book of Esdras has 10 Chapters.

15 Second Book of Esdras has 13 Chapters.

16 The Book of Tobias has 14 Chapters.

17 The Book of Judith has 16 Chapters.

18 The Book of Ester has 16 Chapters.

19 The Book of Job has 42 Chapters.

16 The Book of Danhiel has 14 Chapters.

17 The Book of Osee also has 14 Chapters.

18 The Book of Joel has only 3 Chapters.

The Prophecy of Amos has 9 Chapters.

Book of Ecclesiasticus has 51 Chapters.

Book of Isaias has 66 chapters.

The Prophecy of Abdias Book, has only one little chapter.

The Book of the Prophecy of Jones, (who foolishly fled from God,) has only 4 chapters.

The Book of the Prophecy of Micheas has 7 chapters.

The Book of the Prophecy of Nakum, has 3 chapters.

The Book of the Prophecy of Habacuc has 3 chapters.

The Prophecy of Sophonias, has 3 chapters.

2 chapters

The Prophecy of Aggeus.

The prophecy of Zacharias, has 14 chapters.

The prophecy of Malahias has four chapters.

The first Book of (~~Machia~~)— Machabees has Sixteen chapters.

The second Book of Machabees has fifteen chapters.

1 Chapters of Gospel of St Matthew. 28,

2 The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St Mark has Sixteen chapters.

3 The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St Luke has 24 Chapters.

4 The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St John has Twenty one Chapters.

The act of the apostles.

1 The act of the Apostles has 28 chapters.

2 The life and Epistles of St Paul (has) The Apostile to the Romans has Sixteen Chapters.

3 The first Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians has Sixteen Chapters.

4 The second Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Corintians has Thirteen Chapters.

The Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Galatians has Six Chapters.

6 The Epistle of St Paul the apostle to the Ephesians also has six chapters.

7

7 The Epistle of St Paul (the) The Apostle to the Phhilipians has only Three Chapters.

8 The Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Colossians has 4 Chapters.

9. The Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians has Five Chapters.

- 10 The second (Esp) Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians has 3 Chapters.
- 11 The first Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to Timothy has 6 chapters.  
The second Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to Timothy has only four chapters.
- 1 The Epistle of St Paul to Titus.  
The Epistle of St Paul to Philemon has only one Chapter.
  
- 1 The Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews has 13 chapters.
- 2 The Epistle of St James the Apostle has ~~Three~~ five, chapters.
- 1 The First Epistle of St Peter the Apostle has Five Chapters.
- 2 The second Epistle of St Peter has Three chapters.
- 1 The First Epistle of St John The Apostle has Five Chapters.
  
- 2 The second Epistle of St John has only one Chapter.
- 3 The Third Epistle of St John has also one Chapter.
- 1 The Epistle of St. Jude the Apostle has only one Chapter.  
The Apocalypse of St John the Apostle has 22 Chapters

#### Chapters of the 10 Commandments

From Chapter 20 to Chapter 23. From page 20 to 23. Book of Exodus.

## Appendix B

### **Darger quotes indicating the nature of pain.**

One morning when us boys were in what is called the “playroom” Johnnie Johnson known as the most bad of the boys, teased or tormented me.

At that time I was suffering from a very severe tootache. The pain and his torment of me roused me to an awful fury.

I went at him so savagely that afterwards he never even dared to come near me again. (45)

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After I worked here for three and a half years, it happened because ~~ve~~ violent pains of a bum leg I was forced to quit and retire and am retired yet. Even before then during Christmas and New Years of the years before my leg me severe pain, especially at night. Though it don't bother me so much now, I always need the walking stick to go out with. I am on Social Security and yet get only enough to barely live on. (105-106)

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Now to go back to my ill nature and character. I did not and will not bear things going wrong. I wont stand for the slightest pain anywhere though most of my pains were very severe, and I want everything under any conditions to come my way.

If things went wrong during any kind of work I do, Ill say I lose my temper terribly and say things the saints and all the angels would be ashamed of me for.

For what I had said in the past, for my severe face pains when I was employed at St Josephs Hospital Im surprised yet relieved that one of them did not strike me for it. (116-117)

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In spite of being well to do I would not acount with any other. They were very charitable, kind and good. When I had bad mysterious pains in my face he did all he could to help me.

What he told me to buy buy stopped the pain.

I had wished I had children like theirs. They were good. (124)

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Yet it was either at St Josephs Hospital or the Alexian Brothers that I was in bed under the care of the main head doctor for a severe pain on the right side of my belly Yet what was the cause of it, I or the Doctor did not know.

Repeated Axrays revealed nothing. The pain however slowly stopped after I vomited tward the afternoon of the day, which it had started in the morning early while at work. But I had to remain in bed for for six days. It is a long time since that happened, but have been walking with a cane ever since.

Im over 65 years now but sometimes off and on that same kind of pain returns and goes. (141-142)

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I had slightly did suspect my Gall bladder. Some of the hospital Employes thought I might have strained the right of my belly muscles. That could too could have been a real possibility because the pain does not feel like being inside of me, but on the adomen. When I worked in the bandage room, rolling what was fourteen feet length of what was called hot packs, I as I mentioned before o helper by the name of Jacob Tesert. (143-144)

\*\*\*

And believe me I certainly did not feel at all well. At that vomiting badly in the early morning. It was not what I had eaten. It was that darn side pain off and on. As I had said, I had suffered from it, since the the first time, and had again a bad spell, the 26<sup>th</sup> of January at night time of the big blizzard, and I nearly did also vomit that night.

Are you ashamed of me? You ask why? Its because of the pain, I shook my fist twards heaven, meaning it for God.

I also had a bad spell all day last week when near the west side of the St Vincent Church when I vomited some green stuff as the early afternoon.

The pain gradually stopped. When to go back to writing about Miss Sullivan, I told her I was sick she excused me. I should have told her also of about the Personal Officer permission.

She even for that would have to excuse me, because being only a dietician she has no say on that or even over me. I was on my own.

Then sometime after I had been working for five years in the bandage room, the knee pain came again especially worst after midnight.

The left leg then took its turn, and then back to the right. It was very severe. I would get up and apply a hot rag for a time but that did not help much.

When I went back to bed I thought I had received relief, but half an hour later it was even worse. I had to get up and stay up. That alone slightly slackened it. It spoiled on me a Christmas and a new year.

Since then though the pain is now not so much any more. I had to start walking with a cane. (154-157)

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What did you say? I am being a saint? Ha Ha. I am one, and a very sorry Saint I am. Ha Ha, How can I be a saint when I wont stand for trials, bad luck, pains in my (km) knees or otherwise.

I am afraid I was a sort of devil if I may call my self one, during the bad pain of my knee at night I had forgot to mention that in the early part of September 1917 I was drafted into the army, when the United States entered the latest part of World war one. (158-159)

\*\*\*

To go back to my cross of suffering I would not bear I firmly believe There is no one not even you my reader who would Im sure. who would put up with such pains, my past severe toothaches, face pains, and side pains and other things I don't find time to mention here.

The knee pain at night I must confess and am not ashamed to tell of it. I actually shook my fist twards heaven.

I did not mean it for God though, though I felt like it.

What sin it was if it was one I do not know for sure but when I told it in confession the priest was disturbed admonished me, and gave me a severe or long prayer penance to

recite yet the severe knee pain drove me to yet while working on the first floor at St Josephs Hospital, in the main ward, or rooms, I never found any patients who put up with any severe pains ei either.

Then why should I and people who do suffer are usually crabby or hard to get along with.

Yet despite that pain even bothering me severely in the morning I went to and stayed through three Holy Masses, a week on Thursday Saturday and Sunday.

And also to work on the working day. Yet I stood it.

Would you have done it? (159-161)

\*\*\*

Though were they small ones, I have committed sins because of these trials disappointments and things going wrong or not running smoothly and especially all sorts of childhood pains and miseries. I was very <sup>Dangerous</sup> (dangerous) if teased

For my part to go back to my working time at St Josephs hospital with your granted permission, I had had toothaches very bad ones, and once severe pains where teeth had been pulled, that would not stop day or night, but much worse at night.

The pain was on both sides in the upper jaws You I suppose would have been ashamed of me because of the terrible language and blasphemous words I said constantly during this pain. (165-166)

## Appendix C

### The Anxiety of Knowledge in “The Autobiography”(1-206)

#### “Knowing” and “Not Knowing”

Their religion *I'm not sure I know.* (4)

[O]ne day when for spite, *I know not why* I shoved a two year old child down, and made it cry. (4-5)

*[A]nd not knowing any better* I hated. (7)

But what I had done *I did not know any better anyhow.* (9)

To my own knowlede she was a widow. *I never heard when* her husband had died. (10)

*Once not knowing any better* I put lots of newspaper beside the stove near the wall and st it on fir. (10)

The cause of the fire *was never known* but secret by I fro found sure proofs that my little revengful bonfire did not do it. (18)

*I never knew how many boys there were*, but there were not many. Our large sleing room at times surely had the “beautiful little creatures of a red colour” known as bed bugs. (23)

A boy whose name *I did not yet know*, seeing the dimes, acused me of stealing them. (23)

I let out a big whopper of a poop, and as I said nothing she or most of them there did not know who it was. The oldest one there said, “it might have been ‘crazy’” meaning me. (28)

She said “if he is crazy” *he does not know any better.* John Manley who sat across from me said to me truthfully “it was you?” (28)

*I do not know or even remember how long I was away from school* after being excumicated. (34)

*I did not really know what she was scolding me for so sharply.* I would have told ~~me~~ her off but Father Meaney warned me with a sharp look be careful. (34)

[H]eaven knows, I was now one of the best behaving boys in school. (35)

To go back for a while when I still lived with my father I knew a woman by the name of (I *do not know her first name*) Mrs Anderson. (35)

*I knew not their religion* and never asked but I and he without my father knowing it went on Sundays to A Salvation Army Sunday School. (36)

*I do not know* whether her eyes got better or not. (37)

Scanlons I was acused before Mrs Gannon and Father OHara for something Heaven knows *I never did but had no means to prove I was innocent*. It seemed also I did not have the brains or courage to fiercely deny it. (38)

*If I knew where to go to be elsewhere taken care of I would have surely run away*. (39)

*Had I known that, I only would have done it where I was not seen*.

I hated my accusers and would have liked to kill them, but did not dare. I never was their friend, and am their enemy yet, even whether they are dead now or not. (39)

*I did not know it at the time*, but now I know I was taken to the doctor to find out if I was really feeble minded or crazy. (43)

*Had I known what was going to be done with me* I surely would have ran away. (43)

Again I will say he said nothing about what my examination was for, but during a cold windy threatening late November day (*I know not the day or date of the month*) I was hustled into the Chicago and Alton Limited train, and brought to some kind of home for feeble minded children, outside of and south of the small city of Lincoln Ill.

*If I had known at the time of the cause of me being sent to that childrens nuthouse* I surely would have never forgiven those at the Mercy of Our Lady Home and would have revenged it the very first chance I had. I a feeble minded kid. I knew more than the whole shebang in that place. (43–44)

I wrote letters to him, received once in a while Catholic prayer books and a musical harp. *But I did not know how to play it* or had anyone to learn it to me.

I knew a lot of songs and other pieces. (45)

Johnniw Johnson *known as the most bad of the boys* teased or tormented me. (46)

[T]wo persons, one a janitor and the other *I do not know who or what he was*. (46–47)

She was a wildcat and *let you know it*. (55)

I liked the work very much, but still *I don't know why but I did object to leaving the home*. But as they say so you had to. (58)

[It was] a very peculiar type of crop yet well known to all farm growers. (59)

Their original name *well known by most* is “The deadly night shade. (60)

The farm was supervised by a man *whose known name* was Allenburger. (61)

We answered *we do not know any German.* (65)

*It now is known as Dickens Ave. I prefer it would have retained its original name.* (67)

[P]lease *I sure know or knew how to scrub all hall floors and rooms as clean as they would come and all on my hands and knees.* (66)

You see *I don't know why but they would not let me off,* when really I should have been in bed and under treatment! I dared not take off. (83)

*How I put up with the severe cold that distance I do not know,* but I did. (91)

*Whether she was a Catholic or not I do not know or heard.* Mrs Nash was a Catholic but the way she was at us *I do not know how much.* (100)

*I was not there long enough to know her nature* but it was she who let me go. (104)

He said all neighboring fire departments were notified that even if they did (~~not~~) notice a rousing glare in the sky, they need not run *out because they'll know* what it is. (108)

*I don't know his middle name* but he was a Catholic and so was his folk and sisters. We often went to Riverview Park. I did all the spending. If I had saved all that what would I have had? He had a very good pious mother, *but I know nothing about his father* because he died not long after I went seeing Whillie. (123)

*I know I would chase her out of the house if I was him with my strong independent nature.* (124)

*I do not know what was the cause* but their sister Lizzie died so mysteriously.

Afterwards *I never could find out where his sister went* for she went somewhere not leaving any know a address. I believe she went to Mexico where she intended to go anyway. (127)

*I do not know where the McFarrans were* at the time of Whillies death. (127)

I thought because of my refusal of the (ban) loan to him, the Sisters would rebuke me as being mean, but they said nothing. *They did not even know of it.*

From then on I have never seen him since. (128)

Yet it was either at St Josephs Hospital or the Alexian Brothers that I was in bed under the care of the main head doctor for a severe pain on the right side of my belly *Yet what was the cause of it, I or the Doctor did not know.*

Repeated Axrays *revealed nothing.* The pain however slowly stopped after I vomited. (141–142)

*I know* of a country where the employer would have to pay a thousand to 10,000 dollar fine to work (himself) himself, or work his employer on Sundays, holidays and holey days. (147–148)

I sure felt good about it as I hated Army life. But you know (I) if I would have been a draft evader I would served a three or for years term in prison. (159)

What sin it was if it was one *I do not know* for sure but when I told it in confession the priest was disturbed admonished me, and gave me a severe or long prayer penance to recite. (160)

At that time I never even hard the work “brat’ and *had I and would have known what it meant* and any one would have called me that, that party boy, girl, or grownup would have got a rock or brick on the head. (164)

His name *was known* as Mr Phelan who took charge of things. (168)

I had sent her a telegram *but I do not know or how I got there* ahead of it.

That to me was strange. How long does it take to get. *I know Houston*, Texas, is over 3000 miles from Chicago Ill. Did the train the Xaty Flier run faster than the Telegram.

*I do not know however I even got to pass the Physical examination* for the draft, because all my life I had troublesome eyes, and too much sunglass or sunlight made me seem partially blind. (169–170)

*I do not know if she could read English* (she was from East Germany) or not, but write it. (176)

He made his moonshine in the basement *unknown to anybody*, even the landlord and during time it was outlawed. (182)

The scene was worse than what I heard. *I had seen and known* the building. (184)

Why it was left there all night and the next day and a week. *I do not know*. It was a full evidence that the blast was from the moonshine. Still, even though no officials took it away for evidence examination, or proof.

In four weeks it was gone and *to where I do not know*. (184–185)

*I do not know how I stood it* walking to St Josephs hospital, from where I lived two and a half blocks away. (191)

He sent a police man to me, asking me the loan of five dollars *but knowing of* the favor he refused me I also refused to give him the five. (197)

But with me I don’t give if I don’t receive. And receive first too. If any one don’t like my idea on that they can —— well never mind. *You know* what I mean. (198)

*I do not know if he ever collected as I never heard, but he received his Hospital care free of charge. (205–206)*

*Unless I am mistaken I believe the Baker sued the Hospital for damages, declared the condition of the ceiling was known, and nothing was being done about it. He had a slight skull fracture and a badly cut head. He was in bed there for a month. (205-206)*

### **Forgetting vs Remembering**

*I had so forgotten the incident, that I did not comprehend what he was saying. But what I had done I did not know any better anyhow. (9)*

*My Godmother which until now I forgot to mention who proceeded at my Baptism at 8 years of age, took me to a place on Jackson Boulevard, some distance west, I nicknamed "The newsboys' home. (20)*

*As I truly forgot and did not remember what I had done wrong I did not really know what she was scolding me for so sharply. I would have told me her off but Father Meaney warned me with a sharp look be careful. (34)*

*I do not remember the length of time or years I remained there in the Mission of our Ladys home. (42)*

*I had forgot to mention when the time I gave myself up to the police. I was taken by train the poor house at Dunning town. (66)*

*In my younger th days which I forgot to mention when angry over something I burned holy pictures, and hit the face of Christ in pictures with my fist. I wonder would I havethe heart to do so now? I cant say yes or no. (70)*

*I never seen him again. Im sorry. But if there is anything else again forgotten I will have to write it. I cant be at all left out.*

*I also remember I said I was at St Josephs as floor janitor for 14 years, first under Sister Rose, only a short time under Sister Damien, and the rest of my years there under Sister Dorothy. (81- 82)*

*I do not remember how long I worked under Sister Rufena at St Josephs Hospital but the time came when she died of cancer of the breast. (103)*

*I have forgot to mention that from the time I was a young boy, untill even now I always had a very rough nature or temper. (107)*

I did not want to stay up all night, in spite of the blaze so I returned home *found I had forgot* the keys, and no one was home.

I suspected they too including the house owners were at the fire. They were. (116)

*I forgot the boys first name* but his last name was as her mother. In character of what kind of family were they? (125)

*I forgot the name of the woman* who had, but she had so much work elsewhere that she seldom came around to see how we were getting along. (152)

*I had forgot to mention* that in the early part of September 1917 I was drafted into the army, when the United States entered the latest part of World war one. (158-159)

*I also forgot to mention* while working at St Josephs hospital there came as a patient an old man who was there for some kind of sickness a sort of shaking sickness, but it was not palsy. (167-168)

There is none really important thing I must write *which I have forgotten*. (206)

### **“Belief” and “Disbelief”**

*I could not (belive) believe* my littler bonfire so far from there could cause it, but the ?[can't read]bang including the side of the house, was one high towering mass of ringing flame. Some of the blazing crates crashed down, bouncing and covered the spot where I mad the little one eracing evidence against me. (16)

I don't care what you might say, *but I firmly don't believe it*. (20)

I remembered still not what I had done out of the way the first time at school, *but believe me* and heaven knows, I was now one of the best behaving boys in school. (35)

To me it is a sad remembrance. Now to go back to the home. *I had been there I believe for about seven years*. (38)

The meals there were splendid *but I believe at breakfast I was a glutton* (if not hog) for the oatmeal. I spent one whole summer there, then back to the asylum we went. (58)

*I believe I was at the asylum 7 years* and during the summer between that time on the farm. (63)

*I had I believe more brains ~~that~~* than all combined. (72)

Then why were they to go to school? The School building *as I wrote before I believe* was over two hundred feet north of the asylum. (75)

*I don't really believe any Catholic Sister should such a disposition. That is not Charity or Christ like. (87)*

*[T]here were I believe four very, very severely cold winters, with way below zero tempertures. (90)*

*I don't remember the cause but I do believe because of Mrs. Larson, I was asked to resign, so I left and in a huff. (96)*

*I had forgotten one ting to describe about when I was employed for my third ~~yar~~ year at Grant. I believed October 1923. (108)*

*All the fire departments were still there. This was Saturday all saints day. It was I believe a week from the following Monday before it was all out. (117)*

*As I had no place to hide it I could have fully proved that I never took it, but still they would not believe me. So I was slammed on the nose, and I believed I nearly killed him. (121)*

*I believe that was one of the reasons I had seen him no more, though I did hear he got into a row with negro employes in the main kitchen and they chased him out. (123)*

*Afterwards I never could find out where his sister went for she went somewhere not leaving any know a address. I believe she went to Mexico where she intended to go anyway. (126)*

*I believe he knew there was a time coming, when I would wisely change my ways. It did happen. (139-140)*

*Then one morning I believe it was in early November 1958, my right side (same old belly trouble) and right leg both tortured me so bad I could not hardly stand, at the same time. (150)*

*I could not stand the bright glare of electric lights in the Hospital chapel eighteen. I believe my passing the examination was a fraud on the part of the doctor. (169)*

*I believe it was a very sneaky thing to do, and I believe I told her so. She said I was right. I also remember again I have to go back to write this, that while I was working in the pot room of Alexian Brothers hospital I was suspected by a certain person to have twice snitched on him. (176-177)*

*I could not believe my eyes for what I observed. And no exaggeration either. There was nothing at all left of the building but scattered debris. (183)*

*Yet that was not from my mean temper. I believe I wrote of this before but wont think it wrong to do so again. I once asked that man to do me some favor, really an easy one, but he refused me. (196-197)*

He then had to stay five days in the police station. *I believe you think me mean*, but, whether you do or not, I am the kind that if a person refuses me a favor, don't dare ask me to do any. (197)

*I believe I am right. Am I.* (200)

I was for the favor refused me, so then no favor done by me. *And I believe I am in the right.* (200)

The kitchen ceiling *I believe is 25 feet above the floor.* (205)

## Appendix D

### **Newspaper articles from Chicago papers following the 1967 tornado**

To show the similarity of prose styles, what follows are examples of the writing in various Chicago papers following the devastating tornado strike of 1967. The first is an editorial from the Daily news, printed Saturday April 22. The second is an article printed on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1967

#### **In the Wake of Disaster**

The resources of government, from the community level to the national, have properly been put behind the work of restoration in the wake of Friday's disastrous tornadoes. For while tornadoes wreak destruction at random, reducing one man's home to splinters while sparing his neighbors, the entire community shares in the suffering..

Seldom before have so many twisters surged across a heavily populated area, and greif for the victims is to some degree mitigated by thankfulness that the toll went no higher than it did. Warnings by the weather bureau doubtless alerted many to take protective measures that saved lives.

Yet the weather scientists can only generalize as to where tornadoes may form. These most destructive stoms in nature cannot be pinpointed in advance, and their freakish behavior makes it seem at times that the elements are playing a grisly game of roulette with man and his works.

Perhaps the day will come when man can control the weather and avert the conditions of conflicting frontal systems that spawn tornadoes. If so that day is still far distant. For now, the most that can be done is what is being done: watchfulness on the part of the weather men, education of the public as to possible precautions, and quick action to alleviate the suffering and restore property after systems hit.

The quick response this time reveals a gain in organization to cope with disasters. We can only hope that equal gains are coming in man's ability to foresee and forestall such disasters in the future. (Editorial, Chicago Daily News, April 24, 1967. Print.)

#### **'No Time to Pray'**

#### **An Afternoon of Death and Wild Terror**

**By M.W. Newman**

On a perfect day for tornadoes, the sky fell in.

Death came dancing and skipping, whistling and screaming, strangely still one second and whooshing and bouncing the next.

For some in the Chicago area, death was a black cloud funnel, toeing the earth and crushing the skulls of children.

"It was the most terrible black I have ever seen," shuddered Mrs. Minnie Jasinski of south suburban Hometown.

But in leafy Lake Zurich on that same Black Friday of April 21, death came hooded in “an eerie green and white,” as Mrs. Dorothy Shultz saw it.

And along the 75-mile arc from northwest Belvedere to southwest suburban Oak Lawn, there was a strange smell in the air and it was cold and warm at the same time.

And always death came with a monstrous force, and those who survived could thank their stars.

RIDING THREE MONSTROUS twisters the worst in the Chicago area’s history, death sounded like a frontlines bombardment to Mayor Clair M. Hetland of Belvedere, a World War II veteran.

In Oak Lawn, worst hit of all, death roared like two locomotives running wild.

And yet it could explode a house—and it exploded many—and seemingly made no sound at all.

It slammed people, furniture, autos and trees through the shattered air and shook homes into splinters.

### **‘How Did We Get Here?’**

“My God, we’ve been thrown into our driveway—how did we get here?” gasped Mrs Jasinski seconds after the storm bumped her house at 8906 S. Crawford. Moments before she and her family had been sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

It ran wild, this cosmic delinquent of a windstorm—without pattern, without meaning, touching down on an eastward path along Chicago’s 87<sup>th</sup> St. like a berserk Giant.

Along a crazy route the storm heaped death and injury ‘wrecking almost everything it touched.’

The toll included scores of smashed homes and buildings and whole streets wiped out. Sometimes the path of destruction was no more than a block wide on a day when life and death were measured in fractions of an inch and tenths of a second.

**AND AFTER TWO AWFUL HOURS**, the storm tiptoed away. Only now is the full story of suffering and heroism, martyrdom and miraculous survival being stitched together.

The death-laden twisters boiled out of the sky on a spring day when it was a comfortable 72 degrees at Midway Airport and a chilly 58 downtown.

With warm-wet and cool dry air masses on a collision course, it was a classic time for tornadoes to form. Nineteen of them did, along a 500-mile front from Madison Wis., to Kansas City Mo.

By 1:35 p.m., the first official warning in the Chicago area was sounded—two hours in advance, as it turned out, and yet not nearly enough time.

### **Belvedere: The Terror Begins.**

At 3:40 p.m., an alert patrolman, Harry Faris, spotted a gray funnel, bouncing a jiggling in wanton abandon, racing toward Belvedere at 45 miles an hour. It had popped out of the southwest. The two hours of terror had begun.

Frantically, Faris radioed to Captain Francis Whalen. The farming community of 13,000 had only 12 minutes to brace.

The first of 1,200 youngsters were just pouring out of the doors of Belvidere High School, ready for a carefree weekend. Many of them were grammar school children who had gathered at the school for bussing home.

“Get back! Get back!” Capt Whalen shouted. He set his squad car siren howling.

Some of the children, already in the buses, were scrambling off when the giant twister hit, bouncing like a rubber ball over the building and scattering buses and cars like toys.

“It just upped and snatched them around and flipped them all over the place,” said the horrified Captain Whalen.

## Appendix E

### Borrowings from the Oz Books

**Note that Darger does not borrow the story directly, but he borrows the landscapes and certain structures from the stories. These scenes take place as a party of explorers search for Zaneville a lost city. They come across a landscape littered with broken bukldins and strewn debris, some of it apparently being left over from the destroyed set of a staged version of one or more of the Oz books. There is, in fact, a scene in *The Lost Princess of Oz* where a similar journey takes place.**

“Don’t do that” begged the engineer earnestly. The river is now called The Magnolia the Unlucky You know” (“Some years later it became known as a part of the Illinois River as its known now”) A two hours journey from Chesterbrown, or what’s left of it brought ~~the~~ <sup>litt</sup> us little of investigators to both the river and the devastated railroad running alongside.

Alongside the railroad stood a half uprooted big Elm tree, or what had been a elm tree. Most of <sup>the</sup> branches were gone, or badly broken every which way, and there was no bark on the tree, and it was split in the middle.

A long almost swords like knife was stuck deep into its trunk.

“Look there” said the engineer.

“My eyes almost popped out of my head for what I saw I could not hardly believe it. A great big ~~punk~~ pumpkin headed man exactly resembling Jack pumpkinhead of the Oz stories was stuck among the broken branches tight.

The body of it was made of wood. This wooden framework was covered by a red shirt, with white spots in it—blue trousers, a yellow vest, a jacket of green and yellow and ~~stouth~~ stout leather shoes. The neck was a sharpened stick on which the ~~punt~~ pumpkin head was set and the eyes ears nose and mouth were carved on the skin of the pumpkin very like a childs Jack o Lantern. It appeared exactly like Jack pumpkinhead of the Oz stories but looked much bigger. Then I noticed in a sitting position between the twisted was almost in a sitting position was something like the tin woodman of Oz a very queer image like a scarecrow wrapped around him.

“Where in the world did the twister take these from?” I exclaimed. Stuck among the branches of that Elm was Pumpkins, of a size that was never seen for real.

“This is surely some handsome outfit” said the janitor “but not really not what we came to ~~inrest~~ investigate.”

The engineer turned at this examined the images critically and I winked one eye at him as I said: We have come to the Land of Oz.”

“If so where is the Cowardly lion, the hungry tiger, the Wizard Ozma and Dorothy” demanded the janitor and Glinda the good?”

“They have been blown away” said a childish voice weakly from between some rails. “I’m Dorothy. I’m not hurt but am held here three days I can’t get loose And I’m hungry and very thirsty.”

At this its a wonder I ~~ded~~ did not jump out of my shoes. We went desperately to work to release her and after half an hour she was free. We gave her some of our rations and as she was eating she told us a “Wizard of Oz” show was on in a Theatre, and that is what the storm did. She does not know what became of the girl acting as Ozma.

“If I come across any more freakish things this tornado did. I’ll jump into the river” I said to my self. This world has gone crazy.

“What are we going to do now?” asked the janitor.

“We’ll have to take her along I guess. We can’t turn back. Anything else this tornado deposited all this right of way?”

During the conversation with the little girl the engineer explained their investigation and asked her advice about it”

She considered the matter gravely.

“That is going to be a difficult task said she. “And if I were you, I’d just put the blame on the river and be done with it.”

“I fear that wouldn’t do replied the engineer. “Both the river and the railway are alongside of one another and the current of the river moves to the west. Thats the main puzzle. Had it moved eastward itll not be so difficult to solve. The tornado I never thought would move against the current, and if it had not the outcome might not have worked at all.”

“How long is this river?”

“I’ve seen it as far as Channahon before it turned northeast past Chicago” I answered “La Salle west of us is North of it”

“You’re going that far?”

“Why only as far as the “has been” of the bridge, of course” I answered.

“I know its a beautiful bridge” cried Dorothy. “Cost \$10,000,000 or more. Do you intend to cross it?”

“No no, we don’t” interrupted the engineer. “There’s no chance to do so and otherwise –”

“I don’t just know what you think” said the girl. “You can’t I know the cyclone destroyed it. That is if the tornado followed the river all the way to there. I’ve never seen it however but my instinct tells me it was hit I’m sure and the tornado destroyed this railroad. Look at the road bed. But the thing that’s bothering me is to find I’m right”

I gazed around the wreck strewn landscape and then said:

“This is a flat country so you won’t find it to have caused the bee line of the tornado. We can go only as far as the bridge which this railroad used to cross.”

“And how far is that?” asked Dorothy.

“About thirty five miles from here” I replied. The bridge is east of here. I’ve known all along that we cannot go any further”

“So have I” said Dorothy. “Unless we swim across”

We (I had forgot to mention we stacked the Ozate images into our wagon to take along with us)

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On the following morning we started on the journey back to Chesterbrown which we reached in due time without any important adventure. The people cheered our appearance and on entering the school word came to us from Sister Camellia that she would grant them an audience. I told the head Sister how successful we had been in our investigation untill I came to the item of the wrecked bridge and we could go no further

“You were quite right” said Sister Camilla who did not seem a bit surprised “Had you told me about the wrecked bridge I would have informed you before you started out that you’d be stopped there.”

“I didn’t mind the journey at all though Henry released me from the steel rails” said Dorothy. it was interesting though it was no fun about the bridge.”

“As it has turned out after all” remarked the janitor. We can next get the things of very great expense stuck on the twisted fragments of the bridge belonging to the Ozate show. We got the Scarecrow Tinwood man and the Pumpkin man, from river and the tree. But there is no trace of the little girl who acted as Ozma. The storm struck as the show was on and swept the place away”

“I saw that too said Dorothy “it was awful. Even a piece of house is stuck there.”

“I will forget the things the bridge has on its wreck and what I could have been sent for. Theres Glinda the Hungry Tiger, Cowardly Lion the Wizard of Oz and other thing. Was Ozma the only one with you?”

“No there was Ojo the Lucky Trot, Betsy Bobbon and Button Bright, Shaggy man and others. They all disappeared. Unless they’re found and not killed the show is wiped out and cannot be saved or restored” (1258–1260)

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“I wonder what would have made it so strong?” inquired the janitor–

“Something about its formation between two thunderstorms. That must have gave it such tremendous strength Would you like to solve the mystery?”

“We can’t” replied Angeline “We tried to.”

“Well you can’t estimate the stupendous strength and solve the mystery at the same time” said the man. My name is Frank John Azanover. Sin; Since my kids have read Oz books they nicknamed the twister “Ugu the Shoemaker.”

“Why call it that?” asked Angeline.

“Because like him for what it did it might as well have been a great magician. Oh by the way there was a wicker work castle not far from here. You see this storm became such a power roundabout that this wicker Castle which was so strong that a million men swinging long logs like battering rams could not batter it down, was torn to shreds. By is the Tornado called Ugu the Shoemaker?”

“Why is it called that?” asked Dorothy curiously for she now really remembered that party in the Lost Princess of Oz–Book.

“Because of its almost magical power”

How far is the damaged Wickerwork Castle I asked quickly.

“You can see what is left of it from here” and he pointed. At a distance was a low hill on top of which stood what had been a wicker Castle. It must have been a good sized building and once rather pretty because the sides roofs and what had been domes were all of wicker closely woven as it is in fine baskets.

“I wonder how strong it was” said Dorothy musingly as she eyed the remains of the queer castle.

“It was just as strong as if Ugu the magician had built it” answered the farmer. “Even it seems even with magic to protect it it could’nt resist the twister The one who built is it must be a man of great ideas because he did things in a different way from other people. Its ~~prob~~ probable he got the idea of Ugus Wicker Castle in the Lost princess of oz Oz book. Where he got the material I don’t know. Yet its torn up as if it was made of hay.”

“Did Ugu the Shoemaker live there?” asked Mr Stevens seea scarcestically.

“Why no indeed He is a character in the Oz book” said Ugh, “I don’t remember the name of the man who built it and lived there but I heard he was in the hospital in La Salle critically injured. It cost \$10 000 000 to build the structure He did first live in New York, is a very rich man but he did not come to live in the city any longer So coming here he went to that two hundred foot hill built himself with the help of contractors that splendid wicker Castle. He lived in it with his wife, children and mother in Law. I loath to say so, but he is the only survivor.”

“This is unusual news” I declared. “I know what wicker stuff is. So if wicker was manufactured strong and large enough to make a strong wicker Castle, that castle was the strongest building in the world. What happened to it as we can see, proves there yet can’t be constructed a building strong enough to with stand a tornado. I’ve read the bigger and stronger they are the worst they get it But again why did your kids call the twister “Ugu the Shoemaker?”

“Because they believe it had magical powers to make things disappear like it did.”

“Do you think?” asked Dorothy anxiously “that this tornado would be tough enough to sweep away Zaneville?”

“And wipe out the Gleason Orphanage and Chester Browns Sacred Heart Convent?”

“And the Great Book of Records of Mr Gale” asked Angeline. And his medical supplies?”

“Well” replied Mr Azarover “I won’t say that the tornado was too weak to do that, but it was as you may call very “ambitious” to become the most powerful twister in the world and so I suppose it would not be too “proud” to do all those things which it managed to do.”

“But how Zaneville? How could a tornado make her disappear?” questioned the janitor.

“Don’t ask me my friend. The tornado didn’t tell me why it did things I assure you.”

“Then we must still continue on our way and find some trace of what’s left of the town ourselves.”

“I wouldn’t do that If I were you” advised Mr Azarover, looking at the two little girls and the rest of us. “If the tornado has really carried that town away it’s gone for good. And with all the tieup of the wreckage it would be a dangerous territory to navigate. Therefore if you are wise you will go home again and forget all about Zaneville. But perhaps you’re on the wrong trail, and it never hit Zaneville.” (1801–1806)

## Appendix F

### **Borrowings from *David Copperfield***

**The following scenes occur as one of the witnesses is describing . . . . Again we see Darger taking a nautical scene and repurposing it as a fire fighting scene, although he language stays very much the same.**

From *David Copperfield* Chapter 55- The Tempest

It was a murky confusion - here and there blotted with a colour like the colour of the smoke from damp fuel - of flying clouds, tossed up into most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the clouds than there were depths below them to the bottom of the deepest hollows in the earth, through which the wild moon seemed to plunge headlong, as if, in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature, she had lost her way and were frightened. There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then, with an extraordinary great sound. In another hour it had much increased, and the sky was more overcast, and blew hard.

But, as the night advanced, the clouds closing in and densely over-spreading the whole sky, then very dark, it came on to blow, harder and harder. It still increased, until our horses could scarcely face the wind. Many times, in the dark part of the night (it was then late in September, when the nights were not short), the leaders turned about, or came to a dead stop; and we were often in serious apprehension that the coach would be blown over. Sweeping gusts of rain came up before this storm, like showers of steel; and, at those times, when there was any shelter of trees or lee walls to be got, we were fain to stop, in a sheer impossibility of continuing the struggle.

When the day broke, it blew harder and harder. I had been in Yarmouth when the seamen said it blew great guns, but I had never known the like of this, or anything approaching to it. We came to Ipswich - very late, having had to fight every inch of ground since we were ten miles out of London; and found a cluster of people in the market-place, who had risen from their beds in the night, fearful of falling chimneys. Some of these, congregating about the inn-yard while we changed horses, told us of great sheets of lead having been ripped off a high church-tower, and flung into a by-street, which they then blocked up. Others had to tell of country people, coming in from neighbouring villages, who had seen great trees lying torn out of the earth, and whole ricks scattered about the roads and fields. Still, there was no abatement in the storm, but it blew harder.

As we struggled on, nearer and nearer to the sea, from which this mighty wind was blowing dead on shore, its force became more and more terrific. Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips, and showered salt rain upon us. The water was out, over miles and miles of the flat country adjacent to Yarmouth; and every sheet and puddle lashed its banks, and had its stress of little breakers setting heavily towards us. When we came within sight of the sea, the waves on the horizon, caught at intervals above the rolling abyss, were like glimpses of another shore with towers and buildings. When at last we got into the town, the people came out to their doors, all aslant, and with streaming hair, making a wonder of the mail that had come through such a night.

I put up at the old inn, and went down to look at the sea; staggering along the street, which was strewn with sand and seaweed, and with flying blotches of sea-foam; afraid of

falling slates and tiles; and holding by people I met, at angry corners. Coming near the beach, I saw, not only the boatmen, but half the people of the town, lurking behind buildings; some, now and then braving the fury of the storm to look away to sea, and blown sheer out of their course in trying to get zigzag back.

Joining these groups, I found bewailing women whose husbands were away in herring or oyster boats, which there was too much reason to think might have foundered before they could run in anywhere for safety. Grizzled old sailors were among the people, shaking their heads, as they looked from water to sky, and muttering to one another; ship-owners, excited and uneasy; children, huddling together, and peering into older faces; even stout mariners, disturbed and anxious, levelling their glasses at the sea from behind places of shelter, as if they were surveying an enemy.

The tremendous sea itself, when I could find sufficient pause to look at it, in the agitation of the blinding wind, the flying stones and sand, and the awful noise, confounded me. As the high watery walls came rolling in, and, at their highest, tumbled into surf, they looked as if the least would engulf the town. As the receding wave swept back with a hoarse roar, it seemed to scoop out deep caves in the beach, as if its purpose were to undermine the earth. When some white-headed billows thundered on, and dashed themselves to pieces before they reached the land, every fragment of the late whole seemed possessed by the full might of its wrath, rushing to be gathered to the composition of another monster. Undulating hills were changed to valleys, undulating valleys (with a solitary storm-bird sometimes skimming through them) were lifted up to hills; masses of water shivered and shook the beach with a booming sound; every shape tumultuously rolled on, as soon as made, to change its shape and place, and beat another shape and place away; the ideal shore on the horizon, with its towers and buildings, rose and fell; the clouds fell fast and thick; I seemed to see a rending and upheaving of all nature.

### **Darger Borrows from *David Copperfield*, 1**

Even all over the landscape it was a great murky confusion—here and there blotted with a colour like the smoke from damp fuel, while rising into the far sky being like uprising clouds tossed up into most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the great clouds than there were depts below them to the bottom of the ~~dee~~ deepest hollows in the earth through which the wildest shoots of flame seemed to plunge headlong up as if in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature ~~if~~ they had lost their way and were frightened.

Fortunately there had been no wind up to now, yet the flames were rising then with an extraordinary great sound that should not be heard from burning wheat. Before I got the bad news twards where it was heading it had much increased and the sky was more overcast with smoke yet my men fought hard. The driver of the wagon the little girls were on, was preparing to pull away if things grew worse.

Yet while the men advanced the clouds closed in and densely overspreading the whole sky, then very dark from smoke, yet the attack against the flames came on harder I leading in person

Yet the heat of the flames still more increased untill the nearest fighter could scarcely face it the leaders turning about, coming to a dead stop and we were often in serious

apprehension that the fire would get totally out of control and become a general conflagration like the first big one. Sweeping clouds of sparks roared upwards, like showers of white hot steel and at those times when a breach was made after great toil we were fain to stop to rest in a sheer impossibility to continue the struggle.

When the smoke in front of the fighters cleared a little because of a breeze they fought harder and harder, I had never known before of men fighting like this before or anything approaching it. We came to a side road having had to fight every inch of ground, since we started this desperate attack and found a cluster of men, overexhausted and slightly scoured and suffering from smoke ~~for~~ tormented eyes and nostrils in the road, who under Jim Scanlon had fallen back fearful of being overcome from heat and smoke.

Some of these congregating about the unburned fields while we fought on, told us of great sheets of flame having progressed forward despite all their efforts, and burned forward into a hay field, while they strove to block it up.

Others had to of country men coming in from neighboring villages to help fight the flames. Still there was no abatement in our storm of attack as I called in still more and more of my men and we attacked still harder. I also hurled a savage attack upon Jim Scanlons fire enemy.

As we struggled on and on nearer and nearer to the main line of fire our force of fury becoming more and more and more terrific It began to give way before this mighty attack coming dead on, coming near to a new breach I saw not only more men but the number of Poquats troop braving the fury of the storm of blazing fury and forcing the fire out of its course despite its trying desperately get back.

Poquat was a little ahead of us. Joining these groups, I found exhaustive men whose comrades and reinforcing men were away to the fighting front where there was too much reason to think might have probably succeed in their own assault also

Grizzled old fighters shaking their heads as they looked from flames to smoke filled sky and muttering to themselves or to one another, farmers excited and uneasy, smoke overcome fighters huddling to gether and peering into each others faces even stout old time forest fire fighters disturbed and anxious levelling their glances at the conflagration as if they were surveying their worst of all enemies. In fact they were.

Our tremendous assault itself when I could find sufficient pause to observe it in the agitating of the blinding smoke and heat the flying sparks and the awful fiery hissing noise confounded me The flames seemed possessed by the full might of their wrath, rushing to be gathered to the composition of ~~the~~ another monster, only to be held at bay. I actually seemed to see a rending and fiery upheaving of all nature. (2486–2490)

### **Darger Borrows from *David Copperfield*, 2**

When we came within sight of the endangered fields the smoke from the smoulder caught at intervals above the rolling abyss of flame were like glimpses of numerous severe volcanic eruptions in one with high immense thunderhead and mushroom and other fantastic shapes and hobgoblins forms.

When at last we got into the road running through the fields many people who had fled their threatened farms all aslant and with steaming hair making a wonder that we were holding at bay such a fire.

I put my men in formation along the road and rode on to take a look at the resisting fire, the horse staggering along the road which was strewn with cut down wheat and barley with flying blotches of smoke afraid of more far hotter far reaching heat and holding by people I met near more angry heat. I warmed them away from the danger.

Coming near a turn in the road I saw not only extra lines of men fighting madly but half the people of other farms helping the fighters men women and even elder children braving the fury of the fiery storm to defeat its fiery progress and doing all they can to help us overcome the threatening danger. Joining these groups of volunteer fighters I found women bewailing the peril of their endangered fields or farm houses whose husbands also were away fighting else where to retard the threat which there was too much reason to think might start ablaze before any number of fighters could fight it back and with safty.

Grizzled old farmers were among the fighters slashing right and left on every which way with their own scycles or scythes gunny sack or with what ever they had and shaking their heads as they looked from smoulder to sky covered in sea of smoke and muttering to one another, threshing machine owners excited and uneasy fighting elder children cutting and slashing or with wet gunny sacks beating all before them most wildly even stout town and village folk disturbed and anxious working as if their lives depended on it, officials leveling their field glasses at the smoulder from behind places of shelter from the far reaching radiance as if they were surveying an enemy in a battlefield.

The tremendous sea of smoulder itself when I could find sufficient pause to look at it in the agitation of its blinding heat, the horrid smoke clouds its frequent flaring sparks and the awful hissing and crackling noise unfounded me. As the high fiery walls of the smoulder came surging on here and there across the sea and at their highest dazzled to a blinding whiteness they looked as if they would try to make the smoulder engulf everything before it.

As before the advance of the fighters the receding wave of fire fell back with a hoarse roaring crackling hiss it by its fury seemed to scoop out deep fiery cover in the field as if its purpose were to undermine the earth with its fire.

When some white glaring headed roll of flame came hissing on it was dashed to pieces by the fighters before it came upon the main fields every fragment of the late whole seemed possessed by the full might of its awful wrath rushing to be gathered to the composition of another monster only to be beaten to pieces again.

Undulating clouds were changed to large rolling thunder heads or volcanic like clouds undulating rolls were lifted up to mountanous clouds, masses of flame, shivered and flickered every shape rolled up on high as soon as made to change its shape and place and beat another shape and place away the ideal smoulder on the horizon with its towers of smoke and flame sore and swell the cloud sore fast and thicker I seemed to see a fiery rending and upheaving of all fiery nature. Not finding Kaliko among these waves of desperately fighting men whom this memorable smoulder— for it is still remembered here as the greatest field fire ever known to rage through a country side had brought together I made my way to his own fighting lines of men. They were progressing and as no one allowed themselves to be forced to retreat I led their assault personally by backways and by lanes to the line of battle where they were most savagely fighting. (2952–2955)

## Appendix G

### **Extended passage from Book Four on the Act of Collecting**

Three days later I went to tornado town Chestertown (some called it Esterbrown) and observed something the most greatly surprised me but made me also feel joyful and exultant.

All the timber of all the devastated buildings that could be saved had for a certain length of distance had been stacked or piled up like you see lumber in a lumber yard but much higher. All bricks from demolished buildings that also could be salvaged had been put up like wide tall walls and all wood not fit for salvage also had been stacked neatly in the yard of the houses not touched by the whirlpool of the air.

Hastily made refugee shelter and for the injured had been very strongly strengthened as continued living quarters and comfortably furnished. Simon Legree's barn was the same with the windmill structure wrapped around it still.

As to the stacking of the debris into piles so high and neat it must have taken tremendous work for this short time. ~~Many~~ Many stacks were thirty feet high and one hundred hundred feet long and forty wide. And all boards were placed neatly according to size. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had never believed or thought if the people of Chestertown if that they would plan to construct the lumber piles could do it within months.

Yet it done between the day of the beginning of the field fires and whatever day it was finished. It ~~sure~~ It sure was a big problem ~~the~~ they had faced, yet what was the method of this great lumber came. It too was strongly fenced in.

How could they for this from such a jumbled mass of debris which even kept every of outsider from coming in. Even the lumber had been piled up from wreckage where bodies had been wedged so tightly that they were mutilated by the men who disentangled them. It had been said by the authorities that the last of the wreckage could not be adequately searched for weeks.

Yet even now so soon that same wreckage were now lumber stacks and ~~piled~~ piled neatly according to the equal size of the boards and the debris were as tightly wedged by the fury they flung by the twister as if they were cemented together.

Simon Legrees big barn was still used as a hospital and many tornado victims were still bedridden. But it was handsomely remodeled inside and ~~g~~ regular beds inside and nicely furnished outside.

The great university still a hospital and filled even with burned fire fighters, had long high piled or stacked salvaged bricks from brick houses. All unsalvaged ruins had been neatly cleared and ~~ear~~ carted far away and dumped some where out of sight. I heard all sort of house hold goods bedding clothing and so on were also salvaged and stored away in the basement or street floor.

There was another thing that surprised me greatly. What had become of all the tornado debris of Chesterchire bricks, timbers and so on. I soon found out.

At Chesterchire all the people there had been killed or mortally injured. There were no survivors. By cart wagon long hay mule drawn trucks and other conveyances The salvage wood house hold goods and all type salvage type of merchandise had been taken from there

and brought to Chestertown and stuff no good had been likewise disposed of so all was clear there too.

I thought from the mile long lumber yard there was more wood than was from Chesterbrown alone. The salvaged bricks alone amounted to millions. To get all this wood even all wrecked wooden houses had been demolished.

Some few houses brick or wood not too badly wrecked I saw had been rebuilt from the salvaged debris.

Many pianos not damaged by the tornado were also stored away in vacant floors of the University. Thousands upon thousands of boxes of cigars were also stored these tea store stock and the contents of rubber goods store stuff, hot water Bottles and other rubber articles. All types of books not damaged by the tornado were salvaged also artists supplies beautiful pictures not damaged by the storm. Everything all Chestertown stores had not damaged were salvaged, dolls toys bibles, and so on. All Church pews found were also salvaged but no trace of any other Church articles not even Religious statue vary as Stations of the Cross.

No canned goods were found, but a lot of drug store merchandize were recovered among the debris and bottles of wine and brandy.

A very large eight pound bible was found but printed in Spanish, and full illustrations Despite the full fury of the tornado plenty of registered mail, parcel post packages, all other type of mail not ruined and postage stamps and funds of the post office of both Chestertown and Chesterchire were saved. Lots too were found ruined by the rain following the twister.

Also about 24 000 000 million plain envelope in both places had been found and saved as well as other post office supplies. Lots of dry goods too were found and salvaged. Meats from butcher shops and Bakery Goods were found missing by the workers. One joker said "Maybe the tornado ate them up."

No water or garden hoses were found or grass cutters. Chesterbrown was entirely without horses mules donkeys or asses. The animals caught in their stables by the tornado had been found scattered dead among the wreckage.

Bodies of dead horses badly decomposed had been found everywhere in streets even.

All tipe of of money from destroyed banks were never found.

The workers told me that they moved scores of heavy machines from the debris. They wondered where they came from as no such machines were ever in Chesterbrown. None of them had been damaged.

They had been salvaged on the street floor of the University besides undamaged Cash Registers. Even sail boats were found which never been known to be in Chesterbrown They also had found scattered hardware wholesale notions wholesale drygoods everything of paint stores, jewel stores second hand stores shoe string stores shoes stuff from a shaving Emporium, and retail dry goods among the wreckage they gathered.

All articles from telephone exchange building had also been among the wreckage. And Chesterbrown had never had a telephone exchange building

By questioning I had learned that great numbers of sightseers and other curiosities though they knew they were forbidden had came to Chesterbrown.

By soldiers of the National Guards and officials of the Relief Committes they all had been apprehended, and compelled to go to work on helping with the salvage of the debris or go to jail. None were jailed. So now I see why all the salvaged lumber was stacked so soon.

Even the guards made the sight seeing able bodied women and teen agers help too because the women fold and teenagers of Chesterbrown did all ~~Chea~~ that work by volunteer.

Yet after all the spectators did their work willingly and hard. During this work were day and night shifts.

Even the wreckage pile fire was so wiped out that all the wood not ruined by the fire was a part of these huge lumber stack. Wood not too much burned but which could be salvaged was brought to Chesterbrown as fire wood what could not be hauled away as fire wood was dumber into a large dimple in the ground and buried under lot of ground.

I did not know why all that wreckage ~~woul~~ wood was saved as I learned no one was ever gound to rebuild the city. And none of the salvage was for ~~sale~~ sale, and was under strong guards.

The guard knew me well and gave me thrilling but very important information. Thousands of the surviving people of Chesterbrown men abled bodied women, children ten years of age, teen agers and hundreds of sight seers took night and day shifts.

The hardest job was to get the wreckage loosened from the piles tearing down wrecked wooden houses, salvaging wood from demolished brick buildings and prying up tightly wedge debris

It took five days and nights to accomplish the work and also from the wreckage of Chesterchire and the half burned wreckage out side of Zaneville.

I learned that there was three ~~big~~ big wagon loads of salvaged wood to be brought from Chesterchire yet Through my efforts the wood was brought in within ten hours and I helped ~~and~~ in the stacking of it. The next day I detailed two guards to accompany me to see how the Sacred Heart Convent still was. When we got there it was in a still worse wreck it had never been demolished by any workers an a tall strong wooden fence had been erected around it.

I had only one strong gate which was padlocked.

I didnt want to go inside the fence though I could have. (2951–2957)

## Appendix H

### Examples of 4<sup>th</sup> Order Redundancy

#### H/1

“The ~~lag~~ tongue was gone. In its place was a howling funnel cloud shrouded half way up a whirling umbrella shape upside down formed around it. Each moment added to the unbelievable speed of its whirl, to its head long impetuosity In five minutes the head neck chest and abdomen form of the cloud appeared to expand outward, the belly bursting out into a tremendous roll of cloud, and then the whole cloud forming into one vast canopy full of blazing lightning was lashed onto the most terrific and ungovernable fury ~~be~~ but it was between the shoulders and where the neck had been that the main uproar held its most indescribable sway.

Here the vast cloud seemed and scarred carried into a thousand conflicting channels of delirious fury, ~~it~~ bursting suddenly into the most frenzied convulsions, heaving boiling, hissing gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices and all whirling and plunging overhead to the north~~w~~ eastward with a rapidity which if it had ever been water could never anywhere assume except in precipitous deep descents. (3160-3164)

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Here the vast bed of the lower cloud stretched from the neck seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting seeming to be water channels, bursting at the belly part suddenly into the most frenzied convulsions, heaving boiling hissing gyrating in gigantic and innumerable fierce vortices and all whirling and plunging on to the straight northeast ward as if gone mad, and with a rapidity that had the cloud been a mass of water, then with a speed water never assumes else where except in precipitous descents. Then to my shock the belly of the cloud section burst like a big explosion, with a big loud ‘poop’ sound.

In a few minutes after there came over the scene another very radical alteration. First came another terrific flash of blinding lightning from the tongue followed by a crash of thunder that seemed ten times louder than the other two put together. There followed an awful ~~an~~ concussion. (3568-3569)

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It seemed to add to its speed at every moment, and worsened in its headlong impetuosity. Then five minutes later the head tilted slightly backwards the arms hung down by its sides and the whole cloud including the child cloud began to be lashed into an ungovernable fury which I didn’t expect to see, but it was between the head and the broadening out belly that the main uproar held its ~~saw~~ sway and it looked as if it would burst open.

Overhead there came a strange crack ling hissing sound and looking up the cloud seemed to scar and ream I into numerous conflicting wild channels too numerous to count and began to burst suddenly frenzied convulsions heaving buildings hissing gyrating in gigantic and innumerable wildly acting vortices. They were all amazingly whirling and plunging on from the Northwest on to the southeastward and then to the northeastward with a rapid speed ~~when~~ which even the Niagara never assumes in its precipiteous descent.

There came another ~~fre~~ fierce lightning flash doubly worse than the first and that thunder crash almost made me think that the world was coming to its end. (4272-4272 repeated)

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It came tearing down the river with the roar of a thousand Niagaras. The ship trembled to its very decks and the cabins rocked. Then what I took to be the chopping character of the river beneath or beyond our ship was rapidly changing to a strange current never observed before which set to the east ward moving our ship forward. In a few minutes the whole river west of us was lashed into ungovernable fury but it was where it was in the path of the storm where the main uproar was.

Here the river waters seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels bursting suddenly into frenzied convulsions following in the wake of the storm, hearing boiling hissing gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices coming swiftly towards us and all whirling and plunging on towards the harbor with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumed except in precipitous and mighty descents. (4552-4553)

## H/2

It did sound as I've heard the same noise on the American prairie that put me in mind of a very large herd of buffaloes, and at the same moment, I perceived what sea men term the chopping character of the ocean, appear ~~in~~ on the undersurface of the cloud, rapidly changing into two currents which set to the Northeastward and southwest. (3567)

\*\*\*

Well I thought it was very queer and kept our eyes on the freak clouds about a minute afterwards, while do doing some ~~er~~ chores in the field we heard a loud and strange sound from the tongue as if a vast herd of buffaloes were moaning and bellowing and looked up to see what was the matter. The main cloud was in the crazy action I told you of. (3593-3594)

\*\*\*

The chief Exchange girl was the next witness called for the testimony After stating that although no time seemed actually settled for the formation of the freak cloud head, she observed it from at the edge of the rear of the first passing thunder cloud and the result of her observation of it, gave the highest ~~char~~ character saying it looked like the form of the head of a little girl being strangled, but the protruding tongue giving off a sound like a big herd of Buffaloes yelling at one time. (3711)

\*\*\*

The appearance of the cloud as far as I could see and overhead had something very unusual. become over it Although at the time there was a dead calm and it was very hot and sultry among the clouds there was a short angry cross dashing them in every direction as well in the teeth of the upper winds as otherwise. As I looked towards the southwest there came nearer and nearer a loud and gradually increasing sound that vibrated the very air It sounded like a vast herd of buffaloes moaning and bellowing while in stampede across a Western

prairie while at the same moment the chopping character the cloudy sky while coming nearer was rapidly changing into a strange current which was rising to the eastward to north.

While I gazed and it came close the currents was acquiring a monstrous speed and to me shrieking like a crowd of terrified children. (4042-4043)

\*\*\*

From the head of the 'strangling' child' there appeared to come a sound gradually increasing when resembled the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes I've heard when I was out west upon a American prairie when they are frightened a into a stampede by a Prairie fire. (4271)

\*\*\*

I could not see that strangling child form so often spoke off because it was awfully dark and raining. I spoke to my wife of the crazy actions of the sky, and as I spoke my attention was suddenly attracted to sound loud and gradually gradually increasing. It seemed as if it was like a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie bellowing at the top of their voices combined like the howling of a troop of wolves, shrieking and humming sound at the same time [...]. (4458)

\*\*\*

All the passengers were on deck and some were trying despite the the gathering darkness to obtain photographs of the strange cloud head. Suddenly I heard a tremendous uproar of a deafening thunderous humming sound and a terrible howling tumult. There was a sound also like the loud bellowing of an enormous herd of panic stricken buffaloes [...]. (4515-4516)

\*\*\*

Suddenly, very suddenly this assumed a definite and distinct existence in a twisting undulating circle form of a shroud of more than a mile in diameter. I was wondering if it didn't look as if it was kinda inclining at a forty five angle but what ever it was doing it speeded dizzily round and round with the swaggering motion like an enormous whirl pool of water.

There was an appalling sound such as not even a whole large prairie of frightfully frenzied buffaloes ever lifts up in their agony of bellowing. (4530)

\*\*\*

Were you ever on a large Western Prairie and did you ever see a real stampeded of a vast herd of buffaloes pursued by a prairie prairie fire and bellowing with all their might? Well I did and that is the way the lower part of that shroud sounded with a terrible tumult added like the howling of vast pack of wolves. (4550)

\*\*\*

When this insane vicious storm precipitated itself against south western and eastern Gleason the scene assumed a character of terrific and indescribable grandeur of wild destruction. The magnificent of destruction was never more perceptibly displayed than when these antagonistic elements of rows and whole districts of houses and the wildest winds beyond belief met in deadly strife, of which old Sweetie Pie won.

The mightiest of earth magazines of winds rushed forward like a runaway of buffaloes to meet the strong buildings of this city, an awful agent of death and destruction.

Biggest buildings went away like clouds of dust in its path the works of man were to it but a piece of paper in its fury. (4903)

### H/3

A few of us were talking most excitedly about it, when we notice an awful sound of houses being rended and torn to pieces, amid a strange unearthly humming sound in the sky far above us in the distance mingled with a awful ~~loud~~ howling and yelling noise as from a whole troop of dogs doing it all at one time. (458–459)

\*\*\*

Coming as it then seem twards our train the air was filled with flying boards and other wreckage and clouds of all the sorts of stuff torn from grain, barley, wheat and fields of corn. Farm fences flew like planks made of straw before that fierce windstorm.

It howled like hundreds of mad dogs, but very much louder. (470–471)

\*\*\*

At the same moment the roaring noise and shrill shriek of the wreching town and upper part of the whirlpool of wind, was completely drowned by an awful loud earsplitting howling sound, such a sound as you might imagine given out by many thousands of dogs or wolves, but loud like severe thunder, or as all of those animals letting off their awful tumult together. (552–553)

\*\*\*

As the woman spoke we became aware of a loud ang gradually increasing sound like a serene hum, mingled with a howling of hundred of dogs and the confusion of sound of the ripping and smashing of numerous houses and at the same moment I myself perceived that what seamen term the chopping ~~ear~~ character of the ocean appeared above all the far distant part of Chester brown was rapidly changing into a vast current of swirling flying house wreckage. (607)

\*\*\*

Suddenly there came what appeared to be a large black shroud with some ~~horrored~~ horrid looking outfit towering above it, and the wind came howling like a thousands of dogs at one time. I was walking in the center of the north section of the city. A moment later the blast came and even the roaring of a long frieght train crossing a long wooden bridge could not compare with it, and the air was filled with debris like a big blizzard of snowflakes. (670)

\*\*\*

While the winds across the streets howled like hundreds of yelling dogs, while wreckage was being strewn everywhere around even the school house and while wires were being down in tangled heaps or taken away we all knelt in the cellar. and every one even the nuns and the children loudly prayed the Rosary and Litany of the Saints.

I never heard such a horrible noise as from that storm. It sounded like a deafening thunderous hum, thunderous thundering howl like an army of dogs and like a thousand blasts from whistles, and the roar of smashing houses all joined in one, and reverberating

over the city. The fury of the storm just across the street from us battered our refuge with showers of wreckage flung by the wind, smashing the School windows, and covering the streets in tangled masses of timbers.

For ~~ff~~ five houses we stayed in the School house cellar saying the Rosary and Litany most of the time for deliverance ~~us~~ from that hellish cyclone. (704–705)

\*\*\*

He said he had tried to bring his train to a stand ahead of the funnel but too late. He said as the storm approached his train the atmosphere became very heavy and oppressive. We two heard a terrific roar and the way I can ~~describ~~-describe it, is that there was a loud humming, thunderous howling like a multitude of dogs all at the same time and to a thousand trains rushing through a tunnel at one time. (1081)

\*\*\*

A terrible confusion of other sounds reached my ears, mingled with a piercing howling sound like an army of very big dogs. It too was a cry from the people so full of fear and horror that my heart almost stopped beating and sweat rolled off my forehead. (1458)

\*\*\*

“Oh cease your tiresome chatter I heard him command, getting angry again “Because you're my wife you have an idea you can scold me as much as you please But the next, the very next time you become so impudent, I shall spank you like a five year old. Now follow me to my office” Then they were gone from my hearing As their voices died away I looked out the window again and as dark as it was getting I thought I saw a strange thick fog coming, and wondered why so many dogs were howling at one time. (1610)

\*\*\*

Yet their mad dash soon began to slacken from fatigue, sweating wet heat and out of breath. they were getting too hot and overtired in their mad flight panting like overheated dogs.

I learned even Stevens was not at all pleased to have to witness all this panic and confusion. I was glad thought they were being overcome with exhaustion and breathlessness. (2137–2138)

#### H/4

We rushed to the door and windows, when we hear the sudden howl howl like thousands of wolves at one time but like loud thunder, and the earsplitting roar of all the buildings being torn and flung through the air, in massive clouds of flying wreckage, sides of houses, and thick clouds of dust from brick buildings. (306)

\*\*\*

The underpart of the whil to a great distant up looked like a broad wide forward moving shroud but no particle of this whiled away from the sides of the terrific funnel which seemed to be inclined at an angle of some fourty five degrees speeding most dizzily around like an electric machine, round and round with a swaying motion and sending forth ~~its~~ in its also

sweltering motion to the winds an appalling voice loud thunderous hum way above and half ~~shrek~~ shriek, and earsplitting howling more like thousands of wolves in one single voice below, such as even a hundred mighty cataract of Niagaras ever could left if their most agonizing yell to the skies. Our underpass shelter trembled to its very foundation, and the ground under us rocked.

A few among my companions shrieked shrieked, or howled an apprehension and fear, and some others among them including myself threw themselves upon their knees and began to pray loud in our excess of nervous agitation. (610–611)

\*\*\*

It grew suddenly dark more darker than it should for the coming of a summer thunderstorm and I could not see to read, he said. It had been It had been raining just a little and the sudden darkness almost like midnight of the skies and various crazy motions of the clouds never seen before, made very body greatly apprehensive. A few of us were talking about it, when we noticed a distant humming sound of a peculiar nature, combined with sounds of a multitude of wolves howling which grew in volume untill we recognized it as a noise in the air and along the distant horizon of the city, the most peculiar and feaful sound I ever heard. I heard also a tumultuous multitude of other sounds too I never before heard but just then could not recognize them. After looking over the havoc crated I never want to hear such a thing again. (686–687)

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“I knew a storm was coming but I thought it was one of those old fashioned August thunderstorm as the first cloudy formation came like what is called Sheet Nimbus. At noon it first appeared. but by middle Afternoon they began to pile up from the south west and took on a strange Olive green leaf hue, just as we ~~wr~~ were arriving to Chester brown from Kansas City through St. Louis. There was not even a breeze at the time though I did hear far distant thunder.

The sky darkened, but I was so busy waiting on passengers with refreshments I paid no attention. Then I heard a strange roar like a pack of wolves yelling and howling at the same time and an added tumult like many buildings being torn to pieces. (1107–1108)

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Two of my followers helped me to a chair. When I recovered sufficiently a man lying near “said Im the one who rescued the little girl. And Im a witness too of the convents destruction I could surely give you an earful if you can stand it.”

“Ill try to I answered trying to steady myself.

“Wes “When I was on my way to catch a street car I saw an ominous queerly acting shroud coming down the street. Maybe Im exaggerating but it sounded like howling from a million wolves at once. Suddenly the sky grew darker. (1159–1160)

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As if taken by surprise a dozen big colored Chapel picture windows flew out and the tornado yelling like a pack of wolves with fear, finished all the windows and other portions of the wall as hard as they were broke out and flew through the air as fast as they could go.

Mr or Mrs Tornado still more angry and furious had just time to catch the east wall as it was blowing outward, and the wall first sprawled forward headlong then rolled over two or three times up into the air and then went away in a cloud of debris and crushed stone dust. (1285–1286)

### H/S

I do know many of our best ~~poet~~ poets and historians and also Religious persons set their imagination to play in pictures and descriptions of Hell, especially Dantes Inferno. I believe Milton could have been one of them. But I do firmly believe and there are many of them of the same opinion that the infernal regions and all its flaming terrors as he or Dante conceived them were not half as hedious and appalling than the story of the experience of the hapless inhabitants upon whom the exploded funnel of the tornado poured along its deadly and devastating windstorm.

The fact is that the day of final Judgement as fortold by all type of Religious and prophetic visions of the pious would hardly impress the human mind with more terrific horror than the extinction as in a moment of the Sacred Heart Convent and Angel Guardian Orphange by the blast and whirlwind of old “Sweetie Pie” as it was called Who gave it that name I wonder?” Yet it is the most impressive events of the age. (4779–4710)

\*\*\*

The accounts of the cataclysm in which so many innocent kids kids were in the time it took from the Gleason Asylum, to the four others in Chesterbrown were overwhelmed by the wildest tornado on all record may well make the most proudest man feel how tiny and feeble and insignificant he is and indeed all the rest of humanity too in the face of this mighty and mysterious throes of such a tornado as this.

Who could have set their very imagination in to play in picturing hell was Milton who was the most greatest of them. I know fully from what he did write he concieved the Infernal Regions and all its flaming tortures, terror and horrors in a way to probably scare you out of committing sin and make you want to repent.

All right but I don’t agree with him at all ~~and~~ on that.

He ought to have been at Chesterbrown after this “beautiful Sweetie Pie” raged savagely away to the east. (4872–4873)

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~~in~~ The accounts of the cataclysm in which so many children were in less than thirty seconds from Orphan Asylum and Convent were overwhelmed by the fiercest and ever seen ~~well~~ may well make the proudest proudest man feel how tiny he is and insignificant he also is and also indeed the rest of humanity too in the fury of one of Old Mothers Natures mighty and mysterious athmospheric [...]

There is no disaster to my idea that even can be imagined to play the picture of Hell to compare to this tornado disaster. I know Milton was the greatest poet especially his imaginations but can the infernal regions and all its flaming terror as he concieved them and its hedious and appalling fury send such an immeasurable horror of Chesterbrown and its Convent Calamity compare to it?

Can any one compare to the story of the experience of those hapless survivors of both Orphanages and the Supermarket upon whom the exploded suction threw forth its annihilating storm. (4978–4979)

## Appendix J

### **Passages indicating the relationship between Wreckage and Communication apropos of Chapter Two**

St Anns University outside of the district of escaped houses, but a branch of St Anns School looked as it had scattered far and wide by powerful explosives.

Every kind of communicatios telegraph, telephone and railway were annihilated by the “beautiful shroud” and no wires of any kind not even yet no could be repaired or replaced, causing much severe almost unbearable high tension day or night and also which at times almost became dire panic.

Sixteen of the severely injured I heard became insane. and it was necessary to take them to a wreckage built hospital where they were placed under restraint. I also heard that Joliet was starting to sent a special train with sixty physicians who when they arrived were to work on the local staff. Also more nurses and medical supplies and many big tents, bedding beds and so on were also being brought on this train. Other trains when they would arrive will bring men volunteer workers to the trying if possible to clear the wreckage in the paths the trail arrivals ~~whi~~ will have to choose. Oh my. Can it be done? It will take months I’m afraid, the wreckage is in such tightly tangled heaps. (379–381)

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The lightning revealed wires either torn down or twisted like tangled string telephones were out of commission, also telegraph wires and our cars were filled filled with still frightened horrified passengers, mostly as we could not get the rear tracks clear the train was long delayed, and all worried about the many most seriously wounded brought into the (coches) coaches. (423–424)

\*\*\*

All kinds of wires including ~~te~~ telegraph ~~to~~ telephone, Electric and trolley wires were either carried down or swept away by the storm of wind and all work at nights had to be done by all sizes of lanterns, and an only imperfect idea of the extent and character of the damage could be found. (682)

\*\*\*

The place of the people became almost like a mad camp. Many soldiers had to be assigned to help the guards to handle this crowd of people. What had made this situation worse was because of such destruction of telephone and telegraph wires and such no one could send messages of inquiry. And if it could have been done it would have been absolutely impossible to ascertain definitely any information concerning the dead or the injured survivors in the districts prostrated by the most awful twister. Even letters and mail could not come through because of the destroyed bridges over the river.

Therefore no normal or private or other mail to persons could be delivered or answered. (1023–1024)

\*\*\*

Without knowing the true situation that the four cities were completely cut off from wire and telegraph and railroad communications people send from everywhere so many messages that operators in all places north of the disaster zone plunged into great piles of

telegrams, from persons in their desire to find out what became of their friends and relatives on the missing trains in Chesterbrown.

Operators at all cities north of Chestrebrown reported that thousands of telegrams from far distant cities were piled up at relay offices.

There were from people anxious over the fate of all those on the wrecked trains. Yet no messages could come or go out because of destroyed communications. The relief Committee expressed the wish that people throughout the country refrain from sending messages of inquiry. It was impossible to ascertain definitely any information concerning right then the number of all the passengers in the wrecked trains. (1128-1129)

\*\*\*

A strange thing about the disaster was that Chesterbrowns destruction was kept secret for three days by the storm for all communication is was broken down. (2966)

\*\*\*

Signal wires switch and block systems so completely demoralized by the storm ~~w~~ were still in that condition.

Therefore the railroad men still had to resort continually to the antiquate methods of sending out signal men to mark the passage of all trains (2967-2968)

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*Note in the following passage, the interesting circuitous route that information takes.*

A very disheartening phase of this tornado history in ~~what~~ which relates in which to the manner in which the news of the disaster could not reach the public untill it came from Lincoln Nebraska. And then it was slow coming.

Practically all the tornado news which was given to Lincoln newspapers for many hours after the tornado horror emanated from Lincoln and Omaha and Kansas city and Rock Island and Moline cities over only one small telephone ~~w~~ wire secured by a Peoria Newspaper.

From this point the news and many official messages were disseminated by circuitous methods.

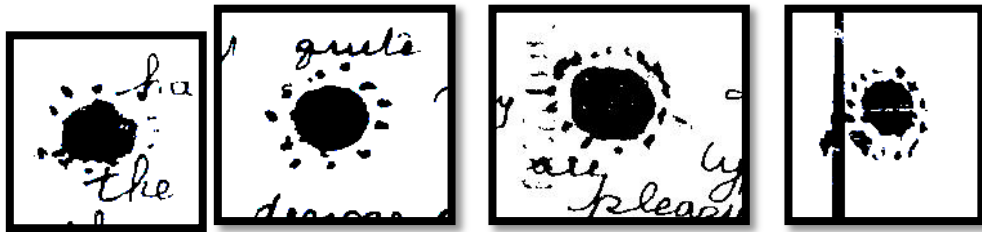
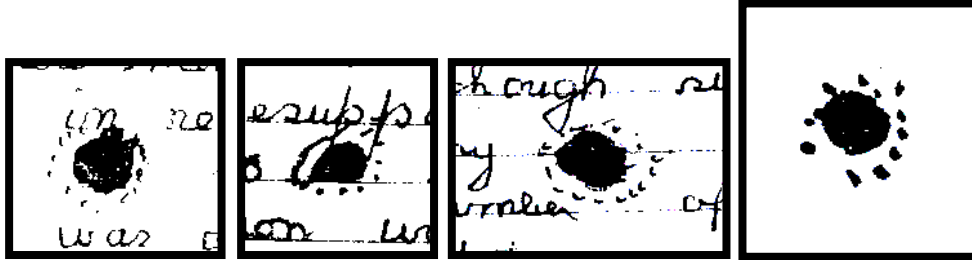
For instance one telegraph circuit was made up to reach Chicago consisted of telegraph lines from Cincinnati to ~~L~~ Louisville to Memphis even to Dallas Texas to Denver Colorado and back from Denver back to Chicago. Toledo though in Ohio recieved its news and information from the stricken section of Northern Illinois by way of Cincinnati through Nashville to New Orleans to New York to Detroit and back to Toledo.

In some cases a circuit was established by using a telephone line to complete a telegraph circuit and yet it was not for a week after the wild cat tornado that some not full telegraph service was established. From La Salle, Ottowa and Chesterbrown and also much further east beyond Zaneville no communication of any kind still could not be recovered in any way.

Why? Because of conditions left by the wild storm the linemen could not get into the stricken territory. (3014-3015)

# Appendix K

## Tornado Doodles



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## Illustrations

**Fig. 12.**

(Girl image substituted for story unit/order of redundancy)



**Fig. 13.**

(Girl image cluster as it appears in many Darger paintings.  
“Untitled.” Carbon tracing, pencil and watercolor, 24 X 105 in.)



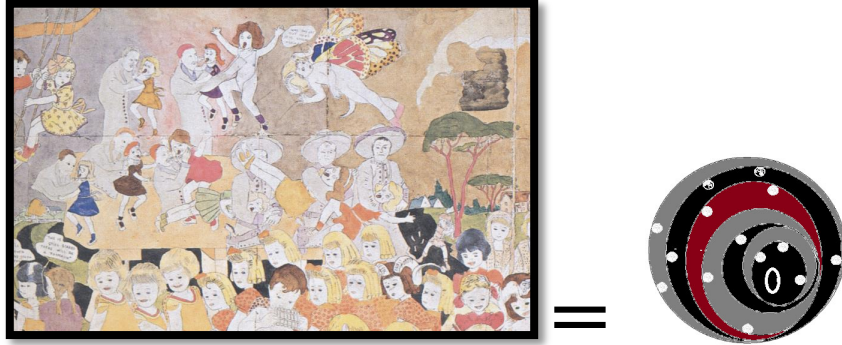
**Fig. 14.**

(Girl image cluster from Fig.10, shown as linear progression  
similar to story progression)

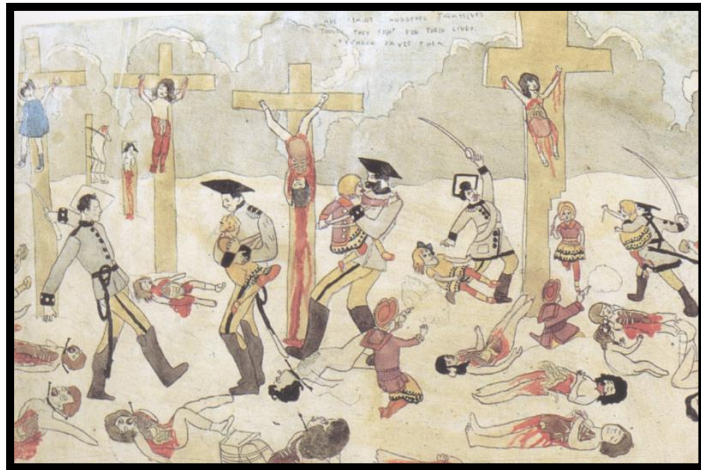


**Fig. 15.**

(Field of girl clusters compared to vortex structure with internal redundancies.  
 “Untitled.” Carbon tracing, pencil and watercolor, 24 X 105 in.)

**Fig. 16**

(Detail: *They are almost murdered themselves though they fight for their lives. Typhoon saves them.* Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 22 X 89 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)



**Fig. 17**

(Detail: *At Norma Catherine, Have strange horrid dream.* Carbon tracing, pencil, and watercolor, 24 X 42 in.)

**Fig. 18**

(Detail: *[Storm]brewing.* This is not a strawberry the little girls is carrying. It comes from a paradise tree. . . Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 30 X 125 in. Collection Musee de L'Art Brut, Lausanne.)



**Fig. 19**

(Detail: *At Torrington. Are pursued by a storm of fire but save themselves by jumping into a stream and swim across as seen in next picture.* Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 19 X 70 ½ in. Collection American Folk Art Museum. New York. Gift of Kiyoko Lerner.)

Note mushroom cloud in background.

**Fig. 20**

(Detail: *At Aronburg Run. Vivian girls then rescue child slaves by bringing large force down upon the Glandolinian soldiery.* Carbon tracing, pencil, and watercolor, 24 X 57")



**Fig. 21**

(Detail: At Jennie Richie. They are placed in concentration camp with crown of child prisoners. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, approx. 19 x 48 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.

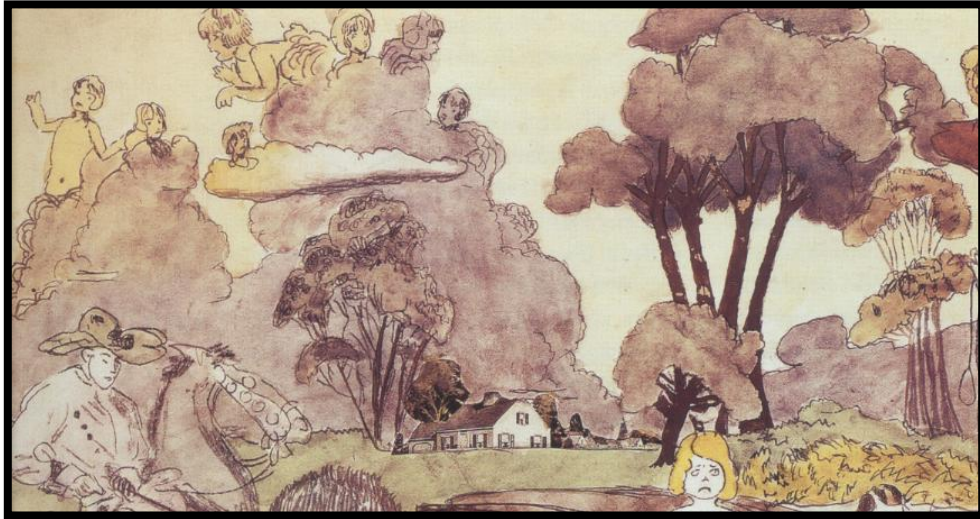
**Fig. 22**

(Detail: At Calverina. They are captured again but get away by playing a funny trick on General Federal. Carbon tracing, pencil and watercolor, approx. 19 X 24 in.)



**Fig. 23**

(Detail: "Untitled." Collage-drawing. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon on paper. 19 X 24 in. Collection of Sam and Betsy Farber, New York. #307 (recto). © Kiyoko Lerner.)

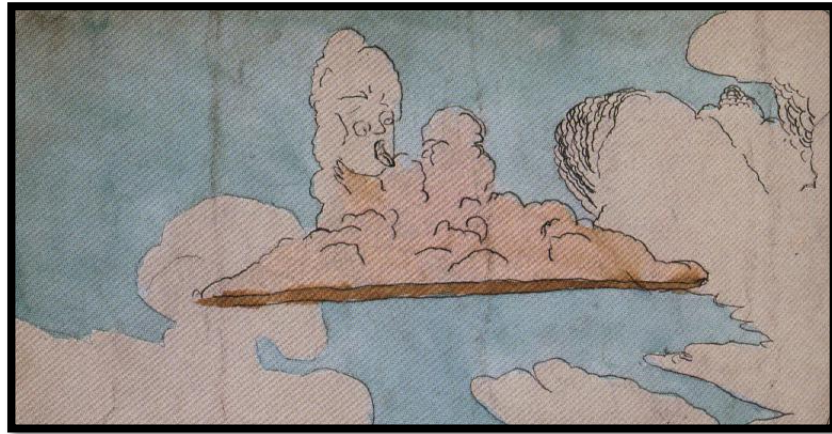
**Fig. 24**

(Detail: "Untitled." Collage-drawing. Watercolor, pencil and carbon on paper. 19 X 24 in. Collection of Sam and Betsy Farber. New York. #307 (recto). @ Kiyoko Lerner.)



**Fig. 25**

(Detail: *At Jennie Richie. For refusing to tell they are buried up top their waists in the sand near the river to die of thirst unless they tell. Statuary of Glandolinians strangling child.* Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, approx. 19 X 47 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)

**Fig. 26**

(Detail: *At Jennie Richie. At the shore of the Aronburgs Run River storm comes up anew.* Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 28 x 108 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)

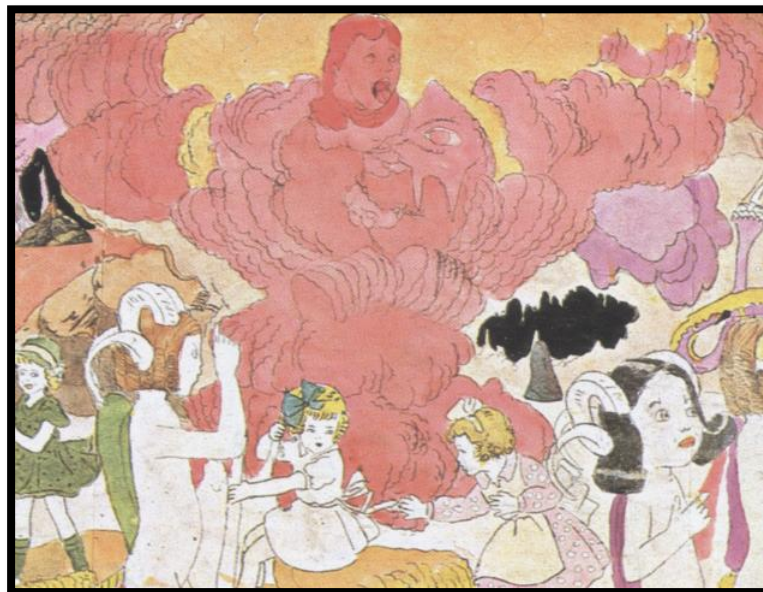


**Fig. 27**

(Detail: *They are chased again however, and have to give up for want of breath.*  
Watercolor, pencil .....

**Fig. 28**

(Detail: *At Jennie Richie. Narrowly escape capture when attacked by Glandelinians, but the creatures “gracefully” also show the Glandelinians the way out.* Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 24 X 110 in. Private Collection.)



**Fig. 29**

(Detail: "Untitled." Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, approx. 24 X 45 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)

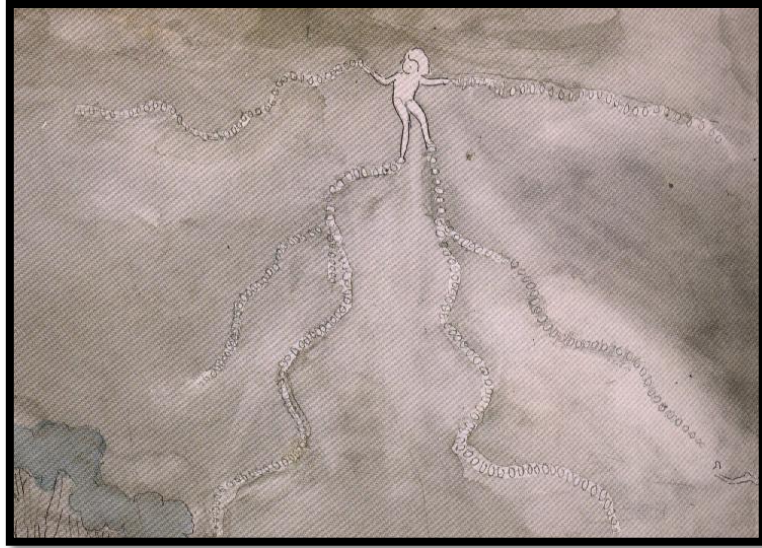
**Fig. 30**

(Detail: *During approach of second storm they seize a Glandeliaian officer who was in swimming. Note at the approach of the dark cloud the strange head formation, one from which the snake like lightening darts from.* Collage-drawing. Watercolor, carbon, and pencil on paper. 19 X 69 in. Collection of Sam and Betsy Farber, New York.



**Fig. 31**

(Detail: *Are enabled to get away as storm starts through thunder shook the air with quite the loudest noise any one have ever heard.* Two separated sheets, watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on paper, each 19 X 24 in. Private collections.)

**Fig. 32**

(Detail: "Untitled." Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 X 108 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)



**Fig. 33**

(Detail: "Untitled." Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 24 X 106 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.)

**Fig. 34**

(Detail: "Untitled" ('She dances holding that big stone, Heavenly days!'). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 X 107 in. Private collection, Chicago)



**Fig. 35**

Detail: "Untitled ("The Arcadeia"). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 32 X 132 in. Collection of Selig and Angela Sacks.

**Fig. 36**

Detail: Untitled (interior with piano). Watercolor pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper., 31 X 126 in. Private collection.



**Fig. 37**

Detail: "Untitled (grape shaped drama fruit). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 X 106 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.

**Fig. 38**

Detail: Untitled ('Tell us the jack and beanstalk fairy tail! We'll believe that more than what you are telling us. This camp is the only one in this territory. Give those bloody murderers up to us, or we'll surely wreck this camp and destroy all of you!! This head proves one of his murders!'). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 32 X 125 in.



**Fig. 39**

Detail: Untitled ('How long are we going to wait?'). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 32 X 125 in. Edlin Gallery Collection, New York.

**Fig. 40**

(Detail: In this picture they stand upon high platforms for fear when the rain comes the ground of the [shelter] will be covered up in the water. Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 31 ½ x 126 ½ in. Private collection.)



**Fig. 41**

Detail: *“The reason there are not . . . Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 32 ¼ X 126 ¾ in. Collection del’art brut, Lausanne.*

**Fig. 42**

Detail: *“Guard those timid kids from any more danger. Those prisoners might escape again. Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 30 X 122 ¼ in. Collection de l’art brut, Lausanne.*



**Fig. 43**

Detail: "Three Blengins here are now a [...] long [...] from the horrid scene they observed ... Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper, 32 ½ X 126 ¾ in. Collection de l'art brut, Lausanne.

**Fig. 44**

At McCall's Run Colls Junction. Vivian girl saves stranger children from phenomenon of frightful shape. Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on paper, 19 X 24 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.



**Fig. 45**

Detail: “*At Norma Catherine. Are captured again by Glandelinian cavalry.*” Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 19 X 46 in. Private Collection.

**Fig. 46**

Detail: “*At Norma Catherine. But wild thunder-storm with cyclone like wind saves them.*” Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 19 X 47 ½ in. Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of Kiyoko Lerner.



**Fig. 47**

Detail: *At Calmanrina. Strangling and beating children to death / At Cedernine. Murdering naked little girls* Carbon tracing, pencil, and watercolor, 19 X 47"

**Fig. 48**

Detail: *Vivian girl princesses are forced to witness frightful massacre of children—Vivian girls not shown in this composition. At Jennie Ritchie—via Norma. The children who are naked are made to suffer from the worst torture under fierce tropical heat imaginable.* Watercolor, pencil and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 22 X 89 in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.



**Fig. 49**

Detail: "Untitled" Carbon Tracing, pencil, and watercolor, 24 X 108 in.

**Fig. 50**

Detail: *At Jennie Richee. Lightning strikes the crazy outfit again*  
Carbon tracing, pencil, and watercolor, 24 X 109 in.

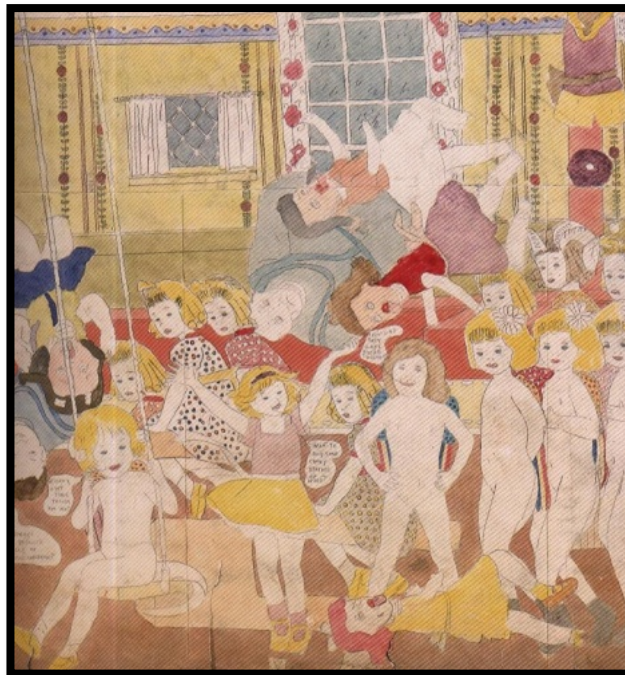


**Fig. 51**

Detail: "Untitled (girls playing with balls and sitting on fence with Blengin). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 32 X 54 ¾ in. Collection Kiyoko Lerner.

**Fig. 52**

Detail: "Untitled (interior with piano). Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 31 X 126 in. Private collection.



**Fig. 53**

Details: "Girls running from children being strangled in the sky. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on piecedpaper, 32 X 132 in.  
Collection of Selig and Angela Sacks.

**Fig. 54****Fig. 55**