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## Interpretations of Fear and Anxiety in Gothic-Postmodern Fiction: an Analysis of the Secret History by Donna Tartt

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**INTERPRETATIONS OF FEAR AND ANXIETY**  
**IN GOTHIC-POSTMODERN FICTION:**  
**AN ANALYSIS OF *THE SECRET HISTORY* BY DONNA TARTT**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH**  
Cleveland State University  
December 2013

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Student's Date of Defense: November 4, 2013

*Art is not only an imitation of the truth of nature  
but a metaphysical supplement to that truth of nature,  
coexisting with it in order to overcome it.*

Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*The Birth Of Tragedy*

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt is a novel that explores the conditions of detachment and anomie that are represented by a group of six students at an eastern private college. This tale of murder and concealment – combined with a lack of remorse and redemption – is far from the traditional, coming-of-age school novel. I argue that *The Secret History* participates in the gothic-postmodern literary genre, even though it bears the trappings of other genres. Reading this novel through a gothic-postmodern lens reveals that this work is an exaggeration – by way of the charged gothic atmosphere – of the tendencies of detachment and anomie that are said to occur more frequently in postmodern society. This novel is a critique of the negative potential of postmodern society, and it provides a means of coping with – and mastering – the fears and anxieties inherent in postmodern society.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Donna Tartt's 1992 novel *The Secret History* is a daunting exploration of the conditions of detachment and anomie represented by a small group of students at an elite eastern private college. This haunting tale of murder, conspiracy and concealment – combined with a lack of representation of remorse or redemption on behalf of the characters – is far from the traditional, coming-of-age novel that so often takes place in similar settings of colleges and boarding schools, like *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles or *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving. While characters in the novel experience a good dose of crisis via paranoid fear and anxiety, a paradoxical element of banality exists with regard to the cold-blooded killings that transpire in the tale. Literary critics tend to connect the occurrences in *The Secret History* to Classical themes in journal articles titled “Failures in Classical and Modern Morality” and “Greek Themes in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*,” albeit, due to the fact that the characters in the novel are Classics students at a New England college, and that they participate in a Dionysian bacchanalia during which they accidentally murder a local farmer while in a state of unconscious revelry. Moreover, reviewers oftentimes tie Tartt to Edgar Allan Poe – or even to more current thriller and horror authors Stephen King or Bret Easton Ellis – all authors who

have delved into issues of moral depravity and whose texts tend toward the suspenseful and thrilling. I believe that it is no mistake that Tartt's novel has characteristics of a wide variety of literary genres – school novel, mystery-in-reverse, psychological thriller, or even a Classical or neo-Romantic tale. In fact, I will later argue within the pages of this thesis that the novel's genre confusion is purposeful on Tartt's part, and that it works as a form of postmodern, hyperreal *bricolage*. With that said, I find it curious that there is little critical attention given to the foregrounded gothic elements of the text, nor is there much critical acknowledgement of the novel's postmodern traits. In this paper, I argue that *The Secret History* participates mainly in the distinct literary genre of the gothic-postmodern even though it bears the trappings of several other genres. What is at stake in reading this novel through a lens that brings both the gothic and the postmodern into focus is that we are able to better recognize Tartt's work as an exaggeration – by way of the melodramatic, charged gothic atmosphere – of tendencies such as detachment and anomie that are said to occur more frequently in our postmodern society. As such, this novel, which I believe is ultimately a critique of the negative potential of postmodern society, serves as a worst-case scenario diagnostic of what types of young adults the late-capitalist society of the 1980s and 1990s was capable of producing. I argue that, as well, this text serves as a worst-case diagnostic of what affects our *current* society – more than 20 years after *The Secret History* was published – has on individuals, given that the postmodern environment has only multiplied and intensified with increased communications, advanced technology and an even more global marketplace. In a bow to my own optimism, I argue that this text provides a means of coping with – and mastering – the fears and anxieties inherent in our current society.



## 1.1 Defining Detachment and Anomie

Before making my case for the inclusion of this text in a specific genre and analyzing this work, though, it is necessary to explain what I mean by detachment and anomie. Anomie, which describes a condition of lacking social norms, is a word that was propagated by sociologist Émile Durkeim in his groundbreaking 1897 work *On Suicide*. More than a century ago – and well before mass production and a consumer-based society were the norm – in *On Suicide*, Durkeim writes that anomie is most likely to occur “in the world of trade and industry,” (279) or, in other words, in a materialistic, consumer culture. Of economic materialism, he writes, “What has happened is that the appetites that it arouses have been freed from any authority that might restrain them. By as it were sanctifying these appetites, the apotheosis of well-being has been freed from any authority that might restrain them” (280). Durkeim continues, “The real seems worthless beside what is seen as possible by feverish imaginations, so they detach themselves from it, only later to detach themselves from the possible when that becomes real in its turn” (281). I find Durkeim’s century-old thoughts to be striking in light of the extent to which United States’ society has become materialistic and consumer-oriented now, in 2013 – not to mention the perceived greed of the early 90s when *The Secret History* was written. And to think that Durkeim was not even privy to the phenomenon of mass media such as television and the Internet is even more astounding. If he theorized that detachment and anomie were the result of a sense of worthlessness created by “feverish imaginations,” and driven by the “senselessness of endless pursuit” (281), it makes sense to extend – and multiply – the affects Durkeim identifies into our communications-and-media-dominated culture. In the later pages of this paper, within

the context of the postmodern traits of *The Secret History*, I will draw from the writings of Neil Postman's 1985 text *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, in which he argues that telegraphic technology, such as television, represents a "language that denied interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence" (77). I believe that it is no coincidence that several sociologists that I will examine in this paper, Donna Tartt, Neal Postman, and even Pink Floyd's 1992 *Amused to Death* album were in relative agreement with regard to defining the times as representing the increasing phenomenon of detachment and anomie. Before delving further into these contemporary – or postmodern – issues, as I will later identify them, though, I will return to the importance of reading *The Secret History* as a gothic-postmodern text.

## **1.2 Gothic-Postmodernism as a Distinct and Purposeful Genre**

In *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Maria Beville argues that gothic-postmodernism is a genre in and of itself. She distances this genre from the contemporary occult craze that is commonly tagged as gothic – referring to what she says Fred Botting calls "candygothic" in his 1996 book *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom* and concerning the recent bout of vampire and werewolf books, movies and television series – by eliciting a more sober definition of gothic-postmodernism: "An amplification of the gothic language of terror to encompass the more recent terrors of our postmodern age and also the theories of terror that have been put forward as part of the enterprise of postmodern cultural theory" (9). In other words, works within the gothic-postmodern genre, according to Beville's view, use traditional gothic *topoi* – from a

charged, suspenseful tone and a fascination with the past to a gloomy setting and omens, visions, and the presence of the supernatural – to amplify the postmodern tendencies of indeterminacy, liminality and hyperreality, among others. Furthermore, Beville points to the “overriding concept of terror” (9) as the factor that unifies the gothic and the postmodern, accounting for the excessive amount of fear and anxiety that are present in both genres. In these pages, I argue that *The Secret History* is gothic-postmodern, as Beville defines the genre. I believe that it is important to pay attention to the gothic markers that Tartt employs in this postmodern text because it is these markers that make clear that this is a tale that is meant to terrify us about the possible ways that a late-capitalist, contemporary society may shape and affect the individuals within it. With regard to *The Secret History*, I suggest that Tartt’s prolific repetition of gothic tropes – precisely because they are located in a supposed coming-of-age, college novel where one would least expect to find them – is purposeful. In *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory*, Paul Hegarty describes Baudrillard’s theory that in a postmodern world, “events are rendered banal by their repetition” (23) and that there occurs a “leveling out of information” (23) when one is inundated with and confused by cycles of fact and fiction in the media. I will show that Tartt’s abundant gothic tropes – along with the abundant and sometimes hard-to-differentiate postmodern traits – work on a superficial level to create fear and anxiety, but eventually and paradoxically work to numb the characters and, vicariously, the reader of the novel by a sort of “leveling out,” or, desensitization process.

For Beville, it is at the intersection of the terrors of the gothic and the terrors of the postmodern that she finds this hybrid – but distinct – genre of gothic-postmodern literature. As such, it is here at these crossroads that I will analyze *The Secret History*.

First and foremost, it is important to remember in using Beville's model of gothic-postmodernism that "'gothic' is the adjective of the term" (51). But also, it is important to point out that while the focus is on the gothic-ness of a postmodern text, there is much about the two parts of the hybrid genre that are the same. Beville writes:

Remarkably, and relevant to this definition, some of the issues that are explored separately in gothic and postmodernist fiction, are one and the same, namely: crises of identity, fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing. (53)

So, keeping in mind that there is no easy way to keep the gothic attributes completely separate from the postmodern attributes of this novel, and, at the risk of oversimplifying this analysis, I will begin with an examination of the presence and the purpose of what I call the gothic markers – the instances of specific, traditional gothic *topoi* in the text – that surround and are woven into the postmodern themes of the work. Tartt's use of gothic markers is excessive – from a charged atmosphere and an old, run-down mansion in the country to brooding protagonists. In fact, *The Secret History* seems to include just about every gothic marker there is, incorporating even more obscure gothic *topoi* like twinning, incest and gender-bending as elements of the text. Why does Tartt work so hard to heighten our experience of terror? Why does she bother to use such recognizable, sometimes two- to three-hundred year old gothic tropes – like dark and dreary nights, sudden middle-of-the-night wakings and appearances of ghosts, cats and ravens – that echo works like *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *Frankenstein* in a work that contains so many apparent postmodern tendencies? How and why do the aspects of this hybrid, gothic-postmodern genre work together in *The Secret History* to exacerbate the fears and anxieties apparent in the text? Again, in my opinion, these gothic tropes are purposeful, in that they separate *The Secret History* from other coming-

of-age novels, and they mark the novel as one that provides an alarming diagnosis of the condition of postmodern detachment and anomie. In other words, I interpret the emotionally charged gothic atmosphere as a decoy for something even scarier – emptiness, lack of feeling, and anomie.

After looking closely at the gothic occurrences in the novel and the way in which these gothic occurrences seemingly work to heighten fear and anxiety for the reader, I will examine what it is that marks *The Secret History* as postmodern – for it is the postmodern, contemporary world with which I argue Tartt is ultimately concerned. To be clear, though Tartt fills her novel with gothic tropes, I argue that this novel is a critique of the postmodern – not the gothic. Finally, I will examine terror as it relates to the gothic, to the postmodern and to the text of *The Secret History* by considering terror as a sublime experience. Sublime terror reigns in the gothic tone of this postmodern text, in the murders and deaths in the novel, in the paranoia of the characters and in the anxiety the reader experiences as a result of his or her complicity – albeit imaginative – with the actions within the work. To define sublime terror, since there are many theorists who have worked to define the term, I will limit this analysis to definitions and explanations of sublime terror by postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. A discussion of the elements of sublime terror in the novel is important because it speaks to the dissolution of reality that leads to the sense of detachment and anomie of the characters. As a final slant in this paper, it is my intention to reveal that *The Secret History* is a not only a valuable cautionary tale of what society has the capacity to affect, but also, because of the repetition of terror in this text and in the gothic-postmodern genre itself, *The Secret History* provides us with a means of coping with – or mastering – the

terrors of the postmodern world, such as 9/11, the various school shootings and the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shootings in the summer of 2012.

### **1.3 *The Secret History* Characters and Plot Summary**

Before delving into an analysis of what makes *The Secret History* both gothic and postmodern, it is necessary to provide a brief character description and summary of the novel. Richard Papen, the narrator and perennial outsider from California, transfers colleges to attend Hampden College in Vermont. There, he seeks to enroll in a Greek language class, but is told that the course can only be taken as part of a Classics major program that is taught by a highly selective professor and attended by only five exclusive, eccentric students. After petitioning the professor and inserting himself into the group of five on several occasions, Richard is accepted into the program. Of the students, Richard says, “Four boys and a girl, they were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party – at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities” (17). Henry Winter, a dark-haired, dark-suit-wearing, tall student appears to Richard as the genius and leader of the group. Twins Charles and Camilla appear to Richard at first as though they are boyfriend and girlfriend, but when Richard realizes they are siblings, Camilla becomes his unrequited love interest. Francis, who wears fake pince-nez and is described by Richard as “angular and elegant” (18), is a bisexual male who is not involved in a relationship. Finally, Bunny Corcoran, his voice “loud and honking” is a blond, preppy East Coast boy who Richard says sounds “like Thurston Howell on ‘Gilligan’s Island’” (20).

Not long after the Classics professor Julian leads a class discussion about the “terrible seduction of Dionysian ritual” (42), Henry encourages the twins and Francis to regularly sneak out of Francis’ old family home in the countryside – to which the students retreat on weekends – in the middle of the night to attempt a Bacchanalian revelry. Apparently, Richard is too new to the group to have been invited to participate at all, and Bunny is left out of the group’s activities after his lack of seriousness destroyed the group’s effort to enter into the altered state they were working to achieve on previous occasions. One night, the four revelers successfully reach the altered state they have been seeking, and they accidentally kill a farmer just off the edges of the estate property. Over the next days and weeks, as the farmer’s murder is in the news, Bunny begins to tease the four revelers about their possible involvement in the killing. Bunny does not know, but he suspects, that they are culpable. Henry, unable to bear the teasing and heckling, convinces Francis, the twins and Richard that Bunny must be eliminated for their own protection. A plan to poison Bunny with mushrooms is scratched for a more opportunistic plan of pushing him over a ledge while he is on one of his regular hikes in the secluded woods. The remainder of the tale is a description of the paranoia and fear that the remaining Classics students feel after the murder of their peer. The important point, though, is that they are paranoid and fearful that they will be caught; they are not guilty or remorseful about the killing. In the end, Henry shoots himself, Charles falls to alcoholism, the group falls apart and Richard ruminates on how relatively unchanged his life remains. With that brief summary of the tale, let us now turn toward an analysis of the text.

## CHAPTER II

### *THE SECRET HISTORY AND THE GOTHIC*

In her article “*American Psycho* or Postmodern Gothic,” Sonia Baelo Allué writes about the evolution of the term ‘gothic:’

Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally considered the first gothic novel, showing a fascination with the Jacobean, medieval, sentimental and sublime. After this novel, there was a proliferation of gothic motifs such as the graveyard, the castle, spectres, monsters, corpses, monks and nuns. (31)

She explains that gothic stories have “changed to adapt themselves to the atmosphere, style and setting dictated by the social reality that they have encountered” (31), and she argues that the modern city, for example, has “replaced the gothic castle and forest” and that “villains are now psycho-killers” (31). She goes on to use this depiction of the evolution of the term gothic to argue that Bret Easton Ellis’ 1991 psychotic horror novel, *American Psycho*, is a member of the postmodern-gothic genre. I think she is right on target with her argument, but I use her example to make a distinction between her idea of a postmodern *gothic* – one that has evolved to a contemporary social reality – and the subtly different idea of the *gothic* postmodern as is represented in *The Secret History*. To underscore, *American Psycho* is, argued by Allué, a gothic tale that takes place in postmodern times; *The Secret History* is a postmodern tale that is told in a gothic way,



with gothic being the adjective of postmodern. Ellis' brand of gothic appears in a different form – modern buildings and psycho killers; Tartt's brand of gothic appears in a traditional form – an old house in the country, and dark and dreary nights. Both Ellis and Tartt's brands of gothic capture what Beville calls the essence of gothic: “a celebration of the dark recesses of the human psyche – sensuality, melancholia, morbid fascination, forbidden love, and the sublime aspects of pain and terror” (3). But Tartt employs traditional conventions in their *traditional* form in her text; and Ellis employs traditional conventions in a *new* form in his.<sup>1</sup> To further set the “gothic” aspect of the gothic-postmodern genre apart from other forms of the gothic imagination, Beville separates works by authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Salmon Rushdie and Mikhail Bulgakov from works like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Twilight* series by saying the latter are “at base superficial and that such texts are not really Gothic” (9). She explains that these popular “candygothic” novels and films are concerned more with “gothic stylistic conventions” than with “gothic's concern with terror and with encountering the unrepresentable in sublime experience” (9). I argue that while *The Secret History* is rife with superficial gothic stylistic conventions – yet is without the Hollywood line up of vampires, werewolves and witches – its brand of gothic-postmodernism is very much concerned with real sublime terror, a necessary ingredient for Beville's recipe of gothic-postmodern literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Secret History* is dedicated to Tartt's college friend and literary colleague, Bret Easton Ellis. The two authors attended Bennington College together, and literally refer to each other's fictions within the texts of their own fiction. Both Ellis and Tartt were members of the so-called “literary Brat Pack,” which was a group of young, East-Coast authors in the 1980s who each pushed the boundaries of established literary expectations in their writing in unique ways.

Virtually every gothic stylistic convention imaginable is present in *The Secret History*, including an old mansion in the country; melodrama, supernatural and unexplained events; an obsession with death; dreams and altered states; labyrinths and disorientation; extreme discomfort; general suspenseful language; and gothic imagery. As Tartt apparently works hard to include anxiety-provoking tropes on virtually every page of the text, it is as if she were taking on a challenge from Horace Walpole, the “founder” of the gothic genre, in his claim in the introduction to his own novel, *The Castle of Otranto*: “Every thing tends directly toward the catastrophe. Never is the reader’s attention relaxed” (6). As an example, regarding the setting of the novel, Richard Papen, the narrator, says of his new home on the campus of Hampden College, “The shock of first seeing a birch tree at night, rising up in the dark as cool and slim as a ghost. And the nights, bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars” (13). Throughout the text, ghost imagery, darkness and disorder reign. Of his new Hampden College friend Francis, Richard says:

In a swish of black cashmere and cigarette smoke, (Francis) had brushed past me in a corridor. For a moment, as his arm touched mine, he was a creature of flesh and blood, but the next he was a hallucination again, a figment of the imagination stalking down the hallway as heedless of me as ghosts, in their shadowy rounds, are said to be heedless of the living. (22)

In another scene, he says, “I saw Francis Abernathy stalking across the meadow like a black bird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind” (33). Richard describes virtually every other main character in this sort of mysterious, anxiety-provoking manner, invoking crows, ghosts and blackbirds along the way. About Francis’ house in the country, Richard says, “It was tremendous. I saw, in sharp, ink-black silhouette against the sky, turrets and pikes, a widow’s walk” (77). Richard explains that the house had a

“sweet, musty smell,” that the “walls were spidery with the shadows of potted palms,” and that “someone in the back of the house was playing the piano” (77). Just about every person or place that Richard describes in his story is portrayed as if viewed through a gothic lens with characteristics readers would expect to find in a traditional gothic story. From the first pages of the novel, the reader expects terror. And yet, as I will discuss, when terrifying events actually occur, they seem trivial and ordinary. In other words, virtually every small detail of the story is wrought with emotion, so much so that it becomes difficult to recognize the “real” events that *should* affect our emotions.

The actions and feelings described in Richard’s story also contribute to the gothic tone of the text. Richard often finds himself caught up in labyrinthine confusion – another gothic trope used to convey disorientation, the idea of a psychological prison and the dissolution of “reality.” “The layout of the place was peculiar, with unexpected windows and halls that led nowhere and low doors I had to duck to get through” (65), he says of his Hampton College friends Charles’ and Camilla’s apartment. Later, as he approaches the family home of Bunny Corcoran, the recently murdered Hampton College classmate, Richard says, “The place was like a maze” (386). Richard conveys a sense of confusion physically in the labyrinth metaphors, and he conveys a sense of confusion mentally in the many changes of mental states that he experiences. As one example, he seems to sleep and dream – more even than a normal college student might be expected to sleep. In fact, Richard recounts dreams in virtually every chapter throughout the narrative. At one point he says, “In some strange country between dream and waking, I found myself in a cemetery, not the one Bunny was buried in but a different one” (423). And a bit earlier in the text, he says, “It was almost dark when somewhere, through great

depths, I became aware that someone was knocking at my door” (205). Camilla says to him at this point, “All you ever do is sleep! Why is it you are always sleeping when I come to see you” (205). In fact, Richard always seems to be sleeping when anyone comes to see him, and just about every main character in the novel walks in on him sleeping at some point. His dreams and hazy liminal states seem always to be abruptly ended with a dramatic pounding on his door, letting readers know Richard’s guard – and their own – can never be down. The repetition of dramatic wakings is a significant contribution to reader anxiety, as we come to anticipate what is usually a melodramatic snap into reality. In fact, it seems that this is the main point of the novel – the anxiety and fear of anticipation – rather than the anxiety and fear of an actual event, like the murders that occur, for example.

Of insomnia, another liminal state frequently represented in the text, Richard says, “Nothing is lonelier or more disorienting than insomnia” (72). And later, “I was tired but I couldn’t sleep; my irritation and perplexity were growing stronger, kept in motion by a ridiculous sense of unease” (138). Also contributing to confusion and disorientation, as well as connoting yet another liminal state, Richard – and several of the other college-student characters – often are represented as high on drugs or drunk on alcohol. Richard recounts one night he spent on Demerol and alcohol, “everything was bathed in a celestial light” (285) and “then I remember feeling dizzy” (285). Upon coming out of the drugged stupor, he describes a dream of falling and says, “I wondered if I was dead” (285). Regarding feelings, Richard and the other main characters often are depicted in states of extreme discomfort or in states of melancholy. Richard spends a winter break living in an old warehouse with no solid roof. He says, “The cold in the warehouse was

like nothing I've known before or since" (115). And, "Only later did I realize that the true cause of this malady was hard, merciless shivering, my muscles contracting as mechanically as if by electric impulse, all night long, every night" (115). Richard's time in the warehouse is described as full of pain, misery and many hallucinations:

I don't know what exactly was wrong with me. The doctors said it was chronic hypothermia, with bad diet and a mild case of pneumonia on top of it; but I don't know if that accounts for all the hallucinations and mental confusion. (120)

Richard's weeks of pain and misery in the warehouse are surrounded by the severe melancholy that he experiences from the beginning to the end of the tale. Of his youth, he tells us, "I honestly can't remember much else about those years except a certain mood that permeated most of them, a melancholy feeling" (8). Later, he says, "I was as depressed as I have ever been in my life. I pulled down the shades and lay down on my unmade bed and went back to sleep" (111). In another instance, he refers to his life as "my short sad life" (223) and overall to "the essential rottenness of the world" (547). Finally, regarding the feelings in the novel that are depicted in a gothic way, Richard speaks often of anxiety. Examples of the narrator explaining or revealing his distress to the reader include the following: "My melancholy began to turn into something like alarm" (104), "A spider of anxiety crawled up the back of my neck" (318) and "*My God, I thought, what are they doing?*" (145). Richard's actions, mental states and feelings, then, too, contribute greatly to the sense of the gothic by way of depicting confusion, disorientation, pain and anxiety.

As if descriptions of people and places and Richard's actions and feelings were not enough to convey gothic characteristic in this text, Tartt also uses overall themes, imagery and language that resonate with the gothic. Themes throughout the novel

include superstitious beliefs, an obsession with death and an obsession with the past – especially in the form of the obsession with the Greek bacchanal. Regarding death, in particular, readers encounter the death of a dog, deer and a duck. There are student suicides, murders, and suicide attempts. In addition, there is paranoia among characters that they will be murdered: “I’m afraid Henry’s going to kill me” (526), Charles confesses anxiously to Richard. And, earlier, Charles confides in Richard with his idea that Henry might murder his sister: “I mean – not that I thought Henry would *kill* her or anything, but you know – it was strange. [. . .] I hate to say this, but sometimes I wonder about Henry. Especially with things like – well, you know what I mean?” (481). Here, Charles’ hesitant, doubtful dialog hints of silent terror about the evils that Henry is capable of performing. In essence, the characters wonder, “if Henry has committed two murders, what will stop him from committing more?” Regarding imagery, the entire novel is wrapped in shadows, dark and rainy twilights and nights, and fog. Sound imagery includes “rain dripping from the eaves” (237), “somewhere a shutter creaked” (263), “from somewhere overhead I hear the shriek and groan of water pipes” (204) and much more. Finally, Tartt even assigns names in her text that sound gothic, for example, Battenkill Road, Deep Kill Road and Hampden County Sheriff Dick Postonkill. Granted, the word “kill” means “river,” and Battenkill and Deep Kill are actual names of places in Vermont and New York. But I would argue that it is no mistake that these morose names are included in this work that contains excessive gothic elements. Tartt seems to leave no stone unturned in her effort to set a tone of fear and anxiety in *The Secret History*.

## 2.1 *Bricolage*: A Blending of the Gothic and the Postmodern

There is one particular characteristic of this novel that indicates its participation in the gothic genre that makes for an ideal transition in moving from this examination of the gothic tropes in *The Secret History* to an examination of what makes this gothic-trope-filled novel postmodern. This characteristic is found in the form of the text – not in the content, as previous examples have been found. It is the excessive, repetitive use of allusion and intertextuality in this novel – so excessive that examples are found on virtually every page of the text. Tarrt uses Greek themes, along with a wild array of other themes, including references to T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, A.E. Hausman and many, many more as seemingly intentional *bricolage*. This *bricolage* – a sort of postmodern mutant creation – is not dissimilar to the mutant creation in Mary Shelley’s gothic novel *Frankenstein*. And, *bricolage*, I argue, is one of the ways Tarrt conveys hyperreality and indeterminacy – two foregrounded conditions of *The Secret History* that I will discuss in more detail in the following segment of this paper that examines the text’s postmodern characteristics. Excessive intertextuality is frequently considered a trait of postmodern literature, but it certainly is not exclusive to the genre. In the 2008 introduction of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, Terry Castle writes of Radcliffe’s prolific and somewhat annoying use of epigraphs, poetry and other literary fragments within *Udolfo*, calling it a “disconcerting textual hybrid” (xiii) that results in a feeling of instability as the text jumps from charged moment to seemingly irrelevant poetry. As well, Tarrt’s text is a disconcerting textual hybrid that simultaneously forces the reader to consume a barrage of allusions and references and examine them for possible meaning. Sometimes, Tarrt seems to use references to other texts very purposefully to tap into the flow of

interpretation and meaning of existing works, as I will argue in the next section that she appears to have done with *The Great Gatsby* and the Jacobean writers that Richard is depicted to have read in his state of melancholia. As an example of Tartt tapping into the flow of interpretation and meaning of another work, in the novel, Henry reads the A.E. Hausman poem “With Rue My Heart is Laden” at Bunny’s funeral. Richard is hard-pressed to find meaning in the poem, saying, “I don’t know why he chose that particular one” (413). But yet he continues to explain that it was one of Bunny’s favorites – one Bunny had memorized in grade school and often repeated. Richard adds, “The rest of us, who were snobs about such things, had thought this a shameful taste” (414). If Richard were “connected” with reality and with his friend’s likes and dislikes, he would have understood how fitting a poem the Hausman poem was. For the reader familiar with the poem, the reference to it and Richard’s reaction to the reference further depicts Richard as out of touch and concerned only with appearances, and it helps Tartt build her case of the detachment and alienation of her characters. In other words, the references to other works often help her say what she is trying to say. But, on the other hand, there are instances in which Tartt’s allusions and intertextuality are “disconcerting” and confusing, too, as Radcliffe’s are said to be. There are frequent occurrences in *The Secret History* in which characters speak in Greek or Latin and the words are not translated for the reader. The effect is unnerving, as these untranslated phrases contribute to anxiety for the reader in his attempt to interpret the text. Moreover, I would argue that the excessive and explicit allusions themselves – like references to Plato, Plotinus and Pythagoras, for example – create anxiety for the reader as he or she struggles like an overworked lockkeeper to repeatedly tap into the flow of meaning of multiple other works of



literature and history. Castle writes of Radcliffe that she “sought to do more than merely excite readerly curiosity. She wished to reawaken in her readers a sense of the numinous – of invisible forces at work in the world” (xvi). I suggest that Tarrt is similarly attempting to reveal the invisible, indeterminate forces of postmodern society by way of *bricolage*. Tarrt’s pulling from other texts and bombardment with allusion brings into play innumerable, historical meanings and interpretations. For example, the title of the novel itself is borrowed from another *Secret History* written in the sixth century by Procopius of Caesarea about the corruption and debauchery of the emperor Justinian and his wife. Perhaps Tarrt is suggesting in her title an immediate association to misguided individuals. Even the names she assigns to her characters come to the text loaded with other meaning, like the androgynous name Francis being assigned to the bisexual male, the prestigious early-American military surname being assigned to Bunny Corcoran, and the English Royal names being assigned to the twins Charles and Camilla, to name a few. *Bricolage*, allusion and intertextuality all contribute to the sense of destabilization and indeterminacy that is characteristic of gothic literature, as the text becomes a type of *Frankensteinian* monster stitched together and endowed with a life of its own. Likewise, *bricolage*, allusion and intertextuality all contribute to a sense of postmodern hyperreality – again, a concept that I will work to define in greater detail later in this paper – as they pull into play innumerable other facts and fictions to contribute historical meanings to a new interpretation.

## **2.2 Concluding Thoughts on *The Secret History* and the Gothic**

In concluding the argument that *The Secret History* belongs partly in the gothic genre, it is important to remember that the elusive, hard-to-define category of gothic

literature is often considered similar to the category of postmodern literature. Of the gothic, Beville writes, “It too is often seen as a means of accessing the real or unconscious and the dark side of subjectivity and reality, through its excesses, abjections and monsters” (50). Later, Beville explains just how connected the two genres really are: “Gothic writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offered an insight into the human condition in a manner that one could argue anticipated the evolution of literature towards the realm of postmodernism. For example, a primary concern of gothic literature is our lack of access to reality” (53). Beville continues:

From this point of view, one could argue that the postmodernist imagination, that which values fiction and fantasy over a quantified, limited concept of reality, is quite possibly inspired by the gothic. Subsequently, we can account for the fundamental role that the gothic plays in the expression of the postmodern experience through literature: that experience of darkness, confusion, and lack of meaning and authority in a desensitized world that confronts alienation and death on a daily basis. (53)

Here, Beville indicates the similar experiences for readers of the two genres, and she shows that because of the two genres’ similarities, it makes sense that one could find them together in a hybrid genre as we have found in Donna Tartt’s work. Before considering why Tartt doubles down with the fear factor and overlays a gothic anxiety on top of a postmodern one, it is necessary – just as I attempted to isolate the novel’s gothic characteristic – to isolate the postmodern characteristics of the text.

## CHAPTER III

### *THE SECRET HISTORY AND THE POSTMODERN*

In order to examine the traits of this text that make it postmodern, it is necessary to briefly outline some basic tenets of postmodern literature. In doing so, I recognize that attempting to define postmodernism runs contrary to acknowledging the indeterminacy and play that postmodernism is said to represent. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, author Bran Nicol writes:

Postmodern fiction is far too diverse to be a genre. [. . .] I would prefer to think of postmodern fiction as a particular “aesthetic” – a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century. (xvi)

I agree with Nicol that postmodern fiction is diverse and that it has a certain “aesthetic” to it. But, for the purpose of the clarity of this paper, I will hold to the notion that a postmodern fiction genre does exist, albeit as a construct. In “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida writes of works belonging to genres as “participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set” (59).

Derrida goes on to explain the purpose for readers of the construct of genre:

The genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order’s principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason . . . . (81)

In other words, construct though it may be, genre – whether it be postmodern, gothic or other – provides readers with a context, or an interpretive map, with which to examine a given text. It is important to note here that both the postmodern and the gothic also refer to specific time periods – the postmodern to the later half of the twentieth century and the gothic to as early as the thirteenth century. For the purpose of this examination, I will consider the “aesthetic” – as Nicol calls it – of the literary movement, rather than the time period or the era that relates to the movement as a whole.

As such, the interpretive map of postmodern literature – or the markings of the “aesthetic” – that often are present in postmodern literature include many of the following. To begin, postmodern fiction is often said to be metafictional, or self-referential, making the reader aware of its fictionality. Indeterminacy and the destabilization of binaries are often portrayed, as are the resulting human emotions that result from this confusion and loss of reason, namely, paranoia and melancholia. Postmodern fiction often contains fantastic – or magical – elements that blur the line between the real and the unreal. Irony and black humor often are put to use. Absolute truths are rendered as nonexistent and fact and fiction become interchangeable, challenging the existence of reality itself. The text often seems borrowed and pulled together, as many postmodern authors employ pastiche, or *bricolage*, and quote or cite from other texts as I have previously mentioned. Lastly, postmodern texts often present an open meaning, involving the reader actively in interpretation, as opposed to “writerly texts” in which the author provides meaning, interpretation or closure to the text. *The Secret History* contains many of these characteristics, rendering the text as a participating

member of the postmodern genre. And, as I have iterated, many of these characteristics also are characteristics of gothic literature as well.

First and foremost, *The Secret History* is metafictional in that it is a self-proclaimed story. The definition of the word story, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* is a “report of a factual or fictional occurrence or it is a lie.” By definition, then, we do not know if a particular story is a claimed truth or a reported lie. The epigraph of *The Secret History* quotes Plato’s *Republic, Book II*, “Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes,” further setting readers up to receive either a fact or a fiction. And, too, Richard Papan, the first-person narrator, frequently refers to what he is about to tell as a story, “This is the only story I will ever be able to tell” (4) and “that might sound odd in light of the story I am about to tell” (9). The proclaimed story that Richard proceeds to tell is framed by a prologue and an epilogue that look back over several years through memory. In fact, the story itself is a rationalization of the murder of Bunny (Edmund) Corcoran – the one of six Classics students who is eternally silenced by his five friends because of his frequent expressions about the accidental murder during the bacchanalia and because of the five friends’ fear that Bunny will expose them as murderers. It is up to the reader to determine whether Richard is able to tell the truth through the shroud of memory and in spite of his admission to being a liar. At several points throughout the novel, the reader is reminded that Richard holds the reins to what parts of the story he will tell us, “What should I tell you?” (94), and to how he will explain his view, “How can I make you see it?” (200), playing with the idea that perhaps our view of the occurrences in the story are only as good as Richard decides – or is able – to convey. In addition, the narrator

reminds us throughout the novel that what we are reading is not necessarily a first-person account, but a first-person document of a tale. For example, Richard seems to be proofreading his work when he says, “Reading back over this, I feel that in some respects I’ve done Bunny an injustice” (380). Here, the narrator tells us that we are reading a written account of his story. Of course not every metanarrative or self-referential text is postmodern. The fact of *The Secret History*’s self-referentiality is just one of many characteristics that deem the text a participant of the postmodern.

Another characteristic of postmodern literature exemplified by this text is found in Richard’s character in that it represents a crisis – or even complete lack – of identity. Richard is an unreliable narrator who admits upfront that he has created his own personal secret history of sorts, by way of embellishing the truth about his childhood in California:

My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers. (7)

As such, Richard’s “true” identity is fluid and indeterminate. In chapter one, Richard admits, “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s lying on my feet. It’s sort of a gift I have” (26). He proceeds to narrate for the reader throughout the text examples of his lying – about his parents being loving and wealthy, about having attended a California prep school, and about owning a car. Richard shares the fact that he lies with the reader, admitting his secrets, for example, during a conversation with his Classics professor: “I wish I could remember more of what was said that day – actually, I do remember much of what *I* said, most of it too fatuous for me to recall with pleasure” (29). And, later, regarding a jacket he borrowed from another student, “It was my grandfather’s” (49), he

tells Bunny in an effort to seem connected and wealthy. Further regarding clothing, Richard narrates a description of items he buys at a second-hand store: “The cufflinks were beaten up and had someone else’s initials on them, but they looked like real gold” (26). For Richard, the only reality in the cufflinks is in the façade of them “looking” real. Along those lines, in the first sentence of chapter one, he shares with the reader his self-proclaimed fatal flaw, “that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life” (7), explaining that his flaw lies in “a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs” (7). Richard holds appearance and “seeming” higher than truth and authenticity. This narrator is full of falsehoods, then, and if he is our connection to the events in the story, why should the reader rely on him to tell the truth? I argue that precisely because of his admissions to the reader throughout the text of his pretending and performing, it is the reader who is privy to knowing Richard best – not the other characters. Tarrt makes Richard accessible to us because his confessions of lies seem like access to the truth. While he may not be likeable, he is a fairly familiar type of young man. In fact, Richard is curiously familiar to the reader in a way that brings the mysterious character Jay Gatsby to mind, “I gave him the spiel,” Richard says of a conversation with the Classics professor Julian. “Orange groves, failed movie stars, lamplit cocktail hours by the swimming pool, cigarettes, ennui” (28), continues Richard as he embellishes his past with imagery that is resonant of a party at Gatsby’s estate. Nearly forty pages later in the text, Tarrt explicitly makes the Richard-Gatsby connection for us, just in case we missed it. Richard says:

When I could no longer concentrate on Greek [. . .] I read *The Great Gatsby*. It is one of my favorite books and I had taken it out of the library in hopes that it would cheer me up; of course, it only made me feel worse,

since in my own humorless state I failed to see anything except what I construed as certain tragic similarities between Gatsby and myself. (72)

This example of intertextuality is just one of hundreds in *The Secret History*. Here – as I briefly touched on in my identification of this text as a sort of gothic-postmodern *bricolage* – Tartt essentially taps into the flow of context of a past text to represent Richard as a self-formed construct, like Gatsby. By reminding the reader throughout the novel – both through Richard’s narration and referentially via intertextuality – Tartt gives this narrator a mysterious, unstable, fluid identity, setting the reader on edge throughout the tale, as the reader never can be sure whether they are only being told the picturesque, embellished version or the “truth.”

In addition to the notion that Richard has constructed his identity out of falsehoods, there are several other contributing factors in the text that point to the overriding theme of Richard’s crisis of identity and loss of self, thus pointing toward the text’s participation in the postmodern. Factors include misrecognition, liminality and sexual ambiguity. Regarding misrecognition, Julian the professor greets Richard Pape as Mr. Pepin: “You have a wonderful name, you know. There were kings of France named Pepin. I’m never too busy for an heir to the French throne if that is in fact what you are” (27). Richard subtly denies the family connection, but by association the seed is planted that Richard has ties to something that he really does not. Regarding liminality, Richard is the perennial outsider. He is from the West Coast, attending an East Coast, elite college. He wants more than anything to be accepted by a small group of five Classics students, Henry, Francis, Bunny and twins Camilla and Charles. Deictically, Richard refers to the group as “them” and not “us.” He says:



I envied them, and found them attractive; moreover this strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been cultivated. Studied or not, I wanted to be like them. It was heady to think that these qualities were acquired ones and that, perhaps, this was the way I might learn them. (31)

In other words, he does not refer to himself and his Classics student friends as “we,” indicating that he is removed from the group and not part of the whole. As an aside, this quote also demonstrates fluidity of identity as Richard observes his friends’ identities as having been “cultivated.” In considering Richard’s positionality as an outsider, it is important to note that he is not invited to participate in the bacchanalia, he is the last among the six Classics students to know about the murder of the farmer, and he is the last to know details of the plan for Bunny’s murder. Finally, as if misrecognition and liminality were not enough to render Richard as one with an indeterminate, fluid identity, Tartt depicts Richard as one with sexual ambiguity. His unrequited love interest, he claims frequently throughout the text, is Camilla. In addition, he has sexual encounters with numerous college girls in the story. At one point, though, Richard has an encounter with Francis, “the most exotic of the set” (18). He says:

All of a sudden I became aware that Francis was immediately behind me, and I turned around. His face was very close to mine. To my surprise he put his hands on my shoulders and leaned forward and kissed me, right on the mouth. [. . .] I was kissing him, too. (289)

Immediately following, Richard tells us, “Matters progressed” (290), leaving the details to the readers’ imagination. As such, Richard’s sexual identity is ambiguous, as well.

As with *The Secret History*’s self-referentiality, it is not the fluid identity of the narrator alone that makes this text postmodern. Many novels – especially college novels and the *bildungsroman* – feature a young person with an identity crisis. What makes this story different – and postmodern – is that this is not a tale of growth and change. Richard

does not seem to find closure, or achieve redemption for his actions, or settle upon a solid identity for himself. In fact, in the epilogue, Tarrt depicts him as remaining the same. He spends the summer that follows the accidental death during the revelry, the murder of Bunny and the subsequent suicide of the Classics group leader Henry, “drowsing on (a) rooftop deck, smoking cigarettes, reading Proust, dreaming about death and indolence and beauty and time” (544). In other words, Richard seems to remain his same, indifferent self, drowsing and dreaming in liminal states. What is more is that, in the end, he accepts credit for attempting to save Henry’s life – something that he did not do at all – once again choosing appearances and perceptions of others over the truth.

Penultimately, just as she did in tying Richard to Jay Gatsby in her explicit reference to *The Great Gatsby*, Tarrt taps into the flow of the river of intertextuality to make sure her readers understand that Richard has not grown or changed for the better. In the second-to-last scene in the novel, Richard describes his time in the library reading the Jacobean dramatists: “Webster and Middleton, Tourneur and Ford. It was an obscure specialization, but the candlelit and treacherous universe in which they moved – of sin unpunished, and of innocence destroyed – was one I found appealing” (547). Tarrt further reveals Richard’s character in his ensuing dialog: “They understood not only evil, it seemed, but the extravagance of tricks with which evil presents itself as good” (547), essentially underscoring with intertextuality once again that Richard is fascinated with façade and suggesting that in his fixation, he too is not what he seems – he is someone associated with evil who presents himself in a different way. Fittingly, the final scene of the novel represents Richard in the liminal state of a dream conversing with the ghost of Henry. The character of Richard, then – from its made-up beginnings to its liminal,

haunting end – is full of examples of identity crisis and loss of self that tend to be characteristic of postmodern literature.

### **3.1 Postmodern Loss of Self**

It is necessary here – before delving into more examples of loss of self, and later into examples of loss of reality – to establish a postmodern context for these equivocal concepts. Both loss of self and loss of reality are not singularly postmodern traits. Loss of self, for example, is connected by Tartt herself to Classical times in the Classics students' participation in and re-creation of a Dionysian bacchanalia. Moreover, loss of self is intrinsically tied into the concepts of terror and the sublime – both concepts that have been assigned multiple definitions and theories over the centuries and both concepts that are said to be representative of both gothic and postmodern literature. Beville writes, “To be terrified is to be in a state of hesitation or suspension” (24), otherwise equating the state of sublime terror with a loss of self. She draws upon Kantian philosophy of the sublime, explaining the ‘pleasure displeasure’ of terror: “When the subject has this sublime experience, it is one of simultaneous ‘terror’ at the loss of ‘time moving’ and ‘exultation’ at the comprehension of the ‘finite’” (24). Beville demonstrates that French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard in his writings on postmodernity extends Kant’s ideas of the state of “pleasure displeasure,” with his own concept of differends: “that simultaneous experience of terror and exultation, fear and desire” (25). Beville writes that Lyotard “suggests that through these differends one has the potential to exist for a moment beyond the perceived homogeneity that governs our acceptance of imposed realities and identities” (25). “Importantly,” Beville continues, “this postmodern approach to the sublime acknowledges it as significant not for its infinite or

transcendental qualities which were valued by Kant, but for its subjective and self-realizing properties” (25). In a review of Andrew Slade’s *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime*, Ayumi Clara Ohmoto-Frederic echoes Beville:

The postmodern sublime, unlike the romantic sublime, is neither beautiful nor necessarily invested with a moral imperative; instead, between knowing and feeling, it is at the limits of ethics and aesthetics. (550)

In other words, a postmodern loss of self, or state of the sublime, does not strive for something like a center, or God, or truth, or past era – but instead represents an emptying out, or nihilism altogether.

Possibly the clearest example of loss of self, and, thus, of an important postmodern trait of *The Secret History*, can be found in the bacchanalia in which four of the six Classics students participate. The first reference to the revelry in the text occurs when Richard describes his first lecture by Julian: “The discussion that day was about loss of self . . . ; he began by talking about what he called the burden of the self, and why people want to lose the self in the first place” (36). Julian challenges the students: “I hope we’re all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?” (36). Next, Julian teaches them about the Dionysian ritual:

The revelers were apparently hurled back into a non-rational, pre-intellectual state, where the personality was replaced by something completely different – and by ‘different’ I mean something to all appearances not mortal. Inhuman. (40)

The students are enthralled with the idea of achieving “that fire of pure being,” (42) that Julian explains, and several weeks into the semester, four of them – sans Richard and Bunny – successfully reach it. Henry, whom Richard describes as a genius and as the leader of the group, later describes the revelry to Richard: “It was heart-shaking. Glorious. [. . .] Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no “I.” [. . .] You have no idea

how pallid the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem, after such an ecstasy. It was like being a baby” (168). It is during this altered state that the four revelers – Henry, Francis and twins Camilla and Charles – accidentally kill a farmer onto whose land they had unwittingly wandered, “Really, I do not know how that happened” (169), Henry says about the killing. In the novel, the crime goes unpunished and the fear and anxiety that the four revelers reveal seems only to be related to the annoyance of getting caught – not to taking responsibility for the murder or to guilt. Henry tells Richard, “When Charles came back with Camilla, we just left. [. . .] People die violent deaths all the time” (170). In other words, Henry removes himself and the others from the equation both physically and emotionally, completely denying agency. They walked away from the scene of the crime and the murder is explained in a passive way that excludes the murderer, with the action assigned to the “people (who) die.” What Henry claims, then, is an inversion of Descartes’ definition of selfhood: “I think, therefore I am.” Henry holds that since the revelers were transformed to an unthinking existence, then they did not really exist as themselves – and they are therefore unattached to their actions. “I was not thinking, therefore it was not me,” seems to be the case that Henry and the others are making in their denial of responsibility. In *The Postmodern Explained*, Lyotard writes of the postmodern as that which:

Invokes the unrepresentable in the presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable. (9)

I read the bacchanalia in *The Secret History* not as connection to some greater *thing or place or time* that is known, but to a total disconnection from all knowing. The

bacchanalia, then, in *The Secret History*, I argue is a portal to a complete loss of self in the postmodern sense – devoid of nostalgia, morals or agency. Now let us turn from this examination of loss of self to consider *The Secret History* in light of another characteristic of postmodern literature – loss of reality.

### **3.2 Postmodern Loss of Reality**

Most notably, *The Secret History* demonstrates a postmodern loss of reality by its pervasive depiction of hyperreality, a term that I have unceremoniously used in this paper already, but one that deserves much more attention here in this discussion of postmodern loss of reality. The word hyperreality was coined by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, and is defined in his text *Simulacra and Simulation* as “a generation of models of a real without origin or reality” (1). The hyperreal is tied intrinsically to Baudrillard’s third order of simulacra which, as Douglas Kellner writes in *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, is the third order of simulacra as defined in Baudrillard’s 1976 work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Baudrillard’s first order of simulacra mostly is represented in post-feudal times when “competition stimulates the counterfeit” and there exists “the possibility of pretense through imitation” (49). The second order is found in “the industrial era, or, approximately, modernity” (50), summarizes Kellner, and it “takes the form of production” and “represents the ‘political economy of the sign’” (50). In other words, commodification and mass production weaken the value of the sign or the thing produced. The third order, which is explained to represent modernity, is when value is lost and “there is no real to imitate as the simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement” (50). In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes of the four

successive phases of the image – differently numbered but very similar to the order of simulacra that he lists earlier in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*:

It is the reflection of a profound reality;  
it masks and denatures and profound reality;  
it masks the absence of a profound reality;  
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Our contemporary society, if we include ourselves in the late-capitalist, late-modern or postmodern category, represents the fourth successive phase, or, the third order of simulacra, depending upon which Baudrillard text we read. Either way, we are apparently in a time in which there is said to be a proliferation of loss of meaning, loss of referents, and loss of reality. We live in a world dominated by simulacra, or signs, that are no longer discernable from the object they were meant to represent. This is Baudrillard's theory restated, but it is important to remember that it is a theory promulgated by others, like Neal Postman who was mentioned earlier in this paper as one who detects an inability within our television-watching culture to distinguish news from entertainment, or fact from fiction. Kellner explains Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality as a postmodern universe "in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life" (8). And, along those lines, in "The Spirit of Terrorism," Baudrillard himself writes of the fine line between reality and fiction at which "the image consumes the event" (5) and that "one could almost say that reality is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become the fiction itself" (5). In a hyperrealistic world – and, as I will show in *The Secret History* – fictions become fact, traditional signifiers lose meaning, and individuals seem lost and detached from a world that has come to seem fake and filmic to them.

As an example of fictions becoming fact within Tartt's text, in the aftermath of Bunny's murder, his disappearance takes on a life of its own. A specially made TV news logo comes to represent his disappearance, individuals claim to have seen the missing student in town long after his disappearance (and unbeknownst to them, long after his death), another fellow student "knows" that Bunny was kidnapped by a drug dealer, and a townsman tells details of how Bunny was kidnapped by Arabs. The theme that individuals "see what they want to see" runs through this text. As one example, Henry tells Francis, Richard and the twins that no one will notice when they come out of the woods after pushing Bunny down into a ravine: "No one will give us a second glance. People don't pay attention to ninety percent of what they see" (257). And then, later, when individuals claim to have seen Bunny in town, Henry says, "People think they see all kinds of things" (300). As such, the text of *The Secret History* frequently portrays how fictions can become reality, demonstrating characteristics of postmodern literature.

Even the signifiers of death and absence seem to lose meaning and to be emptied out in the hyperreality that exists in *The Secret History*. In one instance, the five friends discuss the Corcoran family's mourning of their son's death: "they didn't seem out of their minds or anything. Mr. Corcoran would act all sad and worried for a while, then the next thing you knew he'd be playing with the baby, giving everybody a beer" (334). Later in the text the five friends watch Mrs. Corcoran in an interview on the television news, and they notice that she does not seem very upset about the ongoing search for her son. Richard narrates that she says "reflectively," not emotionally:

Of course, we're all just out of our *minds*, really. And I certainly hope that no mother will ever have to endure what I have for the past few nights. But the weather does seem to be breaking, and we've met so many lovely



people, and the local merchants have all been generous in so many little ways. (348)

Here, Tartt seems to emphasize the turn of the word “But,” as Mrs. Corcoran fixates on the event of the aftermath – the lovely people and the generous merchants – rather than on the loss of her son. Later, the news media picks up on “the rumors – wheeling vulture-like in the skies above his corpse” (384) that Bunny had died an alcohol-related death. Henry says in Greek to his friends, “The mother grieves. Not for her son. For she is a wicked woman. Rather she grieves for the shame which has fallen on her house” (383). Subsequently in the text Mrs. Corcoran continues to be depicted as being most concerned with appearances as it is mentioned that there was a “resemblance (she) tried to cultivate” (417) with the Kennedys, and, as Richard describes her performance at the funeral, “She was carrying I don’t know why – a small bouquet of rosebuds. Patrick offered her an arm and she slipped a gloved hand in the crook of his elbow, inscrutable behind her dark glasses, calm as a bride” (418). Here, funeral imagery in Richard’s filmic imagination is conflated with wedding imagery, emptying out the meaning of both types of ceremonies. These examples indicate that not only are these characters shallow and emptied out, but also that Bunny’s death is inconsequential and without meaning. Furthering this idea is a fact that we learn later in the epilogue – that Marion, Bunny’s college girlfriend, marries one of Bunny’s brothers whom she met at the funeral. This seems to indicate that not only is Bunny’s death inconsequential, but that he is replaceable and able to be simulated, or copied, in his brother. In another example, Richard narrates that all three of Bunny’s brothers resemble one another, “Bunny’s death was starting to seem some horrible kind of regenerative act, more Bunnys popping up everywhere I looked, Bunnys coming out of the woodwork” (397). In another instance

within the Corcoran family, Tartt names two of Bunny's sisters-in-law Lisa. Richard narrates, "By an unfortunate coincidence, both of them were named Lisa, which made for a lot of confusion around the house" (409). In regenerating and duplicating characters in these ways, I hold that Tartt's text suggests a mutated sort of repetition of the same, which originally was defined by Plato as the existence of one true model with all other examples being mere copies. We may consider this sort of Platonic repetition of the same to be Classical in a sense, but I argue that Tartt is once again playing with us by setting false markers of identification of genre and category. Thinking in a binary way, the opposite of a Platonic repetition of the same would be repetition in which everything is unique (repetition of difference). Gilles Deleuze, in his 1969 work *The Logic of Sense*, iterates this theory, "There are two distinct readings of the world: one invites us to think difference from the standpoint of a previous similitude or identity; whereas the other invites us to think similitude and even identity as the product of a deep disparity" (261). For Deleuze, it is the repetition of difference that is subversive to the norm and, thus, change-provoking, active, and forward-moving; a repetition of the same is static. But I suggest Tartt is doing more than simply representing sameness and stasis across characters in her novel, rather, I hold that she is holding up sameness as a smokescreen for emptiness, or identities that are self-less and emptied out. I hold that in the *The Secret History*, the examples of the regeneration of Bunny and the interchangeable Lisas suggest that identity is not unique, nor is it assumed, and, in a postmodern, hyperreal world, it can be empty and meaningless.

One of the most apparent ways that *The Secret History* portrays the postmodern world of hyperreality is in its excessive depiction of the actions within the novel as filmic

simulacra. There are countless instances in which Richard conveys the sense that he is not really present – in his description of the many dreams he experiences, the frequent times he is inebriated with drugs or alcohol and by way of his various descriptions of surreal feelings. But it is the times when he conveys that he feels as if he is watching the actions around him on a screen that most explicitly convey the sense that he is removed from reality. When Richard first begins to understand that four of his friends were involved in the murder that occurred during the bacchanalia, he describes, “nothing seemed real, and I felt as though this were some complicated film I’d started watching in the middle and couldn’t quite get the drift of” (155). Later, when Richard is present at Bunny’s murder, he describes Bunny falling over the edge of the cliff as “a silent-movie comedian slipping on a banana peel – before he toppled backwards, and fell to his death” (227). Of the incident, he says:

You see, then, how quick it was. And it is impossible to slow down this film, to examine individual frames. I see now what I saw then, flashing by with the swift, deceptive ease of an accident: shower of gravel, wind-milling arms, a hand that claws at a branch and then misses. [. . .] Cut to Henry, stepping back from the edge. Then the film flaps up in the projector and the screen goes black. (276)

Richard uses film-director vocabulary as he “cuts” from scene to scene to describe the murder. He then refers to this reproduction of the murder in his mind’s eye as an “objectionable little documentary” (276). And he speaks of his numbness in watching it over and over in his mind:

I marvel at how detached it is in viewpoint, eccentric in detail, largely devoid of emotional power. In that way it mirrors the remembered experience more closely than one might imagine. Time, and repeated screenings, have endowed the memory with a menace the original did not possess. (276)

Thus, Tarrt shows us in Richard's dialog a reproduction – or memory – that is emptied-out of meaning and imbued with something that the original did not possess. In other words, the death itself did not mean anything, but the filmic image afterward was menacing to Richard. Here, she provides readers with an explicit example of a signifier losing meaning, whereas, throughout the text, she provides readers with multiple implicit examples of this emptying out. In another example of filmic simulacra in the text, Richard compares his factual “pleasant” emotions to emotions he thinks he should be having based on fiction: “If this was a movie, I thought, looking pleasantly into the pleasant beefy face of the policeman – if this was a movie, we'd all be fidgeting and acting really suspicious” (328). This is an interesting inversion in which Richard – who just participated in murdering a peer and describes himself as looking pleasant – refers to fiction as a resource for a more fitting, “realistic” response for one who has just murdered another. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neal Postman posits his theory that television has become the command center of all we know:

Our culture's adjustment to the epistemology of television is by now all but complete; we have so thoroughly accepted its definitions of truth, knowledge, and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane. (80)

As Richard refers in the novel to the ways in which he should react according to the ways in which fictive television characters react, Postman's theory becomes enunciated in the text. Postman continues with the main premise of his book, that everything – from fiction to news – becomes entertainment on television: “What I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience” (87). He explains that serious news is rendered banal by the frequent upbeat commercials, the attractive specially made logos for news

stories, and the buoyant news show theme music surrounding the bad news of the day.

Postman writes:

I should go so far as to say that embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticomunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism. (105)

In conclusion, the examples in *The Secret History* of life as filmic simulacra point to a sense of detachment and alienation of these characters. Richard, in particular, who describes actions and events as if they are on a screen in front of him, is the epitome of one representing a passive, meaningless, nihilistic existence. In his hyperrealistic world, Richard is unable to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, and, so, by way of his narration, readers too are pulled into the postmodern, hyperrealistic world of this text.

### **3.3 Concluding Thoughts on *The Secret History* and the Postmodern**

To conclude this examination of what makes *The Secret History* postmodern, I hold that it is Tartt's many ways of representing loss of self and loss of reality that point to this text's participation in the elusive genre of the postmodern. Of the postmodern, Beville writes:

Defined by loss of value and meaning, ephemerality, dissolution and vastitude, the existence of the postmodern subject is terrifyingly unreal and indefinable and this is apart from the obvious terrors of living, alienated in our postmodern world of violence and political terrors. (49)

In other words, Beville points out that life in postmodern times is scary not only because of external postmodern acts of terrorism, but also because of the sense of internal, personal loss of basic, traditional certainties from bygone eras. To be sure, Tartt represents both of these internal and external terrors in *The Secret History*. So, the question arises again, why would Tartt take the already anxiety- and fear-provoking traits

of the postmodern and exacerbate them with the anxiety- and fear-provoking traits of the gothic?

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GOTHIC-POSTMODERN AND SUBLIME TERROR

At this point, we have examined what it is that makes *The Secret History* postmodern, as well as what it is that makes the novel gothic. Key to the argument that this novel is a participating member of the hybrid, gothic-postmodern literary genre is the notion that not only does the text have superficial characteristics, or markers, of both genres, but also that the text represents and melds together real gothic terror and real postmodern terror for the characters in the novel and for the readers of the text. Beville argues that it is terror that binds the gothic and the postmodern together. She writes, “Although generated by different events, terror and its effects today mimic their eighteenth century parallels and this is evidenced clearly through gothic-postmodern fiction” (23). For her, terror – whether stimulated by eighteenth-century events or postmodern events – is directly related to a “rapidly changing world defined by violence, disorientation and loss of meaning and faith” (23). For Beville, terror is a personal experience that causes one to be in a state of hesitation or suspension. Furthermore, “terror merely hints at unimaginable horrors and the mind is left to wander, while it waits to uncover what will happen next” (24). Beville’s definition of terror is not original. It stems from a definition written in 1826 by Ann Radcliffe in “On the Supernatural in

Poetry,” an essay that contains the supposed first-known written description of the differences between terror and horror specifically as they relate to the gothic. Radcliffe writes, “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (150). For Radcliffe, too, terror represents indeterminate glimpses of the unrepresentable, leaves much to the imagination, and is equated with the sublime; horror clearly represents what had before been unrepresentable or unfathomable and it causes the subject to experience shock. In literature, then, horror – by definition – shocks and paralyzes. But with terror, according to Radcliffe, “the whole soul is roused and fixed, in the full energy of attention” (146). Radcliffe also writes of the “correspondent scenery” (146) and the “circumstances” (146) that authors use to “awaken solemn expectation” (146) among readers and “assist the mischief” (146) of the author’s characters. Radcliffe’s ideas, then, support the argument that Tartt uses the gothic *topoi* in her novel to heighten readers’ anxiety and fear of contemporary society to “strike and interest a reader by the representation, even more than a general view of the real scene itself could do” (151), as Radcliffe writes. In other words, Tartt seems to be trying to terrify us *about* the postmodern *with* gothic tools so that we will stand and pay attention – so that we will be compelled to look into the mirror that she makes for us of our society and our selves.

But why make a distinction – as have Tartt, Beville and Radcliffe – between terror and sublime terror? Is there a difference? According to philosophers from Kant, Burk and Schopenhauer to Lyotard and Baudrillard, there is a difference. Without getting into the various shades of differing definitions as these thinkers extend and push



against one another, sublime terror generally is held up as greater and more intense than terror. The sublime is said to be awe-inspiring in its presentation of the unrepresentable. Too, it is said to not only provoke fear, but also a heightened, inexplicable – or liminal – sense of pleasure, or ecstasy. The power of sublime terror, then, is in its suggestion of the unthinkable, the “other,” the abject and the taboo. For Beville, sublime terror is the “heart of gothic and gothic-postmodernist literary exploration” because it is the “most apparent common denominator between the gothic and the postmodern” (15). In fact, she writes that “enunciating aspects of the sublime effects of terror is the primary function of gothic rhetoric” and that “It is also the primary task of postmodernist art and literature as it is perceived as a route to the unknown, unrepresentable aspects of self and reality” (15). Beville is not alone in seeing sublime terror as the link between the two genres. She makes the case that Baudrillard’s discourse of postmodern terror is linked to the gothic, “Significantly, he draws on the gothic idea of the spectre and sublimity in terror in claiming that terrorism is a spectre that plagues us all as part of our desire for symbolic death and the realization of the impossible real” (18). To be sure, the existence and the effects of sublime terror in *The Secret History* are key to the argument that this novel participates in the gothic-postmodern genre, as defined by Beville. But, even more, the existence and the effects contribute also to the dissolution of reality, as we know it, as sublime terror alters our state and takes us past the boundaries of our own imagination. As such, it is necessary to not only define sublime terror as we have done, but also to examine how it transpires within *The Secret History*.

One of the most explicit examples in *The Secret History* of sublime terror – and an example that I already have touched on as representing the closely linked concept of

loss of reality – is found in the bacchanalia in which four of the six central characters participate. The students first discuss these ancient revelries in Greek class with their professor, Julian, who says, as cited previously within the examination of loss of self:

The revelers were apparently hurled back into a non-rational, pre-intellectual state, where the personality was replaced by something completely different – and by ‘different’ I mean something to all appearances not mortal. Inhuman. (40)

Richard the narrator shares his thoughts on Julian’s lecture with the reader, “it was a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable” (40). The bacchanal, then, is set up in the novel as something unknown, unfamiliar and “other.” It is in this classroom discussion, too, that the concept of the sublime is tied into the bacchanal itself and into the concept of terror. Julian lectures, “Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely?” (42). The seduction of the Dionysiac ritual, then, begins for the characters in the novel, and the stage is set for the reader to anticipate this type of unimaginable event that promises utter loss of self and the “fire of pure being” (42).

#### **4.1 Sublime Terror and Symbolic Death**

It is along these lines of sublime terror that Tartt enters the philosophical conversation on symbolic death and rebirth in her novel. In the aftermath of Bunny’s death and his funeral, Richard finds Henry working in his garden. It is important to note that Henry was the instigator of the bacchanal and, thus, the “cause” of the accidental murder. Henry also was the leader of the murder of Bunny. Thus, readers coming from a more traditional, pre-postmodern line of thinking are likely to tag Henry as the “evil” one, or, the “terrorist,” as the responsibility lies with him. Richard asks Henry, “You

don't feel a great deal of emotion for other people, do you?" (493). To which Henry responds:

My life, for the most part, has been very stale and colorless. Dead, I mean. The world has always been an empty place to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I felt dead in everything I did. But then it changed, the night I killed that man (during the bacchanalia). It was the most important night of my life. It enabled me to do what I've always wanted most. To live without thinking. (493)

Henry continues speaking about this new feeling – this new sense of life, “That surge of power and delight, of confidence, of control. That sudden sense of the richness of the world. Its infinite possibility” (493). Richard agrees with Henry, “And, though this new lucidity of vision was frequently nerve-wracking, there was no denying that it was not an altogether unpleasant sensation” (494). Henry, then, claims to be living a new, altered life after experiencing the indefinable, sublime terror of the bacchanal. Richard, too, agrees that he also experienced a “new lucidity of vision,” supposedly in his heightened state of paranoia and anxiety in the aftermath of Bunny's murder. Henry claims to have experienced the outer boundaries of the imaginable while in a state of suspended reality and suspended selfhood. Beville, in her explanation of sublime terror, writes, “In that sublime state we experience ‘absolute’ being, in which a new existence can be initiated as our usual cognitive and emotional counterpoints of self are removed from the frame of experience” (29). In his article “Gothic's Death Drive,” Gary Farnell writes of this sublimation and subsequent rebirth as an encounter with the Lacanian Real and as a second death. Regarding the Lacanian Real, he writes,

For Lacan, the impossible Real is duly encountered by us within symbolization in the shape of an otherwise nameless and unnameable Thing (or *das Ding* in Freud), the appearance of which, by virtue of its intrinsic transphenomenality, is ever a

sort of anamorphic stain in the perception (if not the veiled ideologies) of subjects who otherwise live by signification. (594)

Farnell continues explaining the Lacanian Real describing it as: “the at once impossible and traumatic Thing (not just of darkness, but of black marbled *jouissance*)” (595). In *The Secret History*, then, the transformative bacchanalia is the “impossible and traumatic Thing;” it is the impossible Real, or, Farnell’s “stain.” Farnell, too, in using the term *jouissance*, notes the sublime nature – the thrilling, pleasurable side – to an encounter with the Real. Drawing heavily from Freudian death drive theory and again from Lacan, Farnell then explains the different modalities of death, namely the second – or symbolic – death and the first – or physical – death, by using the example of Antigone, who he says is between the two deaths:

What is the essence of Antigone’s tragic situation, her plight in extremis, her ‘solitude,’ is the fact that, in opposing Creon’s authority by taking the side of her dead brother Polynices, she has put herself beyond the limits of her given symbolic community, and thus she suffers a symbolic or ‘second’ death. (596)

Correspondingly, in *The Secret History*, Henry puts himself beyond the limits of his given symbolic community, too, when he enters the non-rational, pre-intellectual state of the revelry and, thus, experiences second death in Lacanian terms. Henry, then – and, for that matter, all of the characters in the novel who encounter the unimaginable Real and experience the “new lucidity of vision” that Richard and Henry claim to have achieved either by way of the bacchanalia or by way of another encounter with sublime terror in the form of facing death in Bunny’s murder – are in the state of being between two deaths, which Farnell defines as “truly the realm of the living dead” (606). Furthermore Farnell writes that the greater catastrophe between the two types of death is the symbolic, second death because it signifies, “the possibility for the living being of never having

been alive in the first place” (606). Along these lines, the main characters in this postmodern novel, existing as they do in the realm of the living dead, become quintessential gothic figures themselves, with the bacchanal representing the impossible Real and the ultimate element of sublime terror in the novel.

#### **4.2 Sublime Terror and an Altered State**

Another way that Tarrt exemplifies sublime terror in the novel is not necessarily denoted in one specific event, but is represented in the constant fear and anxiety that the characters experience after Bunny’s murder. As I have said before, this fear and anxiety is not related to the guilt of murder and the burden of evil. It is mostly expressed as a fear and anxiety of being caught and punished – just as a person standing on a tower is not necessarily afraid of heights, but of falling. Tarrt foreshadows instances of sublime terror early in the novel during Richard’s first lecture with Julian and the Classics group. Referring to the Furies and to the concept of losing oneself entirely, Julian says, “And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much themselves they couldn’t stand it” (37). I suggest that Tarrt exemplifies this high-volume inner monologue frequently in the form of sublime terror as experienced by several of the characters in the novel. It must be remembered that during the high-volume inner monologue, Tarrt continues to bombard the reader with abundant anxiety-provoking gothic markers, as well as ongoing examples of disorienting hyperreal surroundings for these characters. In one example, Richard is abruptly awakened with a “panicky” phone call from Francis, “Listen to me. I’m having a heart attack. I think I am going to die” (432). This is a simple example of a panic attack, but in the text it is clearly connected to

the fear and anxiety Francis experiences after the murders. Tarrt even endows the doctor Francis sees for his panic attack with dialog that alludes to paranoia, “Nobody’s accusing you of anything. But your behavior is a little irrational tonight, don’t you think?” (435). If the reader had not already concluded that Francis is acting outside of the norm, Tarrt provides explicit direction in the doctor’s quote that he is acting irrational. In another example, Richard describes the general fear and anxiety he experiences after Bunny’s murder:

I dreaded the thought of the night ahead, but not for the reasons one might expect – that I was worried about the police, or that my conscience bothered me, or anything of the sort. Quite the contrary. [. . .] What I did experience when alone was a sort of general neurotic horror, a common attack of nerves and self-loathing magnified to the power of ten. Every cruel or fatuous thing I’d ever said came back to me with an amplified clarity. (317)

Here, Tarrt exemplifies how one’s “inner monolog” can drive them mad and alter them in some way – in this case with an amplified clarity of existence. Late in the text – and so unexpectedly that the passage seems as if it had accidentally jumped in from Ellis’

*American Psycho* – the very passive, non-aggressive narrator Richard seems to have a psychotic break. Again, this break comes after the murders, and surrounded with gothic and postmodern imagery and themes. Richard shares his inner thoughts with the reader:

Camilla’s face burst into glowing bloom. A terrible sweetness boiled up in me. Everything, for a moment – mirror, ceiling, floor – was unstable and radiant as a dream. I felt a fierce, nearly irresistible desire to seize Camilla by her bruised wrist, twist her arm behind her back until she cried out, throw her on my bed: strangle her, rape her, I don’t know what. And then the cloud passed over the sun again, and the life went out of everything. (484)

Richard’s thoughts of his own violent actions seem very out of place in the novel, but I argue that Tarrt uses this as an example of the fear and anxiety of sublime terror leading to an altered state of mind. Another manifestation in the text of sublime terror has to do

with one of several hallucinations that occur in the novel. Richard, tired and achy from anxiety-ridden days and nightmare-filled nights, looks out the window of his dorm room onto the Commons to a pair of students who are building a structure on the lawn for a school project. Richard narrates, “I was flooded with black, irrational terror: *gibbets*, I thought, *they’re putting up gibbets, they’re having a hanging on Commons lawn*” (490).

He explains that the hallucination continued off and on for him over several days:

Sometimes the structure was mundane, silly, perfectly harmless; though early in the morning, say, or around twilight, the world would drop away and there loomed a gallows, medieval and black, birds wheeling low in the skies overhead. At night, it cast its long shadow over what fitful sleep I was able to get. (490)

Once again, Tartt exemplifies an altered state that results from experiencing sublime terror. And, once again, she imbues the example with gothic imagery, heightening the fear and anxiety of the scene for the reader.

### **4.3 Literary Sublime Terror and the Reader**

In addition to exemplifying sublime terror in the bacchanalia and in the characters’ paranoia, I argue that Tartt also affects sublime terror among her readers by implicating them in the evil doings of the novel. I am not saying that readers are guilty of murder because they read the novel. What I am saying is that readers *feel* guilty of murder and complicity because, if reading is a mode of experience, then readers imagine that they are experiencing the first-person narrator’s thoughts and actions as if he were their avatar. In “What Writers Do: The Value of Literary Imagination,” Richard Eldridge draws upon Aristotelian theory to explain that literature is an imitative representation, in which “the subject matter is presented not simply for the sake of classification and theorizing, but rather for the sake of dwelling in the experience of the

subject matter as it matters emotionally to and for an observer or reader” (13). Along those lines, the case can be made that readers’ imaginations dwell in Richard’s experience of being frequently startled and agitated throughout the tale, being enormously annoyed by Bunny’s repetitive, pesky, threatening behavior, and rationalizing the actions that lead to Bunny’s murder. Of course, the reader does not commit murder – but neither, technically, does Richard. The reader, though, continues to read and continues to feel Richard’s fear and anxiety of being caught. For the reader, this *mimesis*, or imitative representation causes real fears and anxieties, though they exist in our imagination as we read. Like Richard and like Henry, the readers’ imagination, too, is expanded to its outer limits as we experience, through our imagination, the sublime terror of the bacchanalia and the characters’ state-altering paranoia. It is precisely this reader experience that Tarrt creates that I argue works to reveal what could become of individuals in our society and, horrifyingly, what could happen in our own future actions. Moreover, it is here that I connect the reader experience that Tarrt creates to the terrors of the postmodern world, such as 9/11, various school shootings and the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shootings in the summer of 2012. I am definitively not saying that readers might push their most annoying friend over the edge of a ravine upon reading this novel. What I am saying is that *The Secret History* allows readers an indirect glimpse of the unthinkable. In the novel, Richard shares an often repeated quote of Julian’s, “*What is unthinkable is undoable*” (277). In other words, “you can not fix something if you do not know what the problem is.” But Richard continues in the same scene with an inversion that echoes, “what is thinkable is doable,” in the following:

The idea of murdering Bunny was horrific, impossible; nonetheless we dwelt on it incessantly, convinced ourselves that there was no alternative, devised plans



which seemed slightly improbable and ridiculous but which actually worked quite well when put to the test . . . . I don't know. A month or two before, I would have been appalled at the idea of any murder at all. But that Sunday afternoon, as I actually stood watching one, it seemed the easiest thing in the world. How quickly he fell; how soon it was over. (277)

This inversion, “What is thinkable is doable” is the spirit of terrorism – to borrow from a title of Baudrillard’s – in that it only takes one individual to think up an act no one has ever imagined and to act upon it to produce terror. Who would have thought a young man in Colorado – one living in the realm of the living dead and imagining himself as The Joker – would shoot up an innocent theater full of Batman fans in the debut of *The Dark Knight Rises* in the summer of 2012? Apparently, one man – caught up in madness in his own hyperrealist filmic simulacratonic world – did just that. In “The Spirit of Terrorism,” Baudrillard writes, “The tactics of terrorism are to provoke an excess of reality and to make the system collapse under the weight of this excess” (3). He continues later with a discussion of the unexpectedness of terrorism in reference to 9/11:

Any inoffensive individual can be a potential terrorist! If those terrorists could pass unnoticed, then anyone of us is an unnoticed criminal (each plane is suspect too), and ultimately, it might even be true. This might well correspond to an unconscious form of potential criminality, masked, carefully repressed, but always liable, if not to surge, at least to secretly vibrate with the spectacle of Evil. Thus, the event spreads out in its minutiae, the source of an even more subtle psychological mental terrorism. (3)

While this example from Baudrillard is admittedly extreme, it underscores the quality of unexpectedness of terrorism and the related, very personal, form of terror. To conclude the argument that Tarrt implicates her readers in the evil of the novel, let us consider Andrew Slade’s interpretation of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s postmodern thoughts about the human and the inhuman. Slade writes:

The idea of the human, a central concern to European modernity in general, and certainly to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, is in general

constructed on the repression and disavowal of the inhuman in the human. Consequently Lyotard is not as concerned with the human as the inhuman. [. . .] Lyotard tries to understand and articulate the forms of otherness that occupy “us.” (37)

Slade continues, “To be human demands that the inhuman dwell in the human, not as parasite or disease, but as constitutive element” (38). Readers of *The Secret History* who never in their wildest imagination contemplated murder in “real” life find themselves with a broader imagination, having gone through the process of imagining and rationalizing participation in the murder of another. In other words, readers are left to wonder, “If what is thinkable is doable, what does that mean for me and my actions?” In the end, readers of *The Secret History* experience sublime terror in the *dread* – not the actualization, because, by definition, that would not be “terror” – of self-recognition in the literary violence before them.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

If *The Secret History* makes readers imaginatively rationalize murder, what good is the novel? If it makes readers feel badly about society and about the unthinkable *inhuman* within themselves and others, can it be of any value? If gothic-postmodern literature shakes readers with fear and anxiety related to sublime terror, why read it? The answer to these questions and the conclusion of this argument is twofold. First, *The Secret History*, when read through a gothic-postmodern lens provides readers with an exaggerated, early-warning view of just how bad things could get for themselves and for society. Second, gothic-postmodern literature, specifically *The Secret History*, provides readers with the tools to cope in the postmodern world in which we live.

Regarding the argument that *The Secret History* provides readers with an exaggerated, early-warning view of just how bad things could get for themselves and for society, Tartt's entire text describes melancholy characters that have superficial relationships with each other, are numb and disconnected from "reality," and are desensitized to traditional notions of evil and wrongdoing. Surely it is no mistake that Tartt invokes the school setting – a place in traditional boarding school and college novels where young adults achieve self-discovery and growth – to highlight by contrast

*The Secret History*'s shallow characters that are simply empty. She renders them as startlingly unwilling and unable to change, grow or react. They are passive, static and flat. To invoke Lacan, the main characters all seem as if they are "between two deaths," as none of them seem to live by signification. In fact, the characters in the novel seem otherworldly and unreal, just as much as any "candygothic" vampire or zombie from the living dead. Surely, most readers of this text do not long to emulate them; rather, readers are more likely to be repelled by them and alarmed by the world that made them. It is important to point out here that, true to the postmodern literary genre, this is a "readerly" text in that virtually all of the judgment and reaction comes from the reader. The didacticism, too, that I argue is, in fact, within this novel, is entirely "readerly." In other words, the characters' lessons learned – and I argue that there are none – are vastly different than the readers' lessons learned. Readers learn in this novel about a world they do not want. By leaving the judgment and reaction up to the reader, Tarrt forces readers to actively read and notice the desensitized characters and the hyperreal society in which they live. In this way, Tarrt draws readers into her anxiety-ridden, exaggerated presentation to be fearful of and anxious about the characters and their actions. In the end, it is as if Tarrt – rather than the character Julian – is suggesting, "What is unthinkable is undoable," as she seems to force readers to think the unthinkable so that we may work toward undoing the conditions that cause unimaginable acts before those conditions cause damage.

Regarding the argument that *The Secret History* works as a coping mechanism, I hold, first, that Tarrt's 1992 text is timely with regard to issues of fear and anxiety. During the eight years that it took her to write the novel, America's fears and anxieties

shifted from the Cold War and its end – marked by the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – to a growing fixation on domestic and global terrorism that continues even more so today. Before individuals had ever imagined young men entering public schools and shooting children and before the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York, historically far-away acts of terror seemed to be hitting closer and closer to home, as Islamic fundamentalists attacked the US Marine quarters in Beirut in 1983 and Americans lost loved ones in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988. The horrible but anticipated threat of death by nuclear war dissolved and the threat of death by unknown means began to dominate the American imagination. As I have stated, I argue that *The Secret History*, and other gothic-postmodern works like it, provide a means of working through conditions of terror and acts of terrorism that occur in our present and have yet to occur in our future. Along these lines, Beville writes:

Gothic-postmodernism can be regarded as an artistic response to the terror that currently haunts our collective unconscious as part of our postmodern culture of fear, and also as part of our subjective desire for its return and for discourse to open into the darker side of our known ‘realities.’ (24)

Beville does not continue into Freudian mastery theory, but I hold that this is exactly what she suggests in this quote that tags gothic-postmodernism as an artistic response to terror. Freud’s *fort/da* experiments are used to make a case that one repeats that with which he is anxious in order to attempt to master and understand the anxiety – to force the unthinkable to become the thinkable. Furthermore, Freudian mastery theory is centered on the active role of the anxious individual, versus the passive role of one who becomes “overpowered by the experience” (15). As such, we read *The Secret History*, with all of its anxiety and fear – and we read gothic-postmodern literature, in general,

with its inherent spiraling death drive – so that we may actively face our “reality,” which, in actuality, is the reality of our own death. Farnell writes,

Ultimately, this facing up to the material reality of death itself, witnessed with the gothic, is for the sake of promoting the life of the living: ‘the life of the Spirit’, as Hegel (by no means uniquely, but eloquently and grandly) has said, ‘is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself within it.’” (593)

While Farnell refers specifically to the gothic here, I hold that this stands, too, for the gothic-postmodern as it is an extension, or survival, of the gothic to which Farnell refers. In this quote, Farnell taps into the idea of a Nietzschean *will to power* in that he notes the importance of being active versus being passive – of actively facing fears, learning to master them, and enduring them. In *The Secret History*, Tartt gives readers plenty of food for the literary imagination when it comes to terror and even terrorism, which I will define here as the use of violence as a discourse of power. We already have examined terror in *The Secret History* in the form of sublime terror and in the form of the fears and anxieties provoked by the characteristics of gothic and of postmodern literature. But I would argue, as well, that *The Secret History* portrays a pervasive subtext of terrorism. For example, in a quote we already have considered, Richard refers to the loss of self during the bacchanalia by calling it “a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable” (40). Richard was referring to the Greeks’ response to – and triumph over – the stoic Romans, but “a triumph of barbarism over reason” could also be said to relate to the early gothic literary response to the Enlightenment, as well as to the postmodern literary genre’s response to the modern. Can we say, then, that barbarism, gothic and postmodern are all reactions – or discourses of power – against a previous era or movement? These specific movements all use terror as a discourse of power to attempt

to change and disrupt our sense of reason and stability. Of course, in this example, Richard is also referring to the bacchanalia, which I suggest leads to a second example of a subtext of terrorism in the novel. Henry, described throughout the novel as dark, mysterious, and unknowable, is the ringleader both for the bacchanalia and, later, for Bunny's murder. If there is a terrorist in this novel, all signs point to Henry as that terrorist, as he not only leads the group through these transgressive actions, but also, he holds the other main characters hostage to secrecy. The power he holds over them is entirely related to fear as the other main characters all, at one point, question whether Henry could be capable of murdering them, as well. Tartt seems to have Henry in mind, too, as a potential terrorist. She sets the tone of the subtext in the first Classics lecture in the novel when Julian speaks of military tactics and jokes about "marching on Hampden town and taking it over by yourselves" (37). Henry laughs and responds, "We could do it this afternoon, with six men" (37), presumably referring to the six Classics students. He continues:

One person to cut the phone and power lines, one at the bridge over the Battenkill, one at the main road out, to the north. The rest of us could advance from the south and the west. There aren't many of us, but if we scattered we'd be able to close off all other points of entry . . . and advance to the center from all points. Of course, we'd have the advantage of surprise. (37)

Richard narrates his thoughts, "I felt an unexpected thrill at the coldness of his voice" (37). Here, readers get the sense, due to the elaborateness of the plan and his quick response to the professor, that Henry has put some thought into these kinds of terrorist actions. In any case, I suggest that this subtext of terrorism – along with all the fears, anxieties and forms of sublime terror in *The Secret History* – provides readers with a form of practice they can use to help work through their own fears and anxieties related

to life in the twenty-first century. Of course, one can never master the element of surprise or the not-yet-imagined, but I argue that this novel, and gothic-postmodern fiction in general – more than fiction that does not appeal to the overwrought emotions of fear, anxiety and sublime terror – can push the limits of our imagination beyond what we have known before. In the end, readers of this text find themselves better equipped to understand the unexpectedness that defines the postmodern world so that they may better face the future and play an active, rather than passive, role in their own survival and in the survival of society at large.

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