



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

# **Malignantly Useless**

Thomas Ligotti's Supernatural Horror and Philosophical Pessimism

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Author:

Ossi Turpeinen

Supervisor:

Merja Polvinen

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## Abstract

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#### Abstract:

This thesis studies the relation between Thomas Ligotti's fiction and non-fiction, demonstrating how the themes that the author overtly discusses in his philosophical work *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010) have a more covert presence in his supernatural horror stories. By looking at select parts of *Conspiracy*, the novella *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002), and the short stories "A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing" (1997) and "Vastarien" (1987), I show how Ligotti's writing functions as literary sublimation of negative thought and emotion. In this process of sublimation, existential agony is creatively transformed into an artistic form that has the potential to be beneficial to both the author and the reader.

*Conspiracy* lays out Ligotti's pessimistic philosophy, describing consciousness as an evolutionary mistake, humans as paradoxical puppets helplessly trapped in the uncanny play of being, existence as a meaningless nightmare, and the extinction of humankind as the ideal scenario. Ligotti also discusses supernatural horror at length in *Conspiracy*, tying it together with philosophical pessimism, which reads like a blueprint for his own weird fiction. From the murderous misanthropy of *My Work* to the static wish for disintegration in "Soft Voice" and the multilayered manipulation in "Vastarien," philosophical pessimism permeates Ligotti's stories in both implicit and explicit ways.

Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman view the genre of weird fiction as a coded communique, an aesthetic enactment of pessimism. Their core idea is that pessimistic thought can better pass the reader's defenses when it is veiled in the form of fiction, appealing to the audience's emotions instead of trying to persuade them with philosophical argumentation. This thesis applies Packer and Stoneman's theory to the analysis of Ligotti's fiction and non-fiction, showing how each form of the author's literary expression works to channel philosophical pessimism and sublimate existential agony.

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## 1 Introduction

The relation between philosophy and literature is that of a complex entwinement, which can be traced back at least as far as classical antiquity, all the way to the earliest known written works of Western philosophy. This thesis loosely situates itself within that vast discussion, investigating the relation between certain literary texts of philosophy and fiction. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, Niklas Forsberg sums up the philosophical value of narrative literature by describing it as the illustrative form of philosophy: that what philosophy claims, a narrative can put in context and display in action, making the abstract concrete (81). This straightforward framework lined out by Forsberg provides a working context for this thesis, even if its rigorous and reasonable structure is bound to creak under the weight of the *weird* that emerges in the following.

Born in Detroit in 1953, Thomas Ligotti is mainly known for his short stories of supernatural horror, which first began to appear in small press publications in the early 80s (Schweitzer 9). However, in the later years of his career, the author has also openly presented himself as a proponent of philosophical pessimism, most notably through his non-fiction book *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (2010). In this collection of essays, Ligotti details his grim outlook on our world, presenting the emergence of conscious life as a tragic accident, portraying humans as helpless puppets trapped in the meaningless nightmare of existence, and advocating the extinction of the species as the ideal scenario. Similarly spirited sentiments and stylistics can be found in the author's weird fiction, albeit in a less explicit form, with many of Ligotti's protagonists finding themselves involved in malicious schemes of manipulation, experiencing humanity and life as unwanted and pointless, and longing for a way out of this world. Another notable characteristic that the author's fiction and non-fiction share is the abundant use of grotesque theatrical imagery such as puppets, mannikins, and clowns as mocking simulacra of humanity.

Utilizing Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman's approach to Ligotti's kind of weird fiction as an aesthetic enactment of pessimism, I will examine how the philosophical ideas explicitly expressed in his non-fiction shine through the nihilistic themes, the disconsolate characters, and the grotesque visions of his fiction. Despite their potential to transmit pessimistic views, I argue that Ligotti's stories and philosophical writings both function primarily as a type of literary sublimation of negative thought and emotion, enabling the transformation of existential angst into something constructive or even enjoyable for the author and the reader

alike. My analysis will mainly focus on selected parts of *Conspiracy*, the novella *My Work Is Not Yet Done* (2002), and the short stories “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing” (1997) and “Vastarien” (1987), aiming to provide a limited yet diverse and career-spanning sampling of the author’s vast literary body of work.

### 1.1 Ligottian Pessimism and Horror

To discuss Ligotti’s philosophical pessimism, I must begin by addressing the influence that the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990), namely his essay “The Last Messiah” (1933), has had on the author’s non-fiction. Ligotti dedicated the first edition of *Conspiracy* to the memory of Zapffe, and in the book’s introduction “Of Pessimism and Paradox,” Ligotti already begins discussing Zapffe’s philosophical views without naming him, mentioning how “the present ‘contrivance of horror’ has been anchored in the thesis of a philosopher who had disquieting thoughts about what it is like to be a member of the human race” (xix). As Zapffe’s philosophy receives in-depth coverage throughout *Conspiracy*, with Ligotti openly borrowing many of his core concepts from “The Last Messiah,” it becomes obvious that the philosopher Ligotti refers to in his introduction is indeed Zapffe.

Both Zapffe and Ligotti trace back the agony of existence to the imagined event of humankind first becoming self-conscious (Zapffe 1; *Conspiracy* 1). With the advent of consciousness, humans became aware of how suffering permeates all life, and how death always looms right around the corner, which resulted in a loss of natural innocence and harmony, and the onset of existential angst. To survive this anxiety, humankind must resort to “a more or less conscious suppression of [its] hazardous surplus of consciousness” (Zapffe 3). According to Zapffe, this suppression works through various defense mechanisms, with the four main types being *isolation* of disturbing thoughts and feelings out of our consciousness (4), *anchoring* ourselves to social and cultural concepts such as religion, country and family (4–6), *distraction* of our attention away from ourselves with a constant stream of diversions (6–8), and *sublimation* of the pains of life into something useful through creative processing (8). It is these defense mechanisms that make up what Ligotti calls *the conspiracy against the human race*. The mechanisms keep our consciousness at bay, and they are necessary for humankind to go on surviving and reproducing as it has always done. Out of the four aforementioned strategies, sublimation is the rarest, most obviously coming into play in artistic simulations of tragedy (*Conspiracy* 14). In fact, both Zapffe (8) and Ligotti (*Conspiracy* 25) mention their own philosophical writings as an example of sublimation. Sublimation is also the defense

mechanism that I am most interested in in the context of this thesis, as it can be detected in Ligotti's works from both the authorial and the readerly perspective.

With the subheading *A Contrivance of Horror, The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* not only refers to the horror of being, but also evokes the connection between philosophical pessimism and supernatural horror fiction. Ligotti traces the history of pessimistic thought in detail, from major names such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to more obscure thinkers like Carlo Michelstaedter and Miguel de Unamuno, but he also devotes a lot of time to discussing how pessimistic sentiments shine through supernatural horror in literature and film. The most significant horror motif appearing throughout *Conspiracy* is that of a puppet – animated to life in a horrific, uncanny way that defies rationality, order and natural law – as humans are essentially portrayed in Ligotti's philosophy as paradoxical puppets with only an illusion of self and free will. As long as the conspiracy prevails, us human puppets will continue believing ourselves to be the masters of our own actions, clinging to our defense mechanisms and ignoring the tragedy of human existence that Ligotti crystallizes as follows: “*Behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world*” (*Conspiracy* 38).

Ligotti recognizes that the pessimist has few valid options at hand after facing their position as a contradictory creature trapped in the horror of being. The pessimist knows better than anyone that the human species as a whole will never take the merciful step of going extinct on their own, which leaves the disillusioned individual with the personal solutions of either refraining from reproduction or committing suicide. Naturally, the ideal scenario would be to have never existed in the first place, but that dream can be realized only for the nonexistent generations of the future by ceasing to make more of us. This leaves the pessimist with a hopeless craving for a way out of life, out of the world, out of reality – a sentiment that reoccurs in many of the protagonists of Ligotti's fiction.

Antinatalism and suicide are not the only solutions within the pessimist's reach, though. Ligotti's writing also suggests and embodies the way of sublimation, where the nightmare of being is confronted and transformed into a creative form by an active individual. This might result in something like a philosophical essay or a weird fiction story, which can in turn extend the sublimating effect on their readers, whether it is by providing inspiration or comfort. Additionally, the creative process of sublimation provides the pessimist with a cozy corner where to curl up and disguise themselves as a potentially respectable contributor to

society, as the pessimist's negative impulses are converted into a socially acceptable form of artistic expression.

An example of Ligotti's "corporate horror," and his longest work to date, the novella *My Work Is Not Yet Done* depicts the surreal revenge journey of Frank Dominio, a low-level manager with a neurotic personality. Already a misanthropic loner with a certain level of indifference towards his faceless corporate job and contempt towards his co-workers, Frank spirals into murderous rage when he is wronged and outed from the company by his fellow managers and their mysterious superior Richard. However, before managing to exact his violent vengeance at his former colleagues, Frank is hit by a bus and becomes a spectral being trapped in the liminal space between life and death. He discovers his new-found state to provide exciting possibilities for realizing his revenge, but with every enemy he eliminates, he has a growing sense of a looming sinister presence behind everything, pulling the strings. Frank comes to realize how everything and everyone is inseparably connected to that fundamental presence of blackness, how existence itself is horribly wrong, and he develops an obsessive-compulsive desire to annihilate all life; that "*all of it had to go*" (*My Work* 111). As the narrator-protagonist realizes that his desire is destined to remain a hopeless dream, he is eventually left cursing all life and longing for his own death (137–138).

The short story "A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing" features an equally tormented narrator-protagonist, who thinks back to the winters of their sickly childhood, and the gentle care of their attending physician Dr. Zirk (117). The narrator – whose name and identity remain obscured – recalls having dreamt about "icy transcendence" ever since then, as well as having sensed the doctor to also possess "a secret affinity with the most remote and desolate locus of the winter spirit" (118). Many years later, the narrator discovers a desolate, wintry town near the northern border, noting its pervasive aura of delirium and disorder (118–119), and comes to recognize the place as the source for some of the cryptic utterances of the doctor (122). During their stay in the town, the narrator witnesses a morbid and bizarre parade led by a malevolent-looking clown (119–120), and mysteriously receives "metaphysical lectures" that elaborate on the philosophy of icy transcendence (121, 123–124). Speaking against the necessity of emotion and existential struggle, preaching salvation through disintegration into wintry void, and evoking the metaphor of humans as idiotic puppets, these lectures have a clear connection to the philosophical pessimism that Ligotti presents throughout *Conspiracy*. Afterwards, the narrator sees a body hanging from a window across the street, and recognizes the dead man to be none other than old Dr. Zirk, who is then carried away by the reappearing

parade (124–125). The story concludes with the narrator realizing that the town is their own home (125).

No more fond of the consensus reality of the waking world, Victor Keirion, the protagonist of “Vastarien,” firmly believes that “the only value of this world lies in its power – at certain times – to suggest another world” (352). On a quest to find literature that would elaborate on visions living up to his unearthly ideal “to dwell among the ruins of reality” (353), Victor is led by a peculiar crow-like stranger in a bookstore to purchase *Vastarien*, an enigmatic volume that only Victor is able to read. Resembling a dream chronicle of sorts, the book makes him feel that it does not only describe an unreal realm of chaos and horror called Vastarien, but that it is a tangible distillation of the very same marvelous nightmare world he has been looking for (357). Victor begins visiting Vastarien in his sleep, but as his dreams are being slowly devoured by a towering shadow resembling both a man and a bird, Victor realizes that he must find and kill the stranger to hold on to his coveted dreamworld (359–361). At the end, Victor is revealed to be a convicted murderer confined in an institution for the criminally insane and mumbling about someone stealing his dreams, as his caretakers wonder what they should do about the completely blank book that keeps on reappearing in his room (361–363).

## 1.2 Weird Fiction and Pessimistic Argument

As can be deduced from the plot summaries above, Ligotti’s fiction is characterized as much by sheer weirdness as it is by negativity, and hence it is no wonder that his work is commonly labeled as weird fiction, a subgenre of speculative fiction (Packer and Stoneman 23). While the term was coined by H. P. Lovecraft in the 1920s, Packer and Stoneman trace the genre’s genesis back to Edgar Allan Poe (24). Ligotti also credits Poe as an essential innovator in the kind of ominous atmosphere that his own works aim for, considering Poe a pioneer in the literary creation of an inescapable “world that is wholly evil, desolate, and doomed” (*Conspiracy* 182), as best exemplified by “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839).

Ligotti’s stories exhibit many of the characteristics of weird fiction recognized by Packer and Stoneman, such as often featuring an episodic narrative structure that favors the weaving of a dreamlike atmosphere over a logically continuous plot – the stories tend to leave unresolved ambiguities for the readerly imagination to speculate upon, refusing to provide a satisfactory sense of closure, or life-affirming catharsis (47–48). The strange and surreal atmosphere is supported by a hazy portrayal of events, often intermingled with dreams or madness, and

rarely told by an unquestionably reliable narrator (33). The described events themselves tend to suggest that knowledge does not lead to liberation but is in fact harmful (42): revelations about the nature of reality offer horrific insight into the futility of human existence at the hands of monstrous, incomprehensible forces that are either hostile or entirely indifferent (45–46). These are also hallmarks of Lovecraft’s fiction, as shown by Packer and Stoneman’s repeated references to the author’s works while lining out the characteristics of weird fiction. This is indicative of Lovecraft’s classic stories being prototypical weird tales, which is in line with Miéville calling him “overwhelmingly the preeminent figure in the field.” Not so surprisingly, Lovecraft remains the most often cited influence on Ligotti, even though Ligotti’s later works do not exhibit clear Lovecraftian traits in the same manner as some of his early stories like “The Last Feast of Harlequin” (1990), which is even dedicated to the memory of Lovecraft (295).

While Lovecraft summarized the desired readerly effect of weird fiction as “a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers” (Packer and Stoneman 24), this uncanny fear can result in more than just a passing sensation of shivers. Packer and Stoneman point out the philosophical potential of weird fiction: that it is able to aesthetically enact pessimism, while disguising the philosophical ideas as an intriguing scary story. Weird fiction can serve as “a pessimistic Trojan horse” of sorts, a literary vehicle of philosophical persuasion on readers that would never pick up a philosophical text, or that would not be receptive to openly pessimistic ideas. (23) At its most effective, a work of weird fiction can then fundamentally disturb the worldview of the reader “by calling into question the viability, desirability, or even intelligibility of life itself” (28).

Pessimistic sentiments loom large behind the origins of weird fiction, with S. T. Joshi highlighting the genre’s philosophical background by calling it “not so much a genre as a consequence of a world view” in Lovecraft’s time (1). Whereas Ligotti follows on a similar philosophical and aesthetic trail, his work also straddles the more contemporary literary movement of the New Weird (VanderMeer xvii), a somewhat slippery genre tag that has been attached to the likes of China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer. In his introduction to the anthology *The New Weird*, VanderMeer names Miéville’s 2000 novel *Perdido Street Station* as an early milestone of the genre with its “progressive political slant” (xi) and goes on to describe the genre as “acutely aware of the modern world . . . but not always overtly political” (xvi). VanderMeer’s repeated mention of the “surrender to the weird” (xiii, xvi) is echoed by Gry Ulstein in her discussion on VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* trilogy, where she

describes the New Weird as moving beyond the sheer cosmic horror of traditional weird fiction to embrace the weird and explore its possibilities (75). Ulstein also recognizes “a distinct urban or modern setting” as a core characteristic of the New Weird (82).

Ligotti retains the heavy pessimistic baggage of his formative predecessors in weird fiction, but his approach towards the weird rather emphasizes fascination over terror. In Ligotti’s fiction, the possibilities opened by the weird do tend to be disastrous instead of life-affirming, which is sometimes exactly why the characters seize them with morbid hunger – if only to crash and burn in ecstatic frenzy. The settings of the stories also place the author in a liminal plane between the old and the new weird: some of them could take place a century, two or more ago in a Lovecraftian fashion, while others have a firm footing in the urban locales of the modern world, bringing Ligotti’s work closer to the aesthetic of the New Weird. Although the political overtones associated with the genre are mostly absent in Ligotti, especially his corporate horror is easy to read as a sardonic critique of capitalist society – like the dark side of the genre coin, with the hopeful idealism of the likes of Miéville on the other (VanderMeer xiii). The hybrid nature of the New Weird definitely applies to Ligotti, as his work is not only experimental in its content, exhibiting an influence from the absurd surrealism of Kafka, but occasionally also in its form: one demonstration of this is found in “Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story,” a metafictional manual to writing a horror story that goes haywire and mutates into a horror story itself.

In his discussion of Lovecraft and the Weird, Mark Fisher locates the weird in the outside, in the beyond – something external to the common human experience – that breaks through the veil to tear down the safe structures of consensus reality in the course of the weird tale. This clash between the outside and the inside tends to lead to a mental (and sometimes physical) breakdown of the character-narrator, and the reader is left to observe “a catastrophic integration of the outside into an interior that is retrospectively revealed to be a delusive envelope, a sham” (Fisher 16). This image of the weird intruding on and invading the territory of the familiar also applies well to the philosophical potential of weird fiction, where sentiments about the desirability and meaningfulness of life, as taken for granted by the majority of people, are shattered by uncomfortable pessimistic ideas from outside the commonly accepted forms of thinking. Packer and Stoneman acknowledge that “most modern people are simply, and profoundly, hostile to pessimistic sentiment” (3), and hence philosophical pessimism makes a good match with the fictional weird, with both being means

to break the illusionary barrier between the inside and the outside in order to bring about a devastating revelation.

Apart from pointing out how weird fiction can circumvent the reader's potential aversion towards philosophical discourse, especially of the pessimistic kind, Packer and Stoneman present the subtle and ambiguous medium of weird fiction itself as most fitting and effective for the message (3–4). Whereas philosophical discourse as a rhetorical project is “inescapably goal-oriented and therefore optimistic” (2), as it is based on the belief in rational argumentation, shared understanding between individuals, and the potential of progress, fiction does not suffer from this conflict between theme and form (43). Instead of trying to reasonably argue in favor of philosophical pessimism, weird fiction can use the strategies of narrative fiction to generate in readers a feeling of unease that nudges them towards a pessimistic way of experiencing the world.

In the following, I first concentrate on Ligotti's denial of the concept of free will, and on his portrayal of humans as mere puppets of their instincts, highlighting the grotesque theatrical imagery that this line of thinking takes in the author's work. I continue with the ensuing view of conscious existence as a nightmare and death as the only escape, looking at the implications that such a hopeless worldview has on the protagonists of Ligotti's stories. Finally, I arrive at how the defense mechanism of sublimation manifests in the author's fiction and non-fiction, and discuss it from both the readerly and the authorial perspectives.

## 2 The Delusion of Self: Uncanny Puppets in the Grotesque Theater of Life

The conceptions about personal freedom and free will are held in high regard by the enlightened and cultured beings of today's Western world. Determinism and fatalism are not exactly in fashion, as even most religious people consider humans to have been created with free will, therefore being in control of and responsible for their own choices and actions. On the other hand, should a Christian, for instance, possess a more deterministic mindset, at least they tend to be comfortably convinced that "God has a plan for us all." In a way, Ligottian pessimism takes the worst of both outlooks, being deterministic yet rejecting the idea of a divine architect: humans are mere delusional puppets with no self, trapped in a "MALIGNANTLY USELESS" (*Conspiracy* 61) play with no benevolent puppet master pulling the strings either – a chaotic debacle, devoid of an underlying purpose or plan.

This "histrionically capitalized phrase" (61) reappears throughout *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (63, 107, 113, 121, 171, 216, 220), and Ligotti also explains his reasoning for the particular words in detail. He prefers "useless" over "worthless" to avoid direct associations to "the concepts of desirability and value" that the latter term invites, while "malignantly" is added for vitriolic boost (61–62). However, Ligotti acknowledges the insufficiency of words to accurately describe such an existential condition, adding that "to express with any adequacy a sense of the uselessness of everything, a nonlinguistic modality would be needed, some effusion out of a dream that amalgamated every gradation of the useless and wordlessly transmitted to us the inanity of existence under any possible conditions" (62). Although Ligotti's fiction still operates within the realm of language, the quote does also call attention to how fiction has the potential to come closer to "some effusion out of a dream" than a simple phrase or a lengthy rational explanation ever can, which aligns with Forsberg's idea of narrative literature as an illustrative form of philosophy as well (81). Perhaps Ligotti's supernatural horror stories are indeed a more adequate medium for expressing the malignantly useless nature of existence – and philosophically a more effective one, as suggested by Packer and Stoneman (26).

Ligotti calls consciousness an "existential liability" and identifies this view as central to philosophical pessimism, with humankind's tragical development into self-conscious beings having resulted from a blind blunder of nature, an accidental evolutionary mutation (*Conspiracy* 35). While Ligotti borrows this idea of the blind mutations of nature from Zapffe, who is the most reoccurring philosophical reference throughout *Conspiracy*, he traces

the key motif of humans essentially as puppets back to Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), the German pioneer of Western pessimism:

While Schopenhauer's system of thought is as impossible to swallow as that of any other systematic philosopher, no intelligent person can fail to see that every living thing behaves *exactly* in conformity with his philosophy in its liberal articulation. Wound up like toys by some force – call it Will, élan vital, anima mundi, physiological or psychological processes, nature, or whatever – organisms go on running as they are bidden until they run down. In pessimistic philosophies only the force is real, not the things activated by it. They are only puppets, and if they have consciousness may mistakenly believe they are self-winding persons who are making a go of it on their own. (*Conspiracy* 38)

Despite agreeing with the basics of Schopenhauer's pessimism, Ligotti criticizes it for its unnecessary “quasi-mystical” complexity, calling Schopenhauer's philosophical model “another intellectual labyrinth for specialists in perplexity” (13). Whereas Schopenhauer named the Will-to-live as the drive behind all living beings, Ligotti himself does not single out a force that would be running the show, rather going for Zapffe's comparatively non-technical pessimistic principles, where the entire human existence is simply a blind blunder, an accident. A major part of the pernicious truth then is how there is nothing or no one behind the scenes.

In the footsteps of Zapffe, Ligotti argues that humans are steered by their innate instinct to survive and reproduce, while the conspiratorial defense mechanisms keep their consciousness at bay enough, allowing them to go on thinking of themselves as “self-winding persons who are making a go of it on their own” (*Conspiracy* 38). We must then avoid waking up to “a sense of being things without significance or foundation, anatomies shackled to a landscape of unintelligible horrors” (25) at all costs, so that the chaotic carnage of existence can stay in motion. Our harmful surplus of consciousness would enable us to see behind the charade, revealing self as an illusion and existence as meaningless suffering, but as this realization would contradict our inherent inclination to keep the charade going, the defense mechanisms to restrict our consciousness and prevent such a realization become necessary. Hence, Ligotti argues, humankind is stuck in a position between two opposing forces, becoming “a biological paradox that cannot live with its consciousness and cannot live without it” (11), as our innate abilities and instincts clash in conflict with one another. This position pushes us to self-deception and denial, so that we do not have to confess to ourselves that we are “*puppets, contradictory beings, mutants who embody the contorted logic of a paradox*” (217), and therefore essentially unreal.

In his attempt to connect the dots between philosophical pessimism and supernatural horror, Ligotti evokes the common image of the undead as an example of a paradox embodied, as an “ontological perversion” that disrupts our conception of reality by being “something which should not be” (*Conspiracy* xx). However, his specific fascination does not lie with zombies, vampires and the like, but with inanimate objects that break the boundaries of their nature and violate reality by turning animate, such as puppets that become self-mobilized. This is where the concept of the *uncanny* becomes key, referring to “nonhuman forms that disport human qualities” to the extent that these forms appear disturbing to us, as they inhabit a liminal terrain of uncertainty, where they are not what they seem yet are two separate things at once (xxi). An uncanny discomfort then escalates to sanity-shattering supernatural horror when these supposedly inanimate objects come to life, beginning to move or speak – a paradoxical breach of the supposed natural order of the universe. Ligotti goes on to ponder that these *human* puppets would probably be unable to see themselves as puppets at all, but rather as independently thinking beings that are the masters of their own movements – much like actual humans think of themselves, insisting that they are individual selves instead of helpless playthings (xxi). This is where puppets’ subliminal potential to incite uneasiness in our minds lies: they are “simulacra of humanity’s horrific disorder and powerlessness” (Harris 1251), uncanny paradoxes that mirror our own role in the supernatural horror of existence as violations against the natural order, as things that should not be.

Packer and Stoneman posit uncanny fear, or a certain sense of *wrongness*, as a central element in weird fiction, recognizing that it is what makes the genre “not only compatible with but also rhetorically advantageous to philosophical pessimism” (26). They emphasize the unsettling effect of reality disturbance in weird fiction, which calls into question the stability and reliability of the universe as we know it:

[I]n transporting the reader from the mundane world of everyday life to a fictive universe marked by unexplainable dread and disturbing unfamiliarity, the weird tale of supernatural horror circumvents the habitual, intellectual, and social barriers that otherwise preserve one’s sense of reality and make the world a familiar home of reassurance and belonging – in other words, of meaning, intelligibility, identity, and rational expectation. (Packer and Stoneman 26)

The fear invoked by a piece of weird fiction is then not that of a singular evil temporarily intruding on the normal life of the protagonist(s), only to be defeated at the ending of the story, where comforting balance is restored. More commonly, the genre rather opts for the permanent disturbance of reality and sanity, casting a brief flash of light on what has been

lurking in the shadows all along, and then leaving the characters and readers alone in the darkness of their imagination as helpless victims of this knowledge. This kind of permanent transformation of the mundane into something dreadfully uncanny and incomprehensible is familiar already from Lovecraft's stories, where scientifically minded narrators such as Francis Wayland Thurston of "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) or William Dyer of *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) recount illuminating events that have shattered their rational understanding of the universe. Ligotti's protagonists are more often peculiar outsiders than hyper-rational scientists or common-sense folk, but reality-shaking shifts from the mundane to the supernatural are likewise employed: for example, *My Work Is Not Yet Done* begins in the dull everyday setting of the corporate workplace, but goes on to become a violent revenge tale permeated by supernatural mystery, where the narrator-protagonist's reality is quite tangibly wrecked as he journeys to the hereafter.

## **2.1 Corporate, Existential and Literary Puppetry in *My Work Is Not Yet Done***

In *My Work*, the protagonist-narrator Frank describes the entire company that he is working for as a puppet show (48), with seemingly arbitrary restructurings pushing employees left and right. This comes across as mockery of the dehumanizing absurdity of the corporate workplace, a mundane nightmare "where vast numbers of anonymous, white-collar drones waste their lives on meaningless tasks" (Schweitzer 127). However, the office community also forms a part of the novella's multilayered theme of puppetry. Frank's superior Richard is a puppet master of sorts, using his six other underlings, Frank's fellow supervisors, to manipulate Frank and maneuver his gradual removal from the company. The events begin unfolding at their regular managerial meeting, as Frank presents his new product idea, which is initially received unenthusiastically by all of "The Seven" (*My Work* 11–13). However, as Richard afterwards shows interest in Frank's proposal and asks for more detailed documentation on it (15–16), Frank begins to get the feeling that Richard is attempting to steal the idea to take the credit for himself. Frank becomes instinctually protective of his product proposal, making continuous excuses why he is not able to deliver its details to Richard yet, and consequently finds himself a victim of subtly ominous and manipulative behavior by The Seven. Eventually, this gradual manipulation turns Frank into a nervous wreck, another company restructuring strips him of his former position (47–48), and he ends up framed for mishandling data and forced to resign (50–51). This turn of events sends the increasingly paranoid and resentful Frank over the edge.

After being reduced to a helpless marionette and discarded from the corporate puppet show, Frank's rage boils over, and he attempts to take control by preparing himself for payback, purchasing a plethora of firearms (*My Work* 51–54). However, in the midst of these preparations for massacre, “something” happens to Frank on the street, which he is only able to describe as “the loudest sound I had ever heard in my life” (59). This scene ends the first part of the novella, and the second part begins with Frank finding himself merged with boundless darkness until he eventually wakes up in his own apartment without a recollection of how he got there (63–64). After a while, Frank and the reader start piecing together that he has wound up in some sort of spectral state of undeath, although the specifics of the incident remain unclear to both until the very end of the story.

Surprisingly, this transformation places Frank in a previously unseen position of agency: he becomes capable of manipulating the minds and bodies of living creatures – as easily as a puppeteer controlling their playthings. Frank is then able to even take over another person's physical form, like when he momentarily steps into the body of his landlady Lillian, as she is being threatened by his former colleague Harry (*My Work* 95). This enables Frank to realize his revenge fantasies in sadistically imaginative ways, but he also comes to feel a connection to the dark sinister presence behind and inside everything, which he calls “The Great Black Swine – a grunting, bestial force that animated, that *used* our bodies to frolic in whatever mucky thing came its way, lasciviously agitating itself in that black river in which the human species only bobbed about like hunks of excrement” (109). This force is not exclusively connected to wickedness, or even humanity, as Frank can sense the same restless agitation and turbulence also within his benevolent landlady and the cockroaches infesting his apartment (110–111). Eventually, Frank comes to realize that even his journey of revenge is not an enactment of his own will but a machination of the conspiring darkness within, a clandestine force that is keeping him alive and using him as its weapon until his work is done (136).

With all characters reduced to puppets of this greater darkness, and Frank coming to view humanity and personality as mere convenient delusions (*My Work* 109), the entire world is portrayed as a vicious puppet show. This fits well with Ligotti's rundown of the basics of pessimistic philosophy, as presented in *Conspiracy*. However, in contrast to the philosophical argument, in the fictional frame of *My Work* there is a clandestine force pulling the strings, a force that Frank becomes able to elaborate on in poetic detail, while it otherwise continues to remain an unknown, invisible, elusive entity that most people could not even bear to face.

Jason Marc Harris points out that “this idea of a malefactor that is manipulated by other greater malefactors is a reoccurring theme in Ligotti” (1255), and the plot of *My Work* is a prime example of such layered structure of puppetry in the author’s fiction. Although Ligotti refrains from singling out a principal malefactor such as The Great Black Swine in *Conspiracy*, the underlying philosophy is largely similar to the one built into *My Work*: each individual thing-in-the-world is essentially portrayed as an impotent no-thing, while events are controlled by “unpredictable and illogical forces” (Mariconda 721) that evade perception and comprehension.

In addition to the theme of multilayered manipulation, the appearance of dolls and mannikins is another notable characteristic in the novella. “These mimetic mockeries of humanity” (Harris 1251) are a reoccurring Ligottian feature, and especially in *My Work*, the use of mannikins does not only invoke the uncanny, but also has a dehumanizing and devaluing effect, as the line between animate and inanimate things is blurred. Photographing old, ruined buildings is a hobby of Frank’s, and on one of his walks in the rundown part of town, he comes across a pair of mannikin hands in the derelict warehouse of Murphy’s Costumes and Theatrical Supplies (*My Work* 40). As he later takes his revenge on Perry, Frank chooses the same locale as the final resting place of his former co-worker, cutting off Perry’s hands and replacing them with the mannikin’s (70). Both hands are actually lefties, which works as a sardonic reference to the pseudo-jazzy fumbblings that Perry would often perform on the piano located in the company offices (19–20). Dumping his body in the former warehouse of a costume company also has a poetic touch to it, as Frank sees the cool image of a jazz enthusiast that Perry attempts to portray to himself and others as a half-hearted charade: under the surface, there is only a hollow corporate plaything to be tossed back into the box once its masters are done with it. The theater reference is also employed later in the spirit of “all the world’s a stage,” as The Great Black Swine is affirmed as the only Thing-in-the-World, with everything else being “only costumes and masks, the inventory of an ancient and still flourishing theatrical supply company” (111).

The mannikin metaphor is utilized even more prominently with Mary, an overly groomed career woman in her fifties, who “could easily be taken for a mannikin, even at the closest quarters” (*My Work* 21). To dispose of Mary, Frank leads her to the ruined outskirts of the city, to another decadent locale known as The Mechanic Street Museum (119). This unofficial “museum” is an ever-expanding exhibition of old dolls and mannikins spread across an entire block, with numerous figures placed in various poses by unknown artists (119–120). Frank’s

fascination with this uncanny shadow-side of the city might very well stem from the way that it exposes the true nature of its animate counterpart, and at least the description of the locale is easy to read as a manifestation of the author's disgust towards modern society: a grotesque and artificial wasteland of mindless mannikins, placed in their crooked postures by someone whose existence they are not even aware of, with new specimens brought in continuously, "replacing the ones that had become too damaged . . . to remain on display" (120).

With his newfound powers, Frank turns Mary into a mannikin, and leaves her on a sofa near a sidewalk, where two drunken derelicts discover the bizarrely neat, thoroughly equipped and lifelike dummy with a contorted expression of panic on its face (*My Work* 121). The hobos are inspired to begin violating the immobile Mary, not caring that "their object of desire was merely a mannikin, although one that might be easily mistaken, as she had been for years, for a human being" (121). However, after they suddenly notice the dummy's eyes looking back at them, the derelicts stomp and smash the unnatural thing to pieces in horrified rage (122). This ultimate dehumanization of Mary does not only display the character as a vain, empty corporate mannikin to be disposed of in the most gruesome way, but the scene can also be read as a representation of the helplessness of every being caught in the vile chaos of existence, prey to its whims like a discarded dummy on the streetside. Harris has discussed Ligotti's theatrical imagery at length, and he importantly points out that while dehumanizing and misanthropic sentiments are easy to recognize in the author's writing, "the misanthropy seems more a matter of outrage and disgust with the positional relation of humanity's impotence in a malign universe rather than an essential detestation against the human form or consciousness" (1255). This also goes for the sentiments expressed by the narrator of *My Work*, who may direct his contempt at other human beings, but who comes to view the existence of the entire creation as an inherently foul condition that would be better off done away with.

A level of puppetry external to the narrative can also be found, if we view the author as the one that is pulling the strings to make the narrators and characters dance to their liking. Helplessly unaware of their omnipotent master and creator, these literary pawns can but do as they are written to, advancing the plot while imagining they are their own autonomous selves, calling the shots. Another significant part of the author-puppeteer's craft is knowing the right strings to pull to captivate the audience, and how to engage them both intellectually and emotionally for the desired readerly effect. However, as Essi Varis presents in her "Monster Analogy" of fictional characters, the author is only the initial creator of these literary

creatures, which then escape the author's control, and a "second creation" of the characters is performed by each reader (83–84). In this sense, the author-puppeteer's absolute power does not extend beyond the stage of the text, as readers' various reactions and interpretations cannot be fully predicted, even if the author would try their best to manipulate the audience.

Whereas the author can be viewed as a puppeteer of sorts in all literary fiction, the idea deserves special attention in the case of Ligotti's narratives of layered deception, manipulation and puppetry, and with *My Work* in particular, where the narrator-protagonist clearly becomes a mouthpiece for the author's pessimistic philosophy, as it was later explicitly detailed in *Conspiracy*. This connection between the character of Frank and Ligotti himself is not only philosophical but also personal, with the author admitting that his escalating frustration with his corporate workplace at the time, and the obsession with "violent fantasies" resulting from it, served as an inspiration for the story (qtd. in Cardin).

Compared to the idea of weird fiction being a subliminal artistic medium of pessimism, as described by Packer and Stoneman, *My Work* is far more direct in delivering its philosophical content. It also leaves fewer ambiguities hanging in the air than most of Ligotti's more fragmentary short stories. While one could perhaps expect more subtlety in sneaking the message into the reader's mind – especially considering that the novella is easily the author's longest work of fiction to date – the more extensive format does enable an exceptionally in-depth emotional engagement with the story's main character. And as Packer and Stoneman point out, one of the traits that can make weird fiction a more rhetorically effective medium for philosophical pessimism than logical argumentation is how it "makes the reader feel instead of analyze" (33). Led to empathize with the wronged narrator-protagonist, the emotionally engaged reader of *My Work* is more likely to understand or even agree with the extremely cynical and grim outlook that characterizes the narrative throughout.

There is also another angle of the literary puppet show to consider: the audience. These onlookers might imagine themselves to be just that – the real individuals watching the unreal puppets do their dance, solely to the sadistic satisfaction of their masters and spectators. Towards the end of *My Work*, Frank confronts his former boss Richard, who reveals to know quite a bit more about the state of things than expected, with Richard speaking a curious mouthful: "Most people have no idea what goes on in this world. But you know what [The Great Black Swine] likes. It likes fear and agitation and conflict and all that stuff that makes such good copy for those folks who are selling that sort of thing – never mind all the

sideliners whose happy lot is merely to peek in the window of the torture shop of life” (133). With a little stretch of imagination, this passage comes across as an ironic jab at literature itself – or journalism, for that matter – portraying it as a conspiracy of authors, publishers, and the audience against some suffering individuals that are reduced to subject matter, whether fictional or not. However, while excitedly “peeking in,” the reader might not realize that they are also observing a simulacrum of their own degradation and destruction at the cruel hands of an indifferent universe; staring at a tragicomical self-portrait, veiled in the form of fiction. The hopeless Ligottian worldview is thus brought full circle, as all parties in the literary communication process are shown as both upholders and victims of the foul conspiracy of existence.

## **2.2 Theatrical Imagery in “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing”**

Ligotti’s earlier short story “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing” also employs heavy theatrical symbolism, and presents bits of his pessimistic philosophy even more directly, with short metaphysical lectures weaved into the narrative. However, while the story invites the reader to emotionally engage with its disconsolate protagonist, somewhat paradoxically, the philosophy that it proposes speaks against “the adventure of intense emotional feeling” (“Soft Voice” 123), presenting such agitation as unnecessary and harmful. Beginning to map the origins of their deep affinity with winter and their vague yearning for “the void of an ultimate hibernation” (117), the anonymous narrator recognizes their gentle yet enigmatic childhood physician Dr. Zirk – a then middle-aged widower – as a kindred spirit who secretly shared this profound connection with the mysteries of wintry desolation. The narrator recalls hearing the doctor mention phrases such as “grotesque discontinuities in the order of things” and “enlightenment of inanity,” with the doctor once mumbling to his half-sleeping patient: “To make an end of it, little puppet, in your own way. To close the door in one swift motion and not by slow, fretful degrees. If only this doctor could show you the way of such cold deliverance” (118).

After discovering the northern border town in their adulthood and realizing Dr. Zirk’s spiritual connection to the location, the narrator witnesses his hanged body dangling from a window “like a puppet” (“Soft Voice” 125), yet somehow “this sight [does] not seem in any way unexpected or out of place” (124). As the doctor’s figure is described as “extremely slight of build, almost like a child in physical stature” (124), there is a poetic reversal of roles between the two characters: the narrator, who was once a “little puppet” on the threshold of

death, has now grown up, while their former caretaker has reduced to a small, withered husk of a man. Yet, after many years, the doctor has at last managed to show his patient “the way of such cold deliverance” by making an end of it in his own way, closing the door on himself “in one swift motion.” Despite the all-encompassing hopelessness of its imagery and atmosphere, the story does then suggest that even for a puppet, it is possible to exit the dismal stage of life voluntarily, in a style of one’s choosing.

The latter and longer one of the two metaphysical lectures within the narrative places the puppet symbolism in a philosophical context, resembling what Ligotti writes in *Conspiracy*. While falling asleep at the lodging house in the northern border town, the narrator feels a weight on the bed, as if Dr. Zirk was again sitting by their side, and hears a soft voice whispering:

Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name – even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet – and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep those precious strings from growing frayed and tangled, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet’s dance throughout all eternity... (“Soft Voice” 123–124)

What is here referred to as the “desire to have a name” can be equated with the delusion of having an individual self, a puppet’s dream of being something more than another pre-programmed, disposable little toy in the “great gray ritual of existence” (118, 123). The lecture also has heavy Zapffeian overtones, dealing with the conundrum of mortality – the realization of which is key in humankind’s existential agony, according to Zapffe – and our desperate denial of the eventual end of life and disintegration of consciousness by the means of various defense mechanisms, which help us maintain the fragile illusion that there is no end to our dance. However, regardless of the lies that we tell ourselves, the strings will unavoidably grow “frayed and tangled,” and there is only void and oblivion waiting above and below. The lecture appears to advocate the acceptance of this inevitability, instead of holding on to mirages of hope to ward off the constantly looming fear of death, as both hope and horror are unnecessary “conditions dependent on a faulty insight,” perpetuated by “our maddening will to follow the path of forgetfulness” (123). With a contemptuous reference to the human inclination to “defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these

strings,” the passage comes across as not only accepting death, but actively embracing it as liberation from the tedious ordeal of life. Being something that is often condemned, or at least frowned upon, philosophical pessimism could also be seen as an effort to cut the strings that keep us suspended, but when combined with the events of the narrative, there is a strong sense that this part is rather speaking in the defense or even in the favor of suicide as a solution – a puppet’s last dance at the end of a rope being the only one of their own choosing.

Akin to the more complex layers of conspiracy and puppetry present in *My Work*, while essentially portraying all characters as subordinate to a greater scheme of manipulation, “Soft Voice” also suggests certain relations of power and knowledge between the characters. Particularly curious is the case of Mrs. Glimm, the lady who runs the lodging house in the northern town, where the narrator ends up staying. While Mrs. Glimm appears indifferent to the peculiarities of the place, describing both the bizarre parade and the flyers with the brief *Metaphysical Lecture I* spread around town as “just some nonsense, like the rest of it” (“Soft Voice” 121), it is she who approaches the narrator, hands them the piece of paper, and leads them to the lodging house, where the narrator receives the second metaphysical lecture while falling asleep in their room. They later discover that Mrs. Glimm in fact oversees all of the depressing-looking properties on the same street (121–122), and they witness her cutting the rope that Dr. Zirk is hanging from, right in time for his body to fall down on the platform pulled forward by the passing parade on the street (125). Therefore, Mrs. Glimm must be at least indifferently complicit in – if not clandestinely a part of – the bizarre death cult prevalent in the town. After all, in addition to operating lodging houses, she introduces herself as a licensed “undertaker’s assistant and a cabaret stage manager” (121), which would suggest her to be an all-around director and caretaker of the disconsolate souls that find their way into town.

However, the story’s most striking theatrical metaphors have to do with the parade that the narrator witnesses twice in the town, which appears as an embodiment of the obscure disorder and delirium that the narrator already senses upon their arrival. Heralded by a chaotic racket, and led by a clown “wearing an expression of bland malevolence” who glances right at the narrator, the parade includes a wheeled platform pulled by “a team of ragged men . . . harnessed like beasts,” with wooden stakes forming a cage around the platform (“Soft Voice” 120). Attached to these stakes, there are “masks and shoes, household utensils and naked dolls, large bleached bones and the skeletons of small animals, bottles of colored glass, the head of a dog with a rusty chain wrapped several times around its neck, and sundry scraps of

debris and other things . . . all knocking together in a wild percussion” (120) – like a grotesque display of all creation reduced to, or revealed as, random clutter. The cacophonous parade makes another appearance the following morning, right in time to take Dr. Zirk’s body away, but this time the rubbish tied to the stakes also includes bottles of pills, scalpels, syringes, and various other doctoral instruments, as if to welcome the latest newcomer into the morbid procession (124–125). Overall, the depiction of the parade fits well with Harris’ interpretation of the Ligottian universe, where “clowns are marked as emblems of chaos while puppets are simulacra of human subordination” (1262). Accepting to join the border town’s death cult then appears as a concrete enactment of the grotesque drama of existence, where malicious clowns lead weary beasts of burden to their slaughter in a cryptic carnival of absurdity. However, at least this particular simulacrum presents each puppet with the possibility to take an active role in liberating themselves from the pointless play, and to merge with the wintry void. This might come across as a horror to some, but it is a relatively hopeful prospect in Ligotti’s literary world.

### **2.3 Manipulation in “Vastarien”**

The short story “Vastarien,” even if it only employs mannikins and puppets as passing figures of speech, is also rife with uncanny imagery and maintains a pessimistic Ligottian tone. Out of the three stories discussed, “Vastarien” remains the furthest from commenting on the themes of humankind’s delusionality and impotence, but the main character Victor Keirion does also become a victim of outside manipulation while pursuing his own goals, winding up as a pawn in a game where everyone seems to lose. At first, Victor is mainly annoyed by the mysterious stranger that he runs into at a store for esoteric literature, but the stranger manages to pique Victor’s curiosity by mentioning “an extremely special book . . . that is not *about* something, but actually *is* that something” (“Vastarien” 355). As the stranger and the shopkeeper move to the dark back of the shop, secretively conversing with one another, the uninvited Victor cannot help but to sneak after them (355–356). That is where Victor comes across a little book titled *Vastarien*, which appears to be exactly what he has been looking for all along: a tangible distillation of nightmarish unreality (357). The shopkeeper is hesitant to sell the one-of-a-kind item, initially asking for an exorbitant price, but following a brief whispered tête-à-tête with the stranger, the shopkeeper revises the price, and Victor is able to purchase the book (358).

After fully immersing himself in *Vastarien* for a time, reading the book by day and dreaming about “shapeless expeditions into its fantastic topography” by night, Victor returns to question the shopkeeper (“*Vastarien*” 359). He then comes to learn that the stranger had in fact paid the original price of the book to the shopkeeper just for Victor to have it, as Victor is the only one with the ability to read the book and therefore access the realm described therein (360). Having conspired together with the shopkeeper to gain access to *Vastarien*, the stranger has now infiltrated Victor’s dreams of the realm, devouring the visions previously outside of his grasp night by night (361). At the end of the story, Victor is revealed to be confined at an asylum, having murdered the stranger: the puppet has annihilated the puppeteer to hold on to its precious dream, but only to fall under the straps and syringes of a new set of masters (361–362). Hence, the story’s discouraging conclusion supports the Ligottian idea of everyone simultaneously as both spectators and victims of, as well as complicit in, the grotesque scheme of being. While dreams and books can offer a temporary escape to realms beyond the depressing facade of the mundane, these realms are but mirages in the desolate desert of earthly life.

The short story can also be read as an exploration of the potential of literature to manipulate reality, both in creative and destructive ways. It is the eponymous book that invokes the unreal realm of *Vastarien*, granting Victor – and, consequently, also the stranger – access to it. In this sense, the book and the world contained within it are the ultimate manipulative forces in the story, as they lead the stranger to conspire against Victor and Victor in turn to murder the stranger, with both ending up “suffering at the hands of forces more powerful and sinister than they can ever hope to be,” as Ligotti himself puts it (qtd. in Angerhuber & Wagner 58). The book’s potential to conjure up an entire world of enchanting ruin is then exactly what drives its pursuers to such destructive acts. However, the book requires its rightful reader in order to invoke the world that it conceals, as its pages appear blank to everyone else other than Victor – this reads like a testament to the power of subjective readerly experience and imagination as the vital vehicle in conjuring literary worlds.

In his discussion on the themes of “The Mystagogue, the Gnostic Quest, the Secret Book” in Ligotti’s stories, Robert M. Price points out that Ligotti often employs “the figure of the mystagogue, the initiator into forbidden knowledge” that is also necessary to nudge the seeker in the right direction (35). In “*Vastarien*,” this role is filled by the stranger, and Price suggests applying this role to Ligotti himself as a horror writer, with the author initiating the reader into secret knowledge, offering a devastating revelation. It is also worth noting that a

mysterious book with supernatural forces is a classic plot element in horror fiction (Price 36), as most famously exemplified by Lovecraft's fictional grimoire *Necronomicon*, referenced in several of the author's stories but most prominently appearing in "The Dunwich Horror" (1929). These sorts of images of the cursed volume have a strong philosophical potential, fittingly embodying the pessimistic notion of knowledge as harmful (Packer and Stoneman 42). As the author or creator of *Vastarien* is never found out in the story, unless we consider its contents to be simply the product of Victor's imagination, the narrative again affirms the unknowability of who or what is behind the curtain, actually running the show – if anyone or anything at all.

As already demonstrated by Harris and the above analysis alike, theatrical images abound in Ligotti's writing, and make for a fruitful subject of both aesthetic and philosophical perusal. The playful nature of Ligotti's theatrical aesthetic has a sense of malicious mockery to it, as also pointed out by Harris (1251), and these playful theatrics have a close connection to the grotesque. Fisher discusses the relation between the weird and the grotesque, noting that both "evoke something which is out of place" (32), and such paradoxically out-of-place quality is indeed present in Ligotti's pairing of the most discouraging worldview imaginable with the colorful images of marionettes, clowns and the like. Fisher's claim about the grotesque inspiring as much laughter as revulsion in its audience also rings true for Ligotti, as the terror and the unease in Ligotti's work is complemented with bleak humor from time to time, unlike in his predecessor Lovecraft's tales, where the only humor is accidental (32–33). Ligotti's use of playful imagery appears to be another confusing paradox, then: on one hand, the literary theatrics might lighten up the grim subject matter, but on the other, the imagery highlights the ridiculous tragedy of human existence, which is difficult to laugh at, when you find yourself in the middle of it.

While Ligotti's writings in *Conspiracy* contain a fair amount of dark and dry humor, this more playful facet of horror is not properly discussed in the book. However, Ligotti does quote his own "Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror" from the 1985 short story collection *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* at length, where the cruelly mocking potential of supernatural horror is touched upon in a pertinent manner:

By means of supernatural horror we may evade, if momentarily, the horrific reprisals of affirmation. Every one of us, having been stolen from nonexistence, opens his eyes on the world and looks down the road at a few convulsions and a final obliteration. What a weird scenario. So why affirm anything, why make a

pathetic virtue of a terrible necessity? We are destined to a fool's fate that deserves to be mocked. And since there is no one else around to do the mocking, we will take on the job. So let us indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions, let us delight in the Cosmic Macabre. At least we may send up a few bitter laughs into the cobwebbed corners of this crusty old universe. (188)

Here, supernatural horror is portrayed as a masochistic form of confrontational escapism, a literary tool to twist the unavoidable tragedy of human existence into a cruel comedy, even if for just a moment. The grotesque theatrical images of Ligotti's own fiction are another manifestation of this vision, embodying the nihilistic indulgence in the Cosmic Macabre, "a universal comedy without laughter" (*Conspiracy* 204). The above passage also comes across as Ligotti using the context of the philosophical essay to try and make sense of his own creative motivations and the process of sublimation, where existential desolation can be momentarily transformed into malicious mockery and bitter laughs, if nothing else.

In addition to the works discussed in this chapter, there would be an abundance of other stories in Ligotti's oeuvre to inspect in terms of grotesque theatrical imagery and its philosophical implications. Whether it is the ghastly shapeshifting clowns of "The Last Feast of Harlequin" (1990), the psychic manipulation with its suggestive references to collective divine masochism in "Dream of a Manikin" (1982), or the reaper-like visitor in the nocturnal apparitions of "The Clown Puppet" (1996), Ligotti clads his pessimistic worldview in playfully disturbing images that haunt and fascinate in equal measure. Forming an elaborate and intriguing literary masquerade with layer upon layer, these theatrically inspired representations of Ligotti's philosophy would have potential for an even more extensive study than presented here.

### 3 Being Alive Is Not All Right: Nonexistence, Unreality and Uncertainty

As elaborated in the previous chapter, Ligotti's philosophy presented in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* regards humans as tragically conscious beings that are merely puppets in a macabre play. And so, upon grasping humankind's hopeless existential position, the pessimist finds themselves in stark opposition to the majority opinion that "being alive is all right." In this chapter, I examine how the pessimistic view of life as undesirable is presented in Ligotti's philosophy and fiction, and what kind of solutions or means of escape are suggested, explicitly and implicitly. I also demonstrate how the author's destabilization of categories such as reality and unreality works as a part of his literary assault on the reader's psyche, leading them to uncertainty about the very foundations of reality, both in their interpretation of Ligotti's fiction, and in their everyday experience of existence.

#### 3.1 From Existential Angst to an All-Out Omnicide

The phrase "being alive is all right" reoccurs throughout *Conspiracy*, and Ligotti mentions this comforting consensus sentiment as an example of the defense mechanism of isolation (25), a sort of self-deceptive mantra that people can repeat to themselves to ward off the dreadful inklings about its untruthfulness and keep on keeping on. While Ligotti's kind of extreme philosophical pessimism portrays the existence of life itself as a malignantly useless abomination that should not be, humans as conscious beings are presented as uniquely equipped among earthly creatures to comprehend their lamentable lot in life. This sets humankind apart from the rest of creation, making us an outcast species that has unwittingly opened its eyes to "the brotherhood of suffering shared by all that lives" (Zapffe 1) and therefore severed itself from the ignorant harmony of nature.

After becoming convinced that existence is suffering of no use, it is not a stretch for the pessimist to conclude that never having been born would be a preferable alternative to that existence. However, as merely fantasizing about nonexistence would hardly qualify as much else than another defense mechanism, the conclusion about the tragedy of birth admittedly begs the question about its practical implications: what of it, then? First, Ligotti reiterates Zapffe's antinatalist answer: that humankind should stop reproducing (*Conspiracy* 11). Ligotti commends this practical and straightforward conclusion by Zapffe over the more intricate intellectual mazes without any suggested exits, as built by earlier theorists such as Schopenhauer (13). In the sub-chapter "Hopelessness," Ligotti even entertains the thought of

an extinctionist utopia, where humankind would gradually thin the herd by decreasing reproduction over several generations. The quality of life could go up as the quantity of humans would go down, there would be no need for these dead-enders to fight each other for resources, and euthanasia could be made available in humane ways for those willing to speed up the process. (66–67) Yet, as can also be deduced from the finale of Zapffe’s essay “The Last Messiah” – where the eponymous figure eventually emerges to preach salvation through infertility, only to get lynched by a mob of midwives and wet nurses (10) – a pessimist knows better than to expect humankind to be capable of overcoming its programming and choosing voluntary extinction. Hence, Ligotti also recognizes that such an extinctionist vision would seem horrendous to the majority of our species still harboring hope for a better future where humanity prevails endlessly, and he concludes with certainty that “humankind is and will always be unsuited to take charge of its own deliverance” (*Conspiracy* 68).

However, Ligotti also takes Zapffeian antinatalism a step further in his philosophical speculation, reasoning that from the perspective of the true pessimist, humankind’s self-annihilation would not be enough. Being one of the early ecologists, even Zapffe got caught up in what Ligotti sees as “conspiring to build barricades against the repugnant facts of life by signing on to a cause (in this case that of environmentalism) that snubs the real issue” (*Conspiracy* 64) – a fine example of the defense mechanism of anchoring, then. Perhaps “the real issue” that Ligotti refers to could be formulated as follows: if to exist is to suffer, and the ethical goal is to seek an end to suffering, should we not aim to end all life? While such a view would have humankind claim a godlike position, becoming some ultimate judge of life and death – an awfully arrogant stance for a mere puppet, one could say – Ligotti plays with the idea that this is exactly what nature intended, creating us as a mechanism of its own self-destruction. But whether we are here to assist nature in its suicide or not, would this planet not deserve to be blown to smithereens and “perish along with every other living thing it has introduced to pain” (65) anyway? This sort of nihilistic musing taken to its most anti-life extreme does not end up becoming a very central facet of Ligotti’s philosophy as presented in *Conspiracy*, but the all-annihilating mentality certainly plays a role in *My Work*, where the protagonist Frank eventually escalates from just wanting to kill his former co-workers to desiring a universal omnicide. Additionally, these overall anti-life sentiments make it evident that Ligotti is not an ecologically minded antinatalist like Zapffe, and this is also reflected in Ligotti’s fiction that chiefly takes place in urban environments, rather indicating fascination for urban decay than admiration towards the vitality of nature’s wonders.

Once the pessimist realizes both voluntary human extinction and the annihilation of all earthly life to be sheer pipe dreams, they are left with the prospect of individual solutions, with suicide being the most obvious one. To start with, Ligotti mentions how one sort of “criticism” that pessimists commonly face is that since they regard being born as such a tragedy, they should kill themselves, or be dubbed hypocrites. Ligotti does not agree with the reasoning, pointing out the faulty logic of such accusations:

Simply because someone has reached the conclusion that the amount of suffering in this world is enough that anyone would be better off never having been born does not mean that by force of logic or sincerity he must kill himself. It only means he has concluded that the amount of suffering in this world is enough that anyone would be better off never having been born. (*Conspiracy* 33)

While pessimists that have committed suicide do pop up throughout *Conspiracy* – such as Philipp Mainländer (18) and Carlo Michelstaedter (16) – Ligotti points out that many optimists commit suicide as well, but they are rarely called out as hypocrites by the aforementioned critics for doing so. The suicide argument of such critics then rather comes across as another form of the dismissive and silencing rhetoric regularly heard from the optimist majority, as sarcastically elaborated by Ligotti in the chapter “The Cult of Grinning Martyrs”: “start pretending that you feel good enough for long enough, stop your complaining, and get back in line” (162–163).

However, Ligotti does discuss suicide as a valid solution to the ills of life, both in the euthanasia-related medical context as well as in the purely existential one. When he ponders why so many “bargain for a life sentence over the end of a rope or the muzzle of a gun” (220) in the closing paragraph of *Conspiracy*, the question appears rhetorical, yet it is simultaneously answered throughout the book: whether it is about not quite having the guts to take the final step, or about still holding onto a tiny spark of hope for the better, most human beings are too deeply engaged in the conspiracy to put an end to it, and too attached to their consciousness to just let go, regardless of their philosophical leanings. The perceived connection to other consciousnesses can be an additional suicide-repellent factor, as “there may also be a crew of friends and relatives whose lives are interwoven with those of suicides and who die with them though they live on after the ‘crime’ of voluntary death has been committed” (144). And so, even when the natural instincts to survive and reproduce break down, peer pressure and a guilty conscience tend to function as a failsafe, making sure that as many of us as possible stick around for as long as possible.

The urge to put an end to the suffering of all life is also brought up as one motivator among a certain clique of the suicidal: “Frustrated as perpetrators of an all-inclusive extermination, they would kill themselves only because killing it all is closed off to them. . . . They despise the conspiracy of Lies for Life almost as much as they despise themselves for being a party to it. If they could unmake the world by pushing a button, they would do so without a second thought” (*Conspiracy* 150). These individuals then settle for just their own death, since they are denied the satisfaction of a planet-wide depopulation. Despite bringing this up, Ligotti refrains from directly discussing those who at least do their best by dragging a few others along with them on their way out the door. This omission seems almost like a cautious cop-out, considering that singing the praises of extended suicide and mass murder might cause a stir in the author’s own homeland in particular, where mass shootings are such a common occurrence and an obviously sensitive subject. Of course, there is rarely a singular motive commonly agreed upon for such acts of violence either – especially a philosophically articulated one – but the subject would seem more or less relevant to touch upon in the already volatile context that Ligotti chooses to get into.

Whereas Ligotti neglects to directly discuss mass murder as one kind of relatively logical pessimistic practice, he does regard pessimistic naysayers as unlikely perpetrators or uprisers: “Immune to the blandishments of religions, countries, families, and everything else that puts both average and above-average citizens in the limelight, pessimists are sideliners in both history and the media. Without belief in gods or ghosts, unmotivated by a comprehensive delusion, they could never plant a bomb, plan a revolution, or shed blood for a cause” (*Conspiracy* 26–27). Ligotti has a valid point in claiming that pessimists are unlikely to surrender themselves to any given cause, being usually too cynical for ideological attachment, but his statement does not exactly explain why a strong anti-human or anti-life credo could not function as “a comprehensive delusion” that inspires individuals to violent deeds. After all, it would seem like a pretty narrow definition of a pessimist, if we count out anyone with enough conviction to practically act out their destructive impulses. Yet, clear-cut examples of such action are admittedly difficult to find.

What might additionally account for the shortage of pessimistically motivated terror attacks and the like is touched upon in Ligotti’s discussion of suicide, as he points out that “[e]very negation is adulterated or stealthily launched by an affirmative spirit. An unequivocal ‘no’ cannot be uttered or acted upon” (*Conspiracy* 34). As every action requires an actor with a “yes” in their heart, an armchair pessimist stuck on the broken record of “no” seldom

becomes one of these actors – perhaps that explains why we are discussing *philosophical* pessimism instead of *practical* pessimism? Paradoxically, the pessimistic worldview then appears as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: because of the defeatist attitude, there is no motivation to act, and hence the desired goal remains unreachable beyond doubt, which in turn reaffirms the defeatist attitude. This suggests that even if a pessimist rejects the conspiracy against the human race, it is all too easy for the pessimist to end up in a conspiracy of their own making – one that keeps them aware of what is going on yet too passive to do anything about it.

### 3.2 Murder and Suicide as Solutions in *My Work Is Not Yet Done*

The view of existence as “a nightmarish obscenity” (14), while suggesting murder and suicide as understandable reactions to it, becomes a central element in *My Work*. One passage that appears particularly relevant is when the vengeful protagonist Frank, while already in his non-living state, is taking a break from annihilating his former colleagues, resting on the couch of his apartment, and pondering: “[M]y mind had already begun turning toward bigger things, more elaborate schemes on a far greater scale. After all, the planet that I inhabited, the reality in which I was captured, was brimming with all kinds of potential victims, all of whom, to some degree, were swine that I dearly wanted to lead into my house of slaughter” (109). Beginning to expand his plans of extermination beyond the people that have personally wronged him, Frank suddenly spots a cockroach running across the carpet and traps it under his boot. Not killing the roach right away, Frank can sense the same swinish turbulence inside it that he has previously only detected in humans. He then comes to recognize this swinish entity as “the only Thing-in-the-World” (111), concluding that it ought to be annihilated in all its shapes and forms, from insects to people to plants. Yet, Frank realizes that such full-scale annihilation is out of his reach – even speculating in passing that there might be other worlds to snuff out as well – and settles for just putting the roach out of its misery:

When I pressed my boot down to the floor I could feel everything go still and silent within that little body where before there had been only a vicious thrashing in blackness. I even felt a little part of myself – the part of me I had allowed to leak into the bug – grow still and silent. It felt good. Very good, however fleeting the feeling had been. I can truly say that it was the only moment of real well-being I had ever experienced in my life, if my present state of existence could in fact be considered part of that fabrication I called my life. (111)

In a way, the passage invokes the Zapffeian thought of the brotherhood of suffering between all living things, as described by Ligotti in *Conspiracy*, while portraying life itself as a vicious

condition that can only be cured with euthanasia. An ecstatic tranquility of death is present here, both in terms of inflicting and experiencing it – a merciful kind of sadomasochism, where Frank simultaneously becomes the killer and the killed. This scene of *My Work* also calls to mind Ligotti’s philosophical musings about individuals who settle for suicide only because an all-out omnicide is unavailable to them. Additionally, there is the view of life as “an inescapable delusion” (112), and death as a liberating entrance into nonexistence, or at least as a dissolution into the primordial blackness whence all came.

Initially having no recollection of how he got to his liminally undead state, Frank eventually learns that his mangled physical form is lying comatose in a hospital bed (*My Work* 131), and recalls how he made a spontaneous suicide attempt by leaping in front of a passing bus (135). Refusing “to be a swine living in a world of swine that was built by swine and belongs only to swine” any longer, Frank – following the same logic that Ligotti discusses in *Conspiracy* – reasons that his suicide would have also meant the end of every other living thing, even if only to his own consciousness (136). Concluding that there would be no salvation in killing his co-workers, Frank had chosen his own death under the wheels of a bus instead, figuring that any other deaths would be unnecessary: “Every suicide is a homicide – or many homicides – thwarted” (136). This implies a rather pessimistic view of the utility of mass murder, at least when motivated by petty personal vengeance, with Frank at least at the moment of his spontaneous leap under the bus favoring a simple suicide over continuing to engage in his essentially swinish schemes of revenge. However, Frank had not expected that he would not be allowed to die, but would continue to be murderously manipulated by The Great Black Swine without his knowledge (136). The novella’s conclusion then suggests an ultimately pessimistic view of the very nature of existence as malignant – a cruel carnival of prolonged suffering and slaughter, where individuals have no control over their own fate.

Despite the eventual revelation of the protagonist’s killing spree having been the result of the machinations of a greater power, Frank “do[es] not regret having annihilated seven persons”: he utters a final curse on his swinish co-workers just as he does on himself, identifying as “a swine who seeks only his own slaughter” (*My Work* 138). He reflects on his weak and frightful nature, and realizes that he has finally overcome it, being ready and eager to die. In the end, Frank declares how he “cannot wait to tear into the tender flesh of [his] last victim, and with a single slash kill two” (138). While the reference could be seen as Frank counting his mangled body and his detached consciousness as the last two victims to do away with, it is also relevant to consider the “two” referring to Frank simultaneously seeking to murder

himself and *The Great Black Swine*. Following the same logic as Frank's earlier suicide attempt, for him to kill himself is to kill his own consciousness and every living thing in and connected to it, and to enter the serenity of nonexistence – a relative salvation, as much as one is available to him, or to anyone in the hopeless Ligottian universe.

It is also relevant to consider Frank's unreliability as a narrator, with the one-sided view provided by him being another contributor to the story's unsettling air of uncertainty. Even before his descent into homicidal mania, Frank comes across as antisocial and paranoid, and he seems to be quite conscious of these personality traits. Whereas Frank's analytical way of relaying the events themselves appears relatively trustworthy – even with the story's supernatural elements – it is his interpretation of what takes place that remains questionable. Frank clearly despises most of his co-workers, and the corporate culture and society at large surrounding him, with his narration being colored by this contempt from the very start. Frank is also inclined to interpret even the slightest gestures of his fellow supervisors as hostile machinations against him, with all of it seemingly building towards a conspiracy to bring him down. Although Frank's suspicions appear to be more or less confirmed by his eventual confrontation with Richard, the narrative of *My Work* remains paranoically self-centered and somewhat questionable in its reliability. However, this subjectivity of an atypical mind is also where a great deal of the story's intensity comes from, as the reader is invited to live, loathe, kill, and die with the narrator-protagonist.

### **3.3 Submission to Stillness in “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing”**

In contrast to the turmoil of personally emotional and pathological drives behind Frank's violent actions in *My Work*, the short story “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing” is rather characterized by stillness and submission. However, just as with the neurotic hostility of Frank, there is a strong subjectivity to the unnamed and largely unspecified narrator's worldview, as it is traced back to their own sickly childhood. Looking back at “those soft gray years,” throughout which they “exhibited the marks of an essentially hibernal state of being” (“Soft Voice” 117), the narrator establishes themselves from the get-go as more of a passive spectator than an active agent. This passivity runs throughout the entire story, as the narrator's experiences in the northern town are marked by their role as a neutral witness, who observes, listens, and describes instead of taking an active role in the events. In this sense, it appears as if the narrator is well on their way to an “enlightenment of inanity” (118), the embracing of emptiness devoid of sense or meaning. A certain emotional fondness can be read between the

lines, when the narrator begins by recalling the gentle care of their childhood physician Dr. Zirk (117), yet at the closing of the story, the sight of the doctor's hanged body does not appear to arouse a particularly emotional reaction in the narrator, rather seeming like a natural thing to witness in the desolate town (124). This suggests a subtle inner transformation having taken place while the narrator has been immersed in the delirium of their new surroundings, further releasing them from under the yoke of "intense emotional feeling" (123).

It is noteworthy how little concentration there is on the narrator's own views about life in "Soft Voice": it becomes clear that the ordeals of their formative years have left a strong impression, but the narrator only expresses a long-lasting yearning to vanish into wintry void, while all of the more philosophical reflections are attributed to Dr. Zirk and the metaphysical lectures. It then seems like the narrator has a certain emotional craving that is answered by these external initiators, leading to the narrator discovering and accepting their place in the world, as they eventually come to realize that the northern town is where they belong. As a large portion of the metaphysical musings is received in the hazy state between wakefulness and sleep, it is also possible to interpret the story's philosophical revelations as products of the narrator's own subconscious that answer to a more conscious emotional need. While this blurring of the lines between reality, dream and delirium is typical for Ligotti, and to weird fiction in general, in "Soft Voice," the conclusion of the story rather appears to leave the narrator-protagonist in a state of serene acceptance and belonging, while it is the reader who is left in uncertainty and doubt.

Regardless of this division, the roles of the narrator and the reader come exceptionally close to each other in the case of "Soft Voice," with both being seemingly passive spectators, but with the possibility to become active makers of meaning. Both the reader and the character-narrator witness the same things and receive the same lectures, yet whatever they might conclude of these, and whatever actions might ensue as a result, is left just as open. In line with how Matt Cardin speaks of the potentially transformative effects of delving into Ligotti's philosophical horror (21), "A Soft Voice" exemplifies this characteristic well, reading almost like an invitation to transform together with the protagonist of the story. However, without familiarizing oneself with Ligotti's philosophy in *Conspiracy*, the brief form and obscure rhetoric of "Soft Voice" arguably enable a multitude of interpretations, with hardly one clear and direct message to decipher.

While the vague depictions such as “only a few questionable memories and impulses drifting about like snowflakes in a gray and endless winter . . . [that] soon [float] down and [settle] into a cold and nameless void” (“Soft Voice” 121) do not portray existence as much else than a foolish and meaningless endeavor, it is this void of nonexistence that most of the description concentrates on – and on how little difference there is between existence and nonexistence, with the former being more of a fleeting mirage amidst the latter. The narration is characterized by the wintry images and the white and grey colors that reoccur throughout, which emphasizes the cold and emotionless resignation of the narrator. These hopelessly peaceful images painted in “Soft Voice” are in notably strong contrast to the restlessly thrashing agitation and hostility of life, and the directionlessly turbulent river of blackness beyond, as described in *My Work*. Similarly, the actively violent role that Frank takes in the novella is the opposite of the passivity of the narrator-protagonist of “Soft Voice.” However, also the main character of *My Work* eventually ends up in a position of submission and acceptance, where he resigns to his fate. It just takes Frank longer to get there, or at least the reader is exposed to his journey in a more extensive, visceral, and in-depth form, which has the potential to evoke both sympathy towards the wronged protagonist and horror at his psychopathic acts. Despite their many differences, both stories at least conclude in a similar state of Ligottian hopelessness and resignation.

The theme of suicide is obviously present in “Soft Voice,” even if it is presented with a certain subtlety for the most part. The narrator recalls having dreamt of “the void of an ultimate hibernation” (“Soft Voice” 117) already in their childhood, and Dr. Zirk’s words to them in regards to “mak[ing] an end of it . . . in one swift motion” (118) clearly imply the preference of choosing one’s own way to leave this world instead of enduring a slow and prolonged process of dying. Yet, the doctor is already a disconsolate widower at that point, and decades must have passed by the time that the grown-up narrator witnesses the elderly doctor hanging by his neck in the northern town. The doctor’s early mention of “undergoing certain ordeals” (118) could explain this: who knows how many years he might have spent in the northern town before his death, partaking in its delirium and waiting for the time to make his exit, in his own way. Similarly, the narrator has just found their way to the town and only glanced at the surface of its mysteries by the end of the story. Perhaps the place is a kind of liminal purgatory, where the narrator must reside and learn until they are ready “[t]o know, to understand in the fullest sense, [. . .] to plunge into an enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite

spaces surrounding us on all sides” (123). After all, the story ends with a harmonious feeling of homecoming, as the narrator gazes upon the barren landscape and the falling snow through the window of their room – it appears that the narrator has found a place which corresponds with their inner world, a place where they can “make an end of it in whatever style [they] wish” (125).

### **3.4 The Maddening Unreality of “Vastarien”**

In the case of “Vastarien,” the fundamental tension is not so much between existence and nonexistence, or between life and death, but between reality and unreality. For the protagonist Victor Keirion, the dreamworld of Vastarien represents mysterious desolation of endless possibilities, while the waking world is one of boredom and futility. Before he comes across the eponymous book that allows him to enter the magical realm of ruin in his dreams, Victor is on the hunt for literature that would put his sought-out vision into words, “a delirious bible that would be the blight of all others – a scripture that would begin in apocalypse and lead its disciple to the wreck of all creation” (“Vastarien” 353). Time and again, Victor is disappointed to find promising esoteric volumes that only end up brushing upon the dark absolute that he is after, yet remain firmly grounded in awfully earthly ambitions:

The work would then once more take up the universal theme, disclosing its true purpose in belaboring the most futile and profane of all ambitions: power, with knowledge as its drudge. The vision of a disastrous enlightenment, of a catastrophic illumination, was conjured up in passing and then cast aside. What remained was invariably a metaphysics as systematically trivial and debased as the physical laws it purported to transcend, a manual outlining the path to some hypothetical state of absolute glory. What remained lost was the revelation that nothing ever known has ended in glory; that all which ends does so in exhaustion, in confusion, and debris. (354)

The passage makes it clear that Victor despises the common human ambitions of power and knowledge, as his own goal is beyond humanity, beyond nature, beyond reality; what he is looking for could only be found in the ruins of these cornerstones of existence. He seeks a terrifying transformation of the mundane into magical, a creation through destruction. There is also an obvious pessimism to Victor’s worldview, in that he rather disregards the waking world and seeks to concentrate on the eventually inglorious end of it, desiring to dwell in that apocalyptic landscape of debris instead. Focalized through Victor, the narrative offers an equally strong contrast between the world of consensus reality described with contemptuous boredom and the dreamworld of Vastarien portrayed with spellbound ecstasy.

While Victor is looking to escape reality as we know it, the unreality of Vastarien can also be viewed as a shadow of negation that reveals the secret nature of our world, philosophically speaking: all ends in ruin, everything is unpredictable chaos, any bizarre harm could come one's way, and there is no safe haven. This interpretation would be in line with how Ligotti himself traces his motivations for beginning to read and write in his youth: "I was very much aware that for me both reading and writing were practiced as a form of escapism, but in a paradoxical way since I usually escaped *into* a sort of imaginary hell. Perhaps you might call this a *confrontational* escapism" (qtd. in Schweitzer 24). Entrance into the abstract realm of Vastarien would then be an escape beyond the false façade of everyday reality, to a place where Victor can confront the nature of the universe as it is, beneath comforting daylight illusions – accessing true reality through unreality, just the kind of paradox that Ligotti as a writer appears to be so fond of. This corresponds with the effects that Ligotti's fiction might aim to have on the reader as well, inspiring them to question the established views of the world and to confront ugly existential truths, presenting the reader with pessimistic philosophical angles in the form of supernatural horror fiction. With Ligotti also having spoken about his former yearning for "enlightenment in darkness" (Cardin 21), which might be something that his works can potentially point the reader towards as well, this curiously corresponds with Victor's desired "vision of a disastrous enlightenment, of a catastrophic illumination" in "Vastarien" (354).

Discussing Ligotti's portrayal of (un)reality in "Vastarien" as well as his other works, Price places it against the background of the Decadent movement, stating that "the glory of decadence in view here is not the decay of reality on its own perceived level, but rather the decay, collapse, or ruination of that very level of perception" (33). Such literary ruination of perception can then lead the open-minded seeker to see beyond the everyday veil of illusion that keeps the masses hypnotized and stuck in their doctrinal and aesthetic conventions. A parallel between Victor Keirion's described goals as a reader in "Vastarien," and Ligotti's own as a writer, begins to emerge – or perhaps Victor's attitude represents the implied reader? Victor's eventual descent into murder and madness reminds the reader of the perilousness of such an extreme aesthetic and philosophical quest, though, which might simply end up in disaster devoid of enlightenment, a catastrophe without illumination. Narrating or focalizing a story through a clearly unstable narrator is a classic characteristic of weird fiction, of course, from Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) to Lovecraft's "Dagon" (1919). Not unlike the case is with many of Lovecraft's stories, "the so-called madmen are the ones who perceive the

truth of the Ligottian cosmos” (Price 32) – a notion that disrupts the categories of sanity and insanity, and suggests that seeing the world for what it is can be enough to drive one mad.

In “Vastarien,” the tension between reality and unreality is complemented with the tension between reliability and unreliability. Whereas the story is told in the third person, and Victor is solely the protagonist and focalizer, the reader is likely to remain skeptical about the narrated events. As it is eventually revealed that Victor has been institutionalized, it is valid to ponder whether he is simply a delusional headcase that has murdered an innocent man for attempting to steal his dreams. However, after the maniacally screaming Victor is tranquilized and drifts off, the reader is thrown a curveball in the form of the discussion that the caretakers in the asylum have amongst themselves. They wonder what they should do about the book in Victor’s room, filled with blank pages that he sits reading for hours – a book that has “been taken away enough times already, but then there’s always another that appears” (“Vastarien” 362). The caretakers conclude that there is nothing to do, as talking about the issue to someone in authority would simply make them seem like lunatics, and so their fear keeps them silent. The story thus ends in uncertainty for both the characters and the reader, being a prime embodiment of the doubt that Ligotti likes to cast on his literary victims in and outside the text. Ligotti’s attacks on reality and certainty have been analyzed in depth by Stefan Dziemianowicz, who notes how “[c]haracters may eventually come to think of the un-reality in which they become trapped as ‘more real,’ and even knowable” (43) – a description that applies to Victor Keirion’s condition as well. When this idea is philosophically reflected back on human existence, the Ligottian view of our delusional puppet dance would seem to be equally in line with such torturous existential uncertainty.

## 4 The Balm of Bleakness: Ligotti's Work as Sublimation

In this chapter, I concentrate on the defense mechanism of sublimation, the rarest of the main strategies of dealing with the pains of consciousness and maintaining the conspiracy against the human race (*Conspiracy* 14). In sublimation, the individual confronts the meaningless nightmare of existence and transforms the ensuing agony into something constructive through creative action. I begin by looking at how Ligotti describes the pessimist's search for an outside representation of their dismal inner world, whether in literature or otherwise, and go on to discuss what kind of challenges this way of sublimation poses. In the second section, I deal with the connection between pessimism and depression, and briefly examine how it relates to Ligotti's own personal background. Finally, I consider how his writing in both the fictional and non-fictional formats can be looked at as sublimation as well as an attempt to spread his pessimistic philosophy, and examine the tension between these two approaches to Ligotti's work.

### 4.1 The Disillusioning Search for a Refuge in Ruin

In *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Ligotti writes about how wallowing or rejoicing in bleakness can potentially have a reassuring effect on pessimistic individuals, providing them with a grim sense of comfort, so they can go on withstanding the agonies of consciousness: "Disdainful of the solicitations of hope, they look for sanctuary in desolate places – a scattering of ruins in a barren locale or a rubble of words in a book where someone whispers in a dry voice, 'I, too, am here'" (135). This sort of search for bleakness fits under sublimation and Ligotti's idea of confrontational escapism, but the passage also evokes the classical phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* in art, which would remind mortals about the omnipresence and inevitability of death. Although Zapffe traces humankind's existential angst back to us first becoming aware of our mortality (2) – an awareness that the various defense mechanisms have developed to suppress (3) – the inescapable end of all can also appear as a comforting certainty for the disconsolate. In addition to this, the mention of "a dry voice" acknowledging its presence hints at the prospect of not being alone in one's misery; that even if the company one has is but a desolate ruin or a dark tale, such embodiments of bleakness can offer somber solace by giving form to the pessimist's inner world.

However, Ligotti points out that finding genuinely pessimistic literature can be a challenging task, as often the dark promise that a book initially shows is betrayed by its conclusion at the latest. “[D]owncast readers must be on their guard,” he notes:

Phony retreats have lured many who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence. Too often they have settled into a book that begins as an oration on bleak experience but wraps up with the author slipping out the back door and making his way down a shining path, leaving downcast readers more rankled than they were before entering what turned out to be only a façade of ruins, a *trompe l'oeil* of bleakness. (*Conspiracy* 135)

Ligotti goes on to discuss how such disappointments abound in fiction – mentioning Tolstoy’s oeuvre as an example – as well as non-fiction that deals with philosophical questions such as “Should we stop reproducing?”, where the answer eventually reached is usually a resounding “no” (140). In contrast to the abundance of such writing that does not deliver on its dark promise, the work of writers like Poe, Lovecraft, and Ligotti himself can be seen to represent literature of a truly pessimistic character. The conclusions of their stories do not come with “traitorous turnabout[s]” (140) that would negate the negation built over the course of the narrative, but the stories rather affirm the desolate and doomed atmosphere by opting for endings that are hopeless, uncomfortable, ambiguous, or all of these things.

If we step back to look at *Conspiracy*’s discussion of pessimism and supernatural horror as a whole, a kind of compact predecessor to it can be found as far back as in “Professor Nobody’s Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror” (1985). These “lectures” are quoted at length throughout *Conspiracy*, and they admittedly cover and condense several of the main themes of the book in a poignant and poetic way. Particularly worthy of note here is Professor Nobody’s discussion of the “morbid man” – a character description that could match at least a small percentage of individuals among the authors and aficionados of horror fiction, and a slightly larger percentage among its characters: “Retreating from a world of health and sanity, [. . .] the morbid man seeks the shadows behind the scenes of life. He backs himself into a corner alive with cool drafts and fragrant with centuries of must. It is in that corner that he builds a world of ruins out of the battered stones of his imagination, a rancid world rife with things smelling of the crypt” (“Nobody” 184). Although “supernatural horror is a vital part of his program,” the morbid man does not simply dabble in romantic decadence, but instead revels in the nauseatingly negative aspects of existence, becoming “a symptom or a cause of decay within both individual and collective spheres of being” (184–185). This depiction of the

morbid man does not come across as only an elaboration on many of Ligotti's characters that feel at home amidst the bleakness of ruins, but also reads like another pointer at the disposition of the author as well as his implied reader.

Victor Keirion, the protagonist of "Vastarien," corresponds with Ligotti's depictions in *Conspiracy* and "Professor Nobody's Little Lectures" well. Having turned his back to the worthless waking world, Victor is looking for a desolate sanctuary of ruin, or "a rubble of words in a book" (*Conspiracy* 135) that would invoke said sanctuary, to be precise. However, what he has found on his literary quest so far has been largely useless, making the disillusioned Victor doubt whether his sought-after literature of nightmarish unreality even exists ("Vastarien" 353). Time and again, the occult books that he has come across have failed to deliver on their promise of terminal transcendence into the unreal, instead eventually revealing themselves to revolve around painfully earthly affairs that are only clad in arcane mumbo jumbo (354). Even if Victor's aim is to transcend earthly reality instead of wallowing in its misery, it is easy to see the parallel between his esoteric literary quest and the challenge that Ligotti describes in *Conspiracy* as the downtrodden reader's search for genuinely pessimistic literature. In both cases, the seeker is bound to be often deceived and disappointed by what they come across, reminded of the regrettable reality that the world does not have much to offer to its outcasts. Considering that Victor winds up incarcerated and lost in his drugged dreams as a consequence of him finding the book that he has been after all along, "Vastarien" also suggests that reaching one's desired destination might end up being just another deception and disappointment all the same.

Victor also fits precisely the character type that Professor Nobody describes in his discussion on morbidity, as Victor's quest for Vastarien is obsessive and unshackled by morality or reason. He seeks the shadow realm of unreality for itself – simply to dwell in its essence – not because of any human aspirations for further knowledge or power. Victor literally "builds a world of ruins out of . . . his imagination" ("Nobody" 184), conjuring the dream realm of Vastarien from the empty pages of the eponymous book. The morbid man's exercises of "isolation, mental strain, emotional exertions, visionary infatuations, well-executed fevers, [and] repudiations of well-being" ("Nobody" 184) all become a part of Victor's macabre menu as well, and these tendencies certainly do not end up doing him or others any good, as the protagonist's path leads him down into the depths of murder and madness. *Be careful what you wish for*, the story jeers, as we eventually find Victor having ended up precisely "in

exhaustion, in confusion, and debris” (“Vastarien” 354) – just not quite the way he had in mind.

In *My Work Is Not Yet Done*, on the other hand, protagonist-narrator Frank seeks refuge in ruin in a more concrete sense as an avid amateur photographer of urban decay, taking pictures of derelict buildings and decadent alleys around the city. However, he recognizes that his hobby is more of a reasoning that he has come up with for frequenting abandoned parts of the city “to wallow in their degraded wonders” (*My Work* 39):

[M]y picture-taking was something of an excuse to justify and explain . . . my presence in the city’s many regions that had passed from squalor to abandonment, from abandonment to decay, and from decay into the ultimate stages of degeneration that bordered upon complete disappearance from this world. It was not the *wabi* of battered but still useful objects that I was seeking; it was the *sabi* of things utterly dejected and destitute, alone and forgotten – whatever was submitting to its essential impermanence, its transitory nature, whatever was teetering on the brink of non-existence that was the fate of everything that had ever been and awaited everything that would ever be . . . every person, every place, every purpose, and every plan that could possibly be conceived. (37–38)

Building on the concepts of *wabi* and *sabi* from Japanese aesthetics, Frank takes the appreciation and acceptance of imperfection and impermanence further, reveling in the decay of the markers of civilization around him. Although a certain melancholy of “fading worlds” (40) can be sensed in Frank’s descriptions of old buildings as well, he hardly comes across as someone who grieves for what has been lost, or as a spiritual seeker with lofty dreams of inner peace. Frank’s narration is rather characterized by a nihilistic overtone, and his inner monologue reveals his fascination with ruins being essentially about a yearning to “a world that is the exact opposite of [this] one” (41), but he recognizes to be too weak and afraid to initiate any kind of drastic change from his mediocre work-centered life. This yearning does not only imply Frank having an urge to resign from his job, to retreat from society, or to commit suicide, but there is an otherworldly quality to it, not unlike Victor’s quest in “Vastarien”; it is a craving to disappear entirely from the world and enter non-existence, the all-devouring absolute. The derelict locales that Frank frequents offer a glimpse of this absolute, and his enjoyment and photography of them can be seen as an act of sublimation, a creative endeavor of transforming urban ugliness into a source of solace.

Eventually, the simple solace of *wabi* and *sabi* must step aside, as with Frank getting fired from the company, his fragile inner balance is disturbed, and solitary creative pleasures are replaced by a burning urge for violence and death. However, before Frank gets to put his

newly purchased weaponry to proper use and realize his gory fantasies, his spontaneous leap under the bus and his subsequent transformation into a spectral state alter the course of events. While the incident stops Frank from shooting up the office the following day, the transformation enables him to exact his revenge in much crueler and more bizarre ways. When Frank is leading his victim-to-be Mary astray into ruined neighborhoods, he reflects: “[M]y feeling for these places was a thing of the past for me. The soothingness of *sabi*, with its mind-clearing desolation and soul-calming decrepitude, had now been replaced by my taste for the Grotesque. Nothing but the Grotesque would gratify my howling mind and poisoned soul. Only the Grotesque” (*My Work* 119). The course of the narrative follows Frank’s personal journey of seeking solace, starting from nihilistic reflections on the world, moving on to run-of-the-mill fantasies of mass murder, and ending up in the exacting of vengeance by the most sadistic supernatural means. Here, a line could be drawn between the character’s course and the author and the implied reader’s journey of sublimation, where only the Grotesque will ultimately be enough to quiet down the agonies of consciousness for a moment. Yet, final fulfillment is denied for the protagonist, the author, and the reader alike, as Frank is eventually unable to take out his nemesis Richard and has to settle for mere self-annihilation – and only after realizing that even his own desires and actions have simply been machinations of the supreme swinish entity pulling all strings.

The defeating conclusion of *My Work* fits well with Packer and Stoneman’s idea of weird fiction employing pessimistic narrative strategies, and the ending suggests that even such literary attempts at sublimation are bound to fall short of cathartic fulfillment, as there is no real solace for the pessimist. In addition, the conclusion can be interpreted to imply that the impulse to seek sublimation is not the seeker’s own either, but only a consequence of their helpless position under the yoke of forces beyond their control. However, despite its defeating tone, the ending of *My Work* is notably conclusive when compared to the author’s other works, and hence more satisfying to the reader than usual, which might be explained by the exceptionally plot-driven story having been originally thought of as a movie by Ligotti (qtd. in Angerhuber and Wagner 69).

In contrast to the tragic journeys of murder and madness taken by Frank and Victor, “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing” rather presents a fulfilling homecoming, where the narrator ends up finding the northern town that gives outer form to their inner longing for wintry disintegration. However, the reader only learns about the narrator’s sickly childhood “long before [they] suspected the existence of the town near the northern border” (“Soft Voice”

117) and their initial discovery of the place “many years later” (118). This hints at the narrator having searched for the town for a long time, yet the search itself is not elaborated on at all, nor are the events that follow the narrator settling in the town: the story only concentrates on the two separate points in time, as if to accentuate the static atmosphere of hibernation and the meaninglessness of everything else.

Thematically, “Soft Voice” seems to be very much about finding refuge and enlightenment, with the town’s wintry desolation and aura of delirium providing the narrator with a sense and place of belonging, while the metaphysical lectures weave a philosophical framework around it. The story can be read as a means to sublimate the agony of feeling lost and alone in the world, describing a way of finding peace in oblivion amongst other inconsolable souls.

Despite the conclusion being seemingly satisfying to the protagonist, which is quite exceptional in Ligotti’s fiction, the narrative remains pessimistic in its core, being arguably too cryptic to be truly fulfilling and too hopeless to be genuinely cathartic to the reader. The story rather welters amidst the disconsolate pointlessness of existence, and while doing so, discovers that there is a soft voice whispering: “I, too, am here.”

#### **4.2 The Entangled Thickets of Pessimism and Depression**

The way Ligotti describes “downcast readers . . . who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence” (*Conspiracy* 135) gives a good indication of what the ideal audience of his writings might look like. Additionally, the quote suggests two things: first, that readers that gravitate towards pessimistic texts are often “downcast.” Ligotti draws a parallel between pessimists and depressives throughout *Conspiracy*, with pessimists implied to be “individuals who know what is known to the depressive”: the inherent meaninglessness of existence, revealed to those who are not under “the stranglehold of emotionalism that anchors [us] to hallucinations” (104). The second point of relevance here is how the downcast readers might find such literature of negation to be “indispensable to their existence” – a source of consolation that they need in order to withstand the tribulation of conscious life. This leads us back to the defense mechanism of sublimation, one of the main strategies that upholds the conspiracy against the human race by leading individuals to channel their existential angst into creative endeavors.

Although Ligotti uses the term *sublimation* in the authorial context, it is relevant to not only apply the term to the creation of artefacts by “thinkers and artistic types” (*Conspiracy* 14) but

to expand it to also cover the reading experience. After all, reading is a creative act, where the author, the text, and the reader interact to construct a literary world of emotions and meanings. The entire literary process from the author to the reader can then serve to momentarily sublimate the pain of consciousness on both ends, hence making the creation and consumption of such pessimistic literary artefacts something potentially indispensable to writer and reader alike. Of course, artistic outcomes of sublimation are not necessarily regarded as such by all of their audience, as even heart-wrenching tragedies originating from the most tormented mind can end up being idly enjoyed as entertainment by some. In his discussion of authorial intention, John Farrell describes all writing as “an intersubjective public practice” (10), where “[b]oth author and audience play a vital conceptual role” (6). However, as “[a]ny act of communication involves the possibility of being misunderstood, and any act of artistic making involves the possibility of failing to produce the intended impact” (Farrell 10), the ever-present human factor in the process of literary communication makes the readerly effects not wholly predictable, introducing both risks and possibilities into the equation. A text that is the result of its author’s sublimation can then simply represent distraction to its reader, and the opposite is possible as well: regardless of the depth of the author’s motivations, or lack thereof, an engaged reader bringing their own creative capabilities to the table can elevate the text to another level with their interpretation, and discover the process to have a sublimating effect.

By connecting pessimists and depressives, Ligotti acknowledges pessimism as a depressive mode of thought, at least when viewed from the perspective of “ordinary folk” (*Conspiracy* 106). The pessimist appears as a “melancholic head-case” (162) in the eyes of the optimist majority, who can do away with such “pessimistic, nihilistic, and defeatist temperaments” (163) by portraying them as attempts to rationalize what is merely a symptom of mental instability: “whatever thoughts may enter your chemically imbalanced brain are invalid, inauthentic, or whatever dismissive term we care to hang on you, who are only ‘one of those people’” (162). On the other hand, in the “Unpersons” chapter of *Conspiracy*, Ligotti equates depression with the loss of emotion, which in turn leads one to seeing themselves as an empty nobody – an unperson – and to realizing that everything is inherently devoid of meaning. A functioning emotional system is then essential in keeping our defense mechanisms running, the puppets unaware of their strings, and the conspiracy in motion. In the light of the above, depression can be viewed as a dismissive label latched onto the pessimist by those who disagree with such philosophy of negation, or as a revelatory condition that strips the

individual of their life-affirming illusions. Regardless, here pessimism and depression become easily so entangled that it is impossible to distinguish where one ends and the other begins, or to figure out which one is the cause and which one the consequence.

In Ligotti's fiction, the portrayal of mental disorders such as depression makes them come across as more of a consequence of existential misery than the cause for viewing life in such a bleak way in the first place. This kind of rationalization is not exactly a surprise, as the protagonists, narrators, and focalizers tend to be more or less unstable social outsiders with peculiar obsessions and otherworldly yearnings – a testament to Ligotti's disinterest in writing about "normal" people. In *My Work*, Frank repeatedly refers to himself as obsessive-compulsive, and after murdering Perry, he talks about the experience being "therapeutic in a way that none of the pills or psychiatric services [he] had consumed over the years had ever been" (86). This follows Frank's logic of preferring violent action over mere personal reflection, and validates his inner craving for retribution as a necessary facet of his wellbeing. However, viewed from the outside, Frank could be described as a sensitive loner that is deeply depressed and frustrated by his meaningless job and the soulless urban culture around him. Already lacking in empathy and social skills, all he needs to be pushed over the edge is to be wrongfully fired by his employer. As Frank spirals into murderous mayhem, the reader can either enjoy the sublimating ride of nihilistic sadism, or wonder what kind of psychopath one would have to be to justify taking such cruel vengeance on one's former colleagues. The rage and contempt that Frank demonstrates towards his co-workers does not imply a lack of emotion, though, that is for sure.

Although "Vastarien" is not narrated by the protagonist Victor, the story is focalized through him, and carries a particularly powerful dreamlike atmosphere of isolation and insanity. The narrative is mostly built around descriptions of Victor's own obscure visions, with little presence of, or interaction with, other characters. Victor's indifference towards the real world and his fixation on finding its thoroughly decadent counterpart would already classify him as a special individual, but as the level of obsession drives him to murder, the disclosure of him being confined in an asylum for the criminally insane does not exactly come as a shock. Of course, the final revelation that the book *Vastarien* is, in fact, a mysteriously reappearing artefact with some sorts of magic powers casts everything in a new light, making the reader question what is real and who is mad after all. The subjective and unreliable nature of reality and sanity is then at the heart of the story, eventually leaving the reader as helplessly ignorant as the characters, abandoning both to maddening uncertainty.

Of the three stories, “A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing” would be the easiest one to read as a literary attempt to sublimate depression. Especially the seasonal type springs to mind while immersing oneself in the short story’s wintry imagery and emotional emptiness. Recounting their childhood medical trauma – which also connects to Ligotti’s own experience of surgery in early childhood (qtd. in Schweitzer 29) – the narrator recalls having dreamed of “the void of an ultimate hibernation” ever since (“Soft Voice” 117). The narrator’s close brush with death at an early age appears to have left them disenchanted with life for good, and their childhood physician’s secretive mentions about mysteries of wintry desolation have planted an obsessive affinity for the season in the narrator’s fragile mind. In a narrative sense, the childhood experience of an incapacitating illness and the narrator’s resulting disenchantment with life would also explain their position as more of a passing spectator of events than an actor with an agency of their own. The narrator’s eventual discovery of the northern town means that they can surrender to their desolate longings and incapacitated stasis, whereas the philosophy revealed to them through the metaphysical lectures functions to justify this surrender.

Even though the approach of my literary analysis is not biographical, it is worth noting that Ligotti is no stranger to mental illness either. The author admits to suffering from agoraphobia, the symptoms of which include “panic attacks and a general sense of unreality” (qtd. in Schweitzer 30). He has openly talked about having started seriously reading and writing only in college, discovering both activities as helpful distractions from his chronic anxiety and fear (qtd. in Schweitzer 24). Despite recognizing to possess a morbid imagination and depressive tendencies since an early age, Ligotti places the turning point in 1970, when he suffered an emotional breakdown, following heavy substance abuse (qtd. in Angerhuber and Wagner 53). This incident, coupled with him discovering Lovecraft’s fiction soon after, is where Ligotti locates the seed of his literary career:

I found that the meaningless and menacing universe described in Lovecraft’s stories corresponded very closely to the place I was living at that time, and ever since for that matter. I was grateful that someone else had perceived the world in a way similar to my own view. A few years later, when I took an interest in writing fiction, there was never a question that I would write anything else other than horror stories. (qtd. in Angerhuber and Wagner 53)

Based on this statement, we can definitely apply the sublimation of negative thoughts and emotions to Ligotti both as a reader and a writer. In addition to identifying with the hopelessness of the Lovecraftian cosmos, Ligotti’s essay “The Dark Beauty of Unheard-of

Horrors” (1992) hints at Lovecraft’s uncanny aesthetic of supernatural horror having been a channel of sublimation to its author as well, referring to “so many statements made by Lovecraft concerning those sensations which, as he asserted, alone made his existence endurable” (83). The way that Ligotti has talked about Lovecraft in interviews also makes it clear that the influence is literary, philosophical, as well as highly personal: “This may sound bizarre or pathetic, but H. P. Lovecraft has been, bar none other, the most intense and real personal presence in my life. Lovecraft was a dark guru who confirmed in me all my most awful suspicions about the universe” (qtd. in Paul and Schurholz 130–131). All in all, the formative Lovecraft influence makes it sensible to regard Ligotti as a successor to the same lineage of devastating cosmic horror, albeit with his own bizarre twists, with Ligotti pouring his inner struggles and pessimistic philosophy into his writing in a spirit kindred to Lovecraft. And just as discovering Lovecraft once brought solace to the young Ligotti, Ligotti’s own writings can console, impress, and influence further generations of horror readers and writers, continuing the lineage.

#### **4.3 Solacing Sublimation or Pessimistic Propaganda?**

To unearth yet another angle from which to examine the potential intents and effects of Ligotti’s fiction, it serves to turn back to the morbid man once more. Although “the morbid man does not appear to be doing himself or others any good” (“Nobody” 184), his actions seem to be driven by a reckless obsession towards morbidity itself rather than by an intent of achieving something with it, whether “good” or “bad.” On the other hand, a more positive perusal of the morbid man’s modus operandi might reveal his actions to count as an extreme case of confrontational escapism and sublimation, a perspective which is easy to apply to the authors and audiences of horror as well. After all, authorial and readerly approaches are many and overlapping, and hence weird fiction or supernatural horror can simultaneously function as ecstatic wallowing for the morbid, offer consoling sublimation for the downtrodden, and sneak subtle pessimistic propaganda past the defenses of the unwary reader on the hunt for thrills – and all of the above might happen without the reader being consciously aware of it.

However, in Packer and Stoneman’s view, the nature of weird fiction makes it resistant to readerly sublimation by default, with the genre rather working towards a subtle transmittal of pessimistic thought. To explain weird fiction’s resistance to sublimation, they point out such genre characteristics as non-conformity to a traditional narrative arc, abrupt and ambiguous endings, and emphasis on an obscure atmosphere over a clear plot. (Packer and Stoneman 47)

Packer and Stoneman have a sound argument in how these characteristics make it difficult for the reader to reach a life-affirming catharsis, but they seem to fail to account for the fact that while sublimation might come with catharsis, the two do not have to necessarily coexist. Catharsis has generally been interpreted as “some form of purgation or purification” of the emotions that the work has aroused in the audience (Weller and Golden 214–216), but I would argue that this purging effect requires a satisfactory completion of the plot, while sublimation only requires a momentary channeling of the negative emotions into creative action. Ligotti’s work is a prime example of this division, as there is hardly any catharsis to be found amidst its hopelessness and ambiguity, yet his writing can function as sublimation for the reader, just as it does for the author. The same can be said about Lovecraft’s work, as well as a lot of other weird fiction, where the persisting emotional effect on the reader is unease without relief, as Packer and Stoneman also recognize (48).

Packer and Stoneman’s argument about weird fiction acting “as a coded communiqué” (48), subverting the defenses of the reader’s mind, holds up better, and this also rings true for Ligotti’s stories. While Ligotti obviously has his share of readers that are already open to pessimistic philosophy and aware of its presence in the author’s work – and a more straightforward pessimistic manifesto such as *Conspiracy* might attract even more of such audience – many other readers undoubtedly read Ligotti for sheer enjoyment of the terror and the weirdness in his stories. However, for some of these unsuspecting readers, Ligotti’s fiction can indeed function either as an introduction to philosophical pessimism, or as a sneaky literary vehicle that plants an ominous feeling of wrongness and unease in their mind, which can in turn fuel pessimistic thinking.

*My Work* exemplifies the pessimism encoded in Ligotti’s fiction well, as the author’s philosophical leanings are not only present in the narrator’s frankly nihilistic musings about the world, but there are also subtler elements to be found, with strong ties to the themes discussed in *Conspiracy*. In this context, it is worth taking another look at the story’s depictions of urban decay, which are not restricted only to lifeless structures, as their inhabitants are also portrayed in a meaningful manner as sore reminders of uncomfortable truths:

[T]hese places frequently served as home-ground for various persons who had nowhere else to call home, the cast-offs and losers of a world that had no use for them and did everything it could to push them further and further into exile, because the presence of these living ghosts, these ambulatory spirits, was simply

too haunting to be tolerated, provoking a dismal reminder of something that must be ignored at all costs...for these specters were not merely human detritus that the rest of us had left behind, but also citizens of a future that awaits all the empires infesting this earth, not to mention the imminent fall of those fragile homelands of flesh which we each inhabit. (*My Work* 38–39)

These “cast-offs and losers” have become unwanted and useless to the world, but at the same time, they have broken free from its rat race. It is not only that the world has thrown them out as human garbage, but they have also left the world behind in the process of becoming “citizens of a future that awaits all the empires.” Even though Frank does not look upon these derelicts with open admiration but with fear, he admits to “[having] taken several psychological steps into their desperate world” (39). However, while these residents of ruin dwell amidst decay in their everyday reality, Frank is simply an outsider looking in. He finds mental refuge in ruin through his photography, yet is too afraid to actually get close to the derelicts, let alone take any serious steps to sever himself from the swinish schemes of society. In this regard, Frank has one foot in each world yet belongs in neither of them, therefore already being a liminal being of sorts before he enters the more literally liminal state between life and death later in the story.

The above depiction of the outsiders of society is easy to interpret as a critique of neoliberalism (see Newell, Rendle), and of the way that capitalism turns people into commodities to be cast aside once they have been sucked dry by the machine. However, the passage’s mention of exiled “cast-offs and losers” also fits together with how Ligotti describes the often scornful attitude of the majority towards pessimists: “None of us wants to hear spoken the exact anxieties we keep locked up inside ourselves. Smother that urge to go spreading news of your pain and nightmares around town. . . . And be sure to get on with things or we will get on without you” (*Conspiracy* 15). In *My Work*, these anxieties are represented by the homeless, whom the rest of society has got on without, pushing them further and further outside its margins and into oblivion. Just like ragged derelicts roaming rank back alleys are preferred out of sight, pessimistic thoughts are best kept out of mind, being “too haunting to be tolerated, provoking a dismal reminder of something that must be ignored at all costs” (*My Work* 38–39). What sane person would want to be reminded of how ruthless and fickle our world is, or of how fragile and fleeting our lives are? We need to conspire against ourselves and each other to suppress the frightening stirrings of our consciousness and keep going, lest we are swallowed by our existential angst over our inescapable mortality and the shared suffering of all that lives.

Although Ligotti rubs his ugly pessimistic truths against the reader's face through his writings, he does so by sublimating the ugliness into an artistic form, therefore being complicit in the conspiracy. Ligotti's fiction can be seen as an emotional and intellectual safety valve of sorts, through which the author can spread his "pain and nightmares" that no one would like to hear expressed in the context of daily life. Whether cast in the form of fiction or creative philosophical writing such as *Conspiracy*, the expression of pessimistic sentiments becomes more socially acceptable, as the reader can freely choose whether to dive in deeper or spare themselves from further miserable wallowing. Also, despite the possible negative intents behind them, these thoughts can even turn into something *sublime* in the literary process and end up having a positive effect on the reader by providing aesthetic enjoyment, inspiring critical thinking, or establishing a solidary understanding between the author and the likeminded audience, for instance.

Despite Ligotti's fiction potentially working as a literary Trojan horse of pessimism, as suggested by Packer and Stoneman (23), it is worth noting that the author's philosophy is marginal both in its content and its form of expression: if the attraction of a pessimist worldview is highly limited already, matching it up with an inherently challenging literary subgenre such as weird fiction is not going to make the philosophy much more palatable to most. Hence Ligotti's work does not rank high in propaganda value, as its form is clearly dictated by the author's personal disposition and preference, and the philosophical content remains subordinate to the marginal aesthetic frame of supernatural horror.

Even in the more direct and less cryptic non-fiction form of *Conspiracy*, the horror element is strongly present, making the book an attractive read only to those with an interest in both philosophy and horror. In addition to the form and content of *Conspiracy* heavily limiting its readerly appeal, there is also the paradoxically optimistic nature of philosophical persuasion to consider – if humans are but unwitting puppets, what is the point of an entire book attempting to convince this hopeless bunch to snap out of the conspiracy (Packer and Stoneman 43)? Ligotti's defeating conclusion to the final chapter suggests that there is none, as "[w]e are only human beings" that will keep on going as we are bidden to until the curtains are drawn (*Conspiracy* 220–221). In this regard, it appears that Ligotti is simply preaching to the converted, and that *Conspiracy* as a rhetorical project is bound to be useless – and malignantly so. Whatever use the work might have can be seen to lie in this very malignance, though, as the heartfelt vitriol packed into the careful argumentation is what makes *Conspiracy* such a powerful act of sublimation.

The author's fiction, on the other hand, has slightly more potential to extend its reach beyond those who already embrace pessimistic sentiment. A casual horror reader coming across some of Ligotti's stories while simply looking for shivers might get more than they bargained for, when a deeper existential terror begins to reveal itself from underneath the haunting and bizarre exterior. While the ethical dimensions of these subtle effects could be interesting to explore in more detail, the way that Ligotti expresses his pessimistic philosophy through fiction can hardly be considered ethically problematic, as his work is unlikely to attract readers who are not already looking to immerse themselves in "the Cosmic Macabre" ("Nobody" 188). The responsibility ultimately lies with the reader, and as aficionados of the genre can attest to, there is a simple rule to reading horror: if you cannot stand the stench, get out of the crypt.

## 5 Conclusion

Over the years, Thomas Ligotti has developed a distinct literary style of his own, building on the foundations laid down by the likes of Poe and Lovecraft, but escalating their grim horror into newfound depths of negativity and absurdity, crafting a nightmare all his own. This unique voice of Ligotti is omnipresent throughout his work, from his weird fiction to the philosophical musings running across *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. The author's style consists as much of the grotesque theatrical imagery as it does of the underlying pessimistic philosophy, although the two occur in a different ratio in Ligotti's fiction and non-fiction. However, in both cases, the resulting combination appears to work towards a joint goal, with the grotesque aesthetics setting the stage for a literary play of confrontational escapism, where both the author and the reader have a chance to sublimate their agony of consciousness by engaging in a simulacrum of their own suffering.

The portrayal of human beings as helpless marionettes is at the core of Ligotti's philosophical pessimism, and the theatrical imagery and the themes of manipulation recur throughout the author's horror fiction as well. The novella *My Work Is Not Yet Done* is an exemplary case, portraying the corporate working world and the entire existence as a vicious puppet show, containing a multilayered structure of clandestine control within its narrative, and employing the uncanny imagery of mannikins in a striking way. Apart from these features, the nihilistic anti-life musings of the narrator-protagonist Frank make the author's voice heard in a more explicit way than usual, precisely matching the philosophy that Ligotti details in *Conspiracy* at times.

Despite featuring a much less personally present narrator and being more cryptic in its language, "A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing" also gives room for the author to express his philosophical views through the metaphysical lectures received by the narrator. The short story has a clear focus on the themes of existentialism and suicide, and employs heavy theatrical symbolism of puppets and clowns to deal with these themes. "Vastarien," on the other hand, largely omits the use of theatrical imagery, but the theme of manipulation is at the core of the story's plot, where the characters fall prey to forces far beyond their understanding and control.

Ligotti's hopeless philosophical vision leads to viewing nonexistence as a preferable alternative to existence, and death as a preferable alternative to life, and this longing for a way

out of the world recurs in the author's fiction. Apart from being a personal preference for the pessimist, such line of thinking can even lead to seeing the end of all life as the ideal, which is exactly what happens to Frank in *My Work*: starting with the desire to take violent revenge on his former colleagues, Frank comes to develop an urge for an all-out omnicide. However, eventually he has to come to terms with his powerlessness and settle for simply putting an end to his own misery.

In "Soft Voice," the craving for a way out takes the form of the narrator's search for a dissolution into the wintry void. The narrator's discovery of the northern border town and its bizarre death cult appear as an initiatory step towards this disintegration, with the narrator experiencing a comforting sense of homecoming at the end of the story. In "Vastarien," the protagonist Victor is on a literary quest for a decadent realm of the unreal since he sees no value in the waking world of common reality. As Victor's obsessive quest leads him to madness and murder, his attainment of a disastrous enlightenment is eventually revealed to have landed him at an institution for the criminally insane.

The consistently pessimistic tone and defeating conclusions of Ligotti's fiction appear as an answer to the challenging search for genuinely pessimistic literature that he discusses in *Conspiracy*, as even the serene closing of "Soft Voice" is far from uplifting. The main motivation for such pessimistic writing appears to be sublimation of negative thought and emotion – a creative transformation of this negativity into an artistic form, where both the author and the reader have the chance to confront and sublimate their existential agony. Being one of the main defense mechanisms that uphold the conspiracy against the human race, sublimation then makes even the pessimist paradoxically complicit in the conspiracy that they openly despise.

The depressive and defeatist nature of pessimistic sentiment is touched upon throughout *Conspiracy*, and this tendency also colors the mental states of many characters in Ligotti's fiction. On one hand, it is easy to classify a narrator like Frank of *My Work* as depressed or deranged, but on the other, adopting the perspective of such a character can reveal their grim worldview as more of an understandable consequence of the state of the world than a cause that explains why their view is skewed to begin with. Regardless, the connection between pessimism and depression is notably present in Ligotti's writing, and the author's open discussion in interviews on the formative creative influence of his own mental struggles serves to confirm the relevance of this aspect. Sublimation clearly plays a significant role in

Ligotti's creative work as an author, and the sublimating effect is likely to extend to the experience of a likeminded reader as well.

When speculating on Ligotti's authorial motivations, the attempt to spread pessimistic philosophy also requires consideration, especially in the case of a primarily philosophical work such as *Conspiracy*. Packer and Stoneman's idea of weird fiction as a potential Trojan horse of pessimism seems a good match with Ligotti's horror stories as well, as the omnipresent negativity and nihilism are likely to leave their mark on the reader on some level. However, whether we are talking about the explicit discussion of philosophical pessimism and supernatural horror in *Conspiracy*, or about the more subtle nuances of Ligotti's fiction, the author's style and themes clearly place him in a marginal corner of literature where readers are unlikely to stumble unwittingly. Hence, Ligotti's writing does not rank high in propaganda value, even though the philosophical potential is there.

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the connections between Ligotti's fiction and non-fiction, demonstrating how the author's pessimistic philosophy is present in his stories in both covert and overt ways. Despite occasionally offering an exceptionally intricate expression of philosophical pessimism, Ligotti's writing appears foremost as a result of sublimation, a creative attempt to confront and transform the unavoidable nightmare of being into an artistic form. Whereas this process of sublimation might provide the author a momentary excuse not to kill himself, for instance – or at least a brief distraction from such thoughts – the resulting literature carries the same potential of sublimation, passing it on to the reader as well. This artistic process then becomes a joint venture between the author and the reader, where creation and interpretation fuse together in one act of literary sublimation.

In addition to the themes that I have examined here, Ligotti's oeuvre could offer plenty of dark corners to explore in further academic research. Especially the author's corporate horror, as exemplified by *My Work Is Not Yet Done* in this thesis, has the potential for more socio-politically inclined analysis. Concentrating on Ligotti's sardonic portrayals of the corporate workplace, the capitalist society at large, and the violent escalations that can occasionally ensue would be one fruitful angle to cover at least.

Despite the author continuing to remain dead, dead, dead in the eyes of many a literary scholar, researching Ligotti and his writings from a more authorial angle could also yield interesting and relevant results. Ligotti has given several frank and lengthy interviews over the years, discussing his own mental struggles among many other topics, and providing the

readers genuine insight into his own persona. Employing such material to shed additional light on the more personal facets of Ligotti's fiction would enable an unfashionably biographical interpretation of the author's work, which could vastly expand on the limited focus presented in this thesis.

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