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On Stephen King's Phallus; or The Postmodern Gothic

There is no group therapy or psychiatry or community social services for the child who must cope with the thing under the bed or in the cellar every night, the thing which leers and capers and threatens just beyond the point where vision will reach. The same lonely battle must be fought night after night and the only cure is the eventual ossification of the imaginary faculties, and this is called adulthood.

—Stephen King, *'Salem's Lot* (242–3)

The peculiarity of the acts [of violence] seems to rise in direct ratio to the intelligence of the man or woman so afflicted.

—Stephen King, *The Dark Half* (387)

Horror is epistemological. Ever since the Enlightenment Gothic depicted the monstrous as, among other things, the allegorical projection of subterranean desires that surface when psycho-social defense mechanisms are relaxed, the definition of horror has been intimately bound up with the representation of the thinking subject. But while nineteenth-century writers like Matthew Lewis, William Godwin, and Charles Robert Maturin locate the source of repression in the social institutions of church, state, and the family, for Stephen King the repression seems much more inevitably and universally psychological in nature. My first epigraph from *'Salem's Lot* argues that horror is an infantile affliction that can be overcome only with maturity, with the “ossification of the imaginary faculties” in adulthood. Yet, the quotation from *The Dark Half* suggests that the standard marker of adulthood—the development of sophisticated intelligence—may itself be a cause of horror. While the child of *'Salem's Lot* will seek out knowledge (in therapy, psychiatry, social services, or just common sense) to allay his night fears,

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the adult of *The Dark Half* will be terrorized by precisely that knowledge. How are we to make sense of this apparent contradiction? What epistemological basis can be ascribed to horror as it is defined by Stephen King?

The contradictory implications of the search for knowledge, which go back at least as far as Victor Frankenstein, are specifically rendered in King through the figure of the author. Hotel caretaker and playwright Jack Torrance of *The Shining*, for example, believes that the cabin fever which drove his predecessor to murder his family and himself was the result of boredom, too much television and solitaire during the long winter at the isolated Overlook Hotel—whereas he absorbs himself in novels, has a play to work on, and will teach his young son to read (9). And it is this same Jack Torrance who will later try to ax-murder both wife and son. Indeed, the function of articulateness and intelligence in making one vulnerable to horror is an *idée fixe* for King: those characters most vulnerable to horror are males on the threshold of some crisis with the world of language. They are writers—Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, Ben Mears in *'Salem's Lot*, Thaddeus Beaumont in *The Dark Half*¹—undergoing a block or crisis of productivity; or they are young boys just on the cusp of full emergence into the symbolic order—Danny Torrance who is learning to read, Mark Petrie of *'Salem's Lot* who is just coming to understand the meaning of words, and the young Thaddeus Beaumont, who came to writing as an eleven-year-old boy and generated the murderous villain, George Stark, a pseudonym who comes to life and commits the atrocities he writes about.² Despite King's own prolificacy—he produces about one huge novel a year—he connects the desire to write with fearful repressions instituted by the act of writing itself.

This fixation on the vicissitudes of verbal productivity—its relation to madness and self, its pleasures and horrors—suggests an almost uncanny resemblance to the fixations of that other theorist of language and desire, Jacques Lacan. While it may seem startling, indeed monstrous, to suggest a doubling between the French psychoanalyst and the American “pulp” writer, Lacan theorizes many of the same complexities and fixations of King's postmodern Gothic. For it should become evident through the course of this essay that King is (or at least appears to be) remarkably in line with contemporary theories of psycholinguistics as he depicts the writing psychology. In a world after Lacan, it is no longer the ego that is given the verbal mastery over the ineffable repository of instincts that is, for Freud, the id, but rather it is the id itself, that *locus classicus* of Gothic activity, that contains “the whole structure of language” (*Ecrits*, “Agency” 147).³ And as a definitively verbal site, this unconscious and its discourse register a crisis in the production of the self—and in particular the male self—that is documented in King's fiction. Thus, I want to argue two things in this essay: first, that Stephen King, clearly the monarch of America's popular articulation of late twentieth-century horror, employs the anxieties over language as articulated by Lacan to discuss a postmodern condition; and second, that this deployment signals in King's characters, as it does in Lacanian psychoanalysis, a crisis of male self-definition that gnaws at the heart of gender stability and throws into question the very category of male heterosexuality.

1. THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Just as Schreber's psychosis is, for Lacan, primarily a question of grammatical shifts between the verbs love/hate and the pronouns I/him,⁴ so do the horrors surrounding King characters appear as formal, linguistic problems. King's is a universe where the seemingly clear contests of Gothic good and evil have become questions of linguistic formulation: Father Callahan of *'Salem's Lot* bemoans, "there were no battles. There were only skirmishes of vague resolution. And EVIL did not wear one face but many, and all of them were vacuous and more often than not the chin was slicked with drool. In fact, he was being forced to the conclusion that there was no EVIL in the world at all but only evil—or perhaps (evil)" (150). And while this (evil) makes itself clearly known in the real world as those anxieties, those "phobic pressure points" that King says are particularly virulent in post-war America (divorce, child-molesting, isolation, superstar writers and their fans) (*Danse* 4), they have the fascinating habit in his fiction of being presented as problems of *material* signifiers. From *The Shining*: "The greatest terror of Danny [Torrance]'s life was DIVORCE, a word that always appeared in his mind as a sign painted in red letters which were covered with hissing, poisonous snakes" (27), and hell for this six-year-old is "a blackness where one sinister word flashed in red: REDRUM" (57; we find out later that this word is "MURDER" presented to Danny on the mirror of his consciousness, and thus backwards). In *'Salem's Lot*, a town where "the trees . . . were half denuded now, and the black branches were limned against the gray sky like giant letters in an unknown alphabet" (378), Ben Mears, visiting author and *ad hoc* vampire slayer, "could almost see the word 'vampire' printed on the black screen of his mind, not in scare movie-poster print, but in small, economical letters that were made to be a woodcut or scratched on a scroll" (326). And in *The Dark Half*, when Thad Beaumont first encounters his literary other, George Stark, in a dream, "all he could see was the car, a steel tarantula gleaming in the sunlight. There was a sticker on the high-rise rear bumper. HIGH-TONED SON OF A BITCH, it read. The words were flanked left and right by a skull and cross-bones" (34). Lacan's insistence that analysis recognize "what function the subject takes on in the order of the symbolic relations which covers the entire field of human relations" (*Seminar* 67) opens up a means of understanding King's fascination with the writer in horror, and begins to meld the feared imaginary faculties with the anxiety about intelligence itself.

"Ask the writer," charges Jacques Lacan, "about the anxiety that he experiences when faced by the blank sheet of paper, and he will tell you who *is* the turd of his phantasy" (*Ecrits*, "Subversion" 315). Ask Thad Beaumont about the anxiety he experiences, and he will locate it in George Stark. Stark is the pseudonym under which Thad produces financially successful horror schlock, and in that sense he is a thermometer for what contemporary reading audiences desire in fiction. But as a literary creation who becomes flesh and blood, Stark is also the projection of Thad's own fear: fear of writing as an addiction, and as something that will take over our lives, fragment us, and alienate us from our families

and ourselves. As Thad begins to realize that “Pen names [can] come to life and murder people,” he decides, “*I will call it my William Wilson complex*” (135), a complex which, like that in the Poe story, must lead to a fight to the death. But while Thad spends most of the novel being horrified by his own literary creation, what is really at stake in *The Dark Half* is what Lacan calls the agency of the letter in the unconscious, the way self-referentiality inscribes the self only by doubling, fragmenting, and killing the self: “Thad Beaumont did not keep anything resembling an organized journal, but he did sometimes write about the events in his own life which interested, amused, or frightened him. He kept these accounts in a bound ledger. . . . Most were strangely passionless, almost as if part of him was standing aside and reporting on his life with its own divorced and almost disinterested eye” (82). This self-splitting is replicated near the end of the novel when Thad realizes that it is not George Stark who is the agent of horror, but George Stark’s own fictional creation, Alexis Machine, the sadistic villain of the Stark novels (447). In this novel, horror is the result of a *chain* of signifiers, a veritable lexis machine; Frankenstein’s monster is the written word. If the Enlightenment Gothic documents the fear of doubleness and self-splitting that is the result of the repression of desires, King’s postmodern Gothic documents the fear of self-splitting that is the result of documentation, of the act of writing and of representing the self. If the earlier genre knew what Freud knew—that monsters are the products of our repressed and projected fears and desires (“Uncanny” 241)—then Thad Beaumont knows what Lacanian methodology knows: “Words on paper made him [i.e., Stark, the psychotic other], and words on paper are the only things that will get rid of him” (430).⁵ Like a Lacanian case study, Thad is ripped apart by his placement in the symbolic order.

This incipient madness, this source of great terror, is, as for Lacan, a voice of Otherness that produces flickers of signification but that are unintelligible to the analysand: “Since Freud the unconscious has been a chain of signifiers that somewhere (on another stage, in another scene, he wrote) is repeated, and insists on interfering in the breaks offered it by the effective discourse and the cogitation that it informs” (*Écrits*, “Subversion” 297). That “somewhere,” that inevitable space constructed by the split of self-referentiality that Lacan calls the Other, is the overwhelming alterity from which the King hero suffers his horror. Plaguing Beaumont throughout *The Dark Half* is a sentence written on the wall at the site of each of Stark’s murders: THE SPARROWS ARE FLYING AGAIN. Figuring out who Stark is, how Thad “made” him, and how Thad can “unmake” him (341), means figuring out the precise significance of THE SPARROWS, not merely as signifieds (although actual sparrows do hover, Hitchcock-like, around Thad and George), but as *signifiers*: what precisely is the meaning of the *presence* of the words at the murders, and how can this relation assist Thad in his own relation to his Other? In a similar vein, Danny Torrance reads the writing on the wall—and in his case, significantly, the writing on the *mirror*—but with only enough comprehension to know that he doesn’t comprehend.⁶ The signifier REDRUM is given to him by Tony, the boy in his bathroom mirror who shows him “signs,” the meaning of which he does not know, but hopes he soon will, as “my mommy and daddy are teaching me to read, and I’m trying real hard”

(140). With almost too obvious a precision, King represents Tony as the discourse of the Other, the barely audible, barely intelligible voice that proceeds from the space opened up in the mirror stage. Danny explains an early trance in which he sees Tony: "I was brushing my teeth and I was thinking about my reading. . . . Thinking real hard. And . . . I saw Tony way down in the mirror. He said he had to show me again . . . he was *in* the mirror" (127). While Danny cannot exactly remember what Tony has to show him (the unconscious is, after all, unconscious), he knows it has something to do with "that indecipherable word he had seen in his spirit's mirror" (34), a verbal chain comprised of "Roque. Stroke. Redrum" (125). ("Roque" is the mallet with which his father will try to stroke and redrum/murder him at the end of the novel.) Danny may not know the meaning of his Other's discourse, but he does know its content: "Signs," he tells his doctor. "He's always showing me stupid old *signs*. And I can't read them, hardly ever" (140).

Danny's frustration over the unintelligibility of "stupid old *signs*," like Thad Beaumont's impotence in front of the signifying SPARROWS, indeed like the writer's block that prohibits Jack from writing his play at the Overlook Hotel, proceeds from a castration of verbal acuity that King places at the heart of his Gothic. For Freud, the uncanny often took the form of a bodily dismemberment that could be ultimately located in the castration complex. For Lacan, the phallus that is castrated by one's emergence into the symbolic order is the phallus-as-signifier, the sense of unity and imaginary wholeness that is fallaciously granted by one's deployment of language to define and represent one's self. This symbolic castration appears in King at the dawn of entrance into the symbolic order. The "shining," for example, is usually thought to be the ability to predict the future in a kind of precognition (see Leiber and Warren), but is fundamentally the ability to read the signifiers of another's consciousness (or even unconscious), to do "what mystics and mind readers do" (148). For Danny, "The most terrifying thing about DIVORCE was that he had sensed the word—or concept, or whatever it was that came to him in his understandings—floating around in his . . . parents' heads, sometimes diffuse and relatively distant, sometimes as thick and obscuring and frightening as thunderheads" (27). But more to the point, the foreclosed, castrating signification is a tiptoe through the shadows of *sexual* castration, through the primal scene. Danny explains why he doesn't try to read what his parents are thinking: "It would be like peeking into the bedroom and watching while they're doing the thing that makes babies" (83). And when Wendy, Danny's mother, does catch him shining her, "She suddenly felt more naked than naked, as if she had been caught in an obscene act" (201), later specified as "a masturbatory act" (297). The sexualization of signification continually points to castration as Danny is told by one of the Hotel's ghostly tenants—one of the shined—that "I'm going to eat you up, little boy. And I think I'll start with your plump little *cock*" (334). This cannibalistic specter is not the first one Danny has met: his own father is represented to him in a dream as "a tiger in an alien blue-black jungle. A man-eater" (130). Nor is he the only castrating father in King. Mark Petrie, the boy who knows too much horror lore and fantastic fiction in *'Salem's Lot*, allows that his dead father "would have made a very successful

vampire. Maybe as good as Barlow [the king vampire], in time. He . . . was good at everything he tried. Maybe too good” (382). Moreover, like Jack Torrance, Henry Petrie’s prohibitive child-rearing techniques include specifying that *The Wall Street Journal* is preferable reading to horror schlock. And finally, perhaps the most obvious example is the castrating paternity of George Stark, who is horribly on the mark when he declares that *he* is the father of Thad’s successful novel-writing: “Maybe he knew how to write before I showed up, but *I* was the one who taught *him* how to write stuff people would want to read” (413). The written word *becomes* the father, the *real* turd of Beaumont’s fantasy. And to drive the point home, Stark commits his first murder—of Frederick Clawson, who had threatened to expose Stark as Thad’s pseudonym—by cutting off Clawson’s penis and stuffing it into his mouth. Thus does the King hero undergo the castration of the Name of the Father, the symbolic commandment that orders, punishes, delimits, and frustrates the subject.⁷ Yet ultimately, it is also that Name which catapults the subject into a battle for self-definition and self-assertion, for it is that Name that figures as the evil to be beaten in the novel.

The conventional Gothic double or *Doppelgänger*, then, is for King not a projection of repressed desire so much as a discourse, the discourse of the Other that is, for Lacan, the language that proceeds from castration, from the *Spaltung* (splitting) that plagues every human subject. And it is the nature of Gothic fiction in general that such doubleness comes to represent the force of evil against which the protagonist battles: in King’s case, the discourse of the Other becomes the discourse of the other, the seemingly autonomous George Stark, or the Overlook Hotel which, like Danny, has the ability to read others’ minds and to absorb the emotions and discourse of the people who stay there. But whereas for Lacan, this Elsewhere emits only partially intelligible utterances—“(ça pense). It thinks rather badly, but it does think” (“On a question” 193)—for King’s characters the ability of this Other to think is startling. George Stark’s symbiotic relation to his literary creator allows him to know exactly where Thad is and what he is thinking, so that George can stay one step ahead of him in the murder game, a punishing father at the same time as a literary son. The Overlook Hotel, that Elsewhere of Danny’s greatest fears of abuse, divorce, and paternal violence, swims in the voices of America’s literary and cultural past; it is a veritable “index of the whole post-World War II American character” (187); it is an ex-writer’s school that will commission Danny’s father to write its story like a “large and rambling Samuel Johnson” that had “picked [Jack] to be its Boswell” (282). What is terrifying about the Overlook Hotel is not what is repressed but what is articulated; it is articulation itself. The Hotel echoes with quotations from Eliot’s “Prufrock” and Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death”; it presents to Danny images of its murderous history “like pictures in a book” (87–88).⁸ The Overlook, that evil other, is not only the fear of a violently castrating father, but that of a castrating Father—of the *discourses* of violence that threaten one’s ability to move in a signifying order.

Such articulateness, such jubilantly evil deftness with the symbolic order, suggests a further erosion in the postmodern Gothic—that boundary between the superego and the id that the ego is thought to negotiate. Whereas the topography

of evil in *'Salem's Lot* presents us with an obvious popularizing of Freud's notion of the contest between superego and id⁹—Ben Mears's typewriter standing sentinel in his upstairs room while a vampire sleeps in the basement—in the Overlook Hotel and in Leland (Satan) Gaunt's home in *Needful Things*, the *basements* are full of newspapers, letters, journals, and various other bits of literary information. That the id may be the site of an articulate language, and thus indistinguishable from the superego, is embodied most forcefully in Kurt Barlow, the child-sucking vampire of *'Salem's Lot*, who is both ravenous murderer and "thoughtful" (144), tasteful, urbane, cultured, literate. And as I shall discuss more fully later, Barlow is the perfect double of the novelist Ben Mears. This casting of the monstrous not only as id but also as superego is a familiar psychic image for Jacques Lacan, who writes:

The super-ego is at one and the same time the law and its destruction. As such, it is speech itself, the commandment of law, in so far as nothing more than its root remains. The law is entirely reduced to something, which cannot even be expressed, like the *You must*, which is speech deprived of all its meaning. It is in this sense that the super-ego ends up by being identified with only what is most devastating, most fascinating, in the primitive experiences of the subject. It ends up being identified with what I call *the ferocious figure*, with the figures which we can link to primitive traumas the child has suffered, whatever these are.

In this very special case, we see, embodied there, this function of language, we touch on it in its most reduced form, reduced down to a word whose meaning and significance for the child we are not even able to define, but which nonetheless ties him to the community of mankind. (*Seminar* 102–103)

That "word," emanating from the "ferocious figure," is "vampire," "REDRUM," or "SPARROWS," which alienates the speaking and thinking subject in Stephen King, yet which also comprises the very language of his unconscious, and projects it outward into an other evil, the destruction of which he will dedicate his life to in the service of "the community of mankind."

If the discourse of the Other—the semilucid yet frighteningly literate register of one's fear of language—represents in its projected embodiments the ultimate terror for a King hero, it also represents the possibilities for triumph over the evil agent. King's plots often turn on the recognition that, by *remembering*, by bringing some piece of information from silence into speech, the protagonist will be able to disempower the evil other/Other. In *The Shining*, Tony assures the persecuted Danny that "You will remember what your father forgot" (420). Thad begins his ascendancy over George by realizing that George does not hear the sparrows, and has no idea of their presence. At this revelation, Thad "did not know exactly why, but it was as if his nerve-endings possessed some arcane understanding the rest of him did not have. He felt a moment of wild triumph . . ." (221). This arcane understanding is, in Lacanian terms, a return to the pre-symbolic imaginary of childhood, a period before the castrating submission to the

paternal Law of language (although King's boys are much older than Lacan's mirror-stage child: Danny is learning to read at five, and Thad is learning to write at eleven; yet both are presented as in the process of acquiring the symbolic). What Danny remembers—and what Jack forgot—is that if the caretaker does not let off some steam from the antiquated boiler in the basement, it will explode and destroy the Hotel. And if this danger sounds allegorically symbolic, it is: it parallels other remembrances Danny has as he crouches in the hotel hallway, waiting for his father to find and kill him. Here he is struck by a realization:

He knew. A long and nightmarish masquerade party went on here, and had gone on for years. Little by little a force had accrued, as secret and silent as interest in a bank account. Force, presence, shape, they were all only words and none of them mattered. It wore many masks, but it was all one. Now, somewhere, it was coming for him. It was hiding behind Daddy's face, it was imitating Daddy's voice, it was wearing Daddy's clothes.

But it was not his daddy.

It was not his daddy. (420; emphasis original)

As Danny Torrance faces “the controlling force of the Overlook, in the shape of his father” (421), “the *image* of that dark and stumped form” (422; emphasis added), the “mask . . . [the] false face” (426) that Lacan has called the Name-of-the-Father, Danny remembers what his father forgot, that words are “false faces,” “Everything is a lie and a cheat . . . like the presents they put in the store windows and my daddy says there's nothing in them, no presents, they're just empty boxes” (427–28).¹⁰ Jack's fatherhood, constructed as it is out of prohibitive utterances, is arbitrary, self-justifying, prone to self-destruction if questioned. Indeed, it is what Judith Butler calls “citational” (14). Like the child of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* who can gain power only by killing the figure of power (141–42), Danny remembers what Lacan says the psychotic forgets, that is, that one's placement in the Name-of-the-Father is self-contested, divisive, disempowering, yet arbitrarily maintained and conscripted. Castration, in other words, is a metaphor dangerously potent and debilitating but also arbitrary and silly if identified as such. Hence Lacan could be prescribing for Danny Torrance when he writes, “I will not be surprised if the child . . . throws back (*verwerfe*) the whale of imposture, after piercing . . . the web from one end to the other (*de père en part*)” (and Danny, at the moment of throwing back the whale of imposture, “seemed to be bursting through some thin placental womb” [421]). Then, says Lacan, “the divine voices will make their concert heard in the subject [the shining?] in order to tell the Name-of-the-Father to fuck himself with the Name of God in his backside and to found the Son in his certainty . . .” (*Ecrits*, “On a question” 220–21).

And what of Thad Beaumont's sparrows? In the novel, they are explained as the mythical agents who escort souls from the world of the living to the world of the dead. But they are also the same sparrows that hovered around the young Thad when he learned to write. They are the same sparrows that attacked the hospital the day the boy-writer was rushed to surgery to remove a brain tumor

that turned out to be the body parts of a twin that Thad's fetus had absorbed *in utero*. They are the sparrows who show up in Thad's fugue states (Danny's shinings), when he unconsciously and automatically writes what George is thinking. And they are the sparrows—the writing—that Thad must wrest back from George and claim as his own language as he chants to himself, mantra-like, that the one who writes of the sparrows is “*The one who knows. The one to whom the sparrows belong. . . . I am the knower. I am the owner*” (261; emphasis original). And perhaps, at some level, they are the same avian messengers about which Avital Ronell writes in *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*, when she equates the birds of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* with Gilles Deleuze's notion of Conversation as a mode of discourse that “disrupts the possibility of a simple history because it dispenses with a personal or universal narrative in favor of what could happen to us between ourselves when we expose ourselves to this space, which belongs to neither the one nor the other” (xv–xvi). This deconstruction of the central and centralizing authority of language makes of the finale of *The Dark Half* something other than the rather cheap *deus ex machina* it appears to be. After the final showdown in which Thad refuses to write the novel George would have him write—for George, that Other, that self-referential Name-of-the-Father, can write nothing but his own name and the word “sparrows” over and over again—and after they have had a physical battle in which the weapons are pencils and typewriters, millions of sparrows enter the room, pick the flesh from George's bones, and transport him to the other world. And King is clear as to where these sparrows come from: they are words that Thad writes on a blank sheet of paper (448). They are the signifiers of a discourse that Thad takes back from George, the Other who has spoken him, the father who has taught him how to write. The act of writing that had originally split Thad becomes, like the feminist revision of Lacan,¹¹ the discourse that can re-empower Thad and give him back some agency.

King's Gothic, then, like psychoanalysis, is often about the arbitrariness and illusion of literary paternity and the self-justifying, citational authority of verbal productivity. It is about the signification of the phallus and the fear of its castration. Jack Torrance is English teacher, writer, dramatist, conduit for the voices of American literature, and mostly, *father*: “I have . . . the *pecker*, my boy. Ask your mother” (426). This same Jack Torrance is told by the son to fuck himself with the Name of God in his backside. And the terror that befalls Thad Beaumont comes as a result of Thad's dissolving his alter ego and acquiring the imaginary uniformity and wholeness of fatherhood. When his wife is eight months pregnant with their twins, Thad “kills off” George Stark by publicly admitting that he is a pseudonym: “I decided if I was going to be a father again, I ought to start being myself again, as well” (104), a self that is assumed and generated by writing *as oneself*. Had Beaumont read his Lacan, as King seems to have done, he would have realized the fallacy of such an assumption, and would have understood the agency of *his* letters as he writes (as) George Stark. All authority in language, says Lacan, is established by reference to other language (*Ecrits*, “Subversion” 311); “And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) presents himself as the phallus that fills the gap, he does so as an imposter.” Indeed, we remember, when Danny Torrance exposes his father as a lie and an

empty box, he does so by reference to what “my daddy says”; the son founded in his certainty, as Lacan says, is not so certain at all. Yet the horror of the postmodern Gothic in King is not merely that the law is an imposter—the superego, the Father, discourse itself—but that it is deadly despite its imposture: the power invested in Jack Torrance by his intelligence and his pecker, the power invested in Stark by the popularity of his readership, is a power licensed to kill. As Lacan says, “there is nothing false about the Law itself, or about him who assumes its authority” (*Ecrits*, “Subversion” 311).

2. SHINING THE PHALLUS

“Say, you really are a college fella, aren’t you? Talk just like a book. I admire that, as long as the fella ain’t one of them fairy-boys. Lots of em are. You know who stirred up those college riots a few years ago? The hommasexshuls, that’s who. They get frustrated an have to cut loose. Comin out of the closet, they call it.”

Stephen King, *The Shining* 21

[P]hilosophy, no matter how deconstructive, remains ‘discursive,’ whereas Lacan’s writing is ‘poetic’: allusive, contradictory. The ladies’ man is an expert at flirtation. Unlike the man’s man, philosopher or hunter, who spends his time with serious, frank confrontation, the ladies’ man is always embroiled in coquetry: his words necessarily and erotically ambiguous. The ladies’ man is looked at askance by the ‘real’ man who suspects the flirt of effeminacy.

Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction* (35)

Horror in Stephen King is epistemological, but its epistemology is self-contested: on the one hand, the subject fears the phallus, the castrating Father who denies the son agency, yet on the other hand, he nostalgically pines for the phallus, the articulateness and presence that can overthrow the Father. It is this pining for the phallus that, as my quotation from Jane Gallop illustrates, offers us access to another of those phobic pressure points, those cultural anxieties that King says must be laid bare in the successful horror story. Such a pressure point is blurted out by the Overlook’s summer caretaker, Watson, in my first epigraph above. For just as the literate is equated with the horrific in King, so is it repeatedly associated with the homosexual. Vampire extraordinaire Kurt Barlow’s “face was strong and intelligent and handsome in a sharp, forbidding sort of way—yet, as the light shifted, it seemed almost effeminate” (*Salem’s*, 352); indeed, he keeps his hair “swept back from his high, waxy forehead like one of those fag concert pianists” (144). The significance of this effeminacy is painfully obvious to the town of ‘Salem’s Lot: the victims of the vampire attacks are all young boys, boys like Danny and Ralph Glick who knew “There were no ghosts, but there *were* preeverts” (71), “There were preeverts everywhere” (70), boys who then fall victim to the dandiacal, urbane, fancily dressed Barlow and his “partner,” Straker. And

in case we should not get the point about the dangers of such finely cultured, foreign men, delivery men Hank and Royal spell out the *real* fear plaguing 'Salem's Lot:

[Hank] looked up toward the Marsten House, which was dark and shuttered tonight. "I don't like goin' up there, and I ain't afraid to say so. If there was ever a haunted house, that's it. Those guys must be crazy tryin' to live there. Probably queer for each other anyway."

"Like those fag interior decorators," Royal agreed. "Probably trying to turn it into a showplace." (86)

The phrase "queer for each other," echoed on page 142, becomes realized in the ghostly voices of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*. Harry Derwent, the hotel's erstwhile owner, is "AC/DC, you know," and during the spectral masquerade party that gradually takes over the hotel and the Torrances' lives, Derwent coyly pursues Roger, the man in the dog suit. Roger "is only DC," the voices tell Jack. "He spent a weekend with Harry in Cuba once . . . oh, *months* ago. Now he follows Harry everywhere, wagging his little tail behind him" (347). And it is this same Roger who represents to Danny the threat of castration ("I'm going to eat you up, little boy. And I think I'll start with your plump little *cock*") as he equates Danny with his ex-lover Harry. If Danny and the boys in 'Salem's Lot are on the verge of adulthood and the identification with masculinity, the terror is not only, as Freud would have it, the father's castration: nor is this fear of castration, as Lacan would argue, merely the fear of verbal prohibition. Rather, the fear is specifically *homoerotic* in its projection. Like the homosexual in these novels, the protagonist demonstrates a desire for verbal acuity that is coded queer. The gay man, like the King hero, both "has" a phallus and wants one. Thus I want now to turn to the second part of my thesis and to suggest that Stephen King's postmodern Gothic can be understood not only with reference to the discourses of Lacan, but also in the way those discourses have manifested a certain kind of gender panic in America after Stonewall.¹²

Kurt Barlow's homosexuality may signal rural Maine's fear of pederastic invasion by gay men whose visibility has so markedly increased since Stonewall,¹³ but it also puts him (like Jacques Lacan) in a history that equates urbanity with effeminacy—one that even sees urbanity as the *cause* of effeminacy. As Peter Schwenger has argued, men's relationship to the word has often been at best ambivalent: on the one hand, language is a mode of self-constitution and self-assertion that characterizes a masculine tradition of letters and which, up to and including Lacan, has shored up that tradition by excluding woman from it, by representing her as lack. But on the other hand (and this is Schwenger's point), the very self-referentiality of language forces the seemingly autonomous male into a self-reflection and internal confusion that is coded feminine. Man's world is (de)constructed by woman's word. And in Stephen King's New England culture, this "effeminizing" is equated with the homoerotic: Jack Griffen of 'Salem's Lot is a "bookworm, Daddy's pet" (35), while Mark Petrie is a "four-eyes queer boy" accused of a proclivity to "suck the old hairy root" (46); Ben Mears is, ac-

cordova to Ann Norton, no fitting suitor for her daughter Susan because he is a “sissy boy” (191) whose novel *Air Dance* contains a “homosexual rape scene in the prison section,” “Boys getting together with boys” (21)—although why Ben-as-sissy should then be seen as a sexual threat to the daughter is not a topic upon which Ann chooses to dilate. Nor is Ben naive about the depth of suspicion attending unmarried, articulate men: “Just the fact that you’re not married is apt to make [the community] believe you’ve got a screw loose,” he warns Matthew Burke, English teacher and fellow vampire-hunter, as they contemplate making public their theory that ‘Salem’s Lot is infested with vampires. “And what backup can I give you? . . . [T]hey would just say I was an outsider. They would even get around to telling each other we were a couple of queers and this was the way we got our kicks” (176). And Ben has good reason to worry, for if it is significant that Barlow has an “almost effeminate” face (352) with “oddly virile slashes of iron gray” in his hair (144), then it must upset Ben to have a “sensitive” face on which “Only his hair seemed virile in the traditional sense” (195).¹⁴ Apparently there may be more than one couple of queers in ‘Salem’s Lot. And there is at least one in *The Dark Half*. Despite Thad’s heterosexual credentials embodied in his twin babies, the local gravedigger imagines him pictured in a magazine “stark naked”—pun intended?—“with your old hog-leg stuck up a Great Dane’s poop-chute” (45); and George Romero’s film version of *The Dark Half* indicates that Beaumont’s novels prior to *George Stark* are about “yuppies and faggots.” Indeed it would seem that, at some level, to play with words is to play with the phallus.

Thus it is the phallus—authorial and sexual—whose emergence troubles the heroes of King’s postmodern Gothic. Traditionally, the Gothic has been understood as the register of repressed desires, as unveiling that “which ought to have remained hidden,” as Freud says (“Uncanny” 241), and what constitutes the social order by virtue of the fact that it remains hidden. For Lacan, what remains hidden that constitutes order is precisely the phallus, in that it is the phallus-as-signifier of identity, wholeness, and unity that unconsciously structures the human subject and authorizes his relations with others.¹⁵ King’s Gothic, however, unveils the phallus and brings it out of the closet in terrifying ways. Liz Beaumont jokingly remembers that, in Thad’s writing history, “George Stark was there all along. I’d seen signs of him in some of the unfinished stuff that Thad did from time to time. It was just a case of getting him to come out of the closet” (23). This closet, moreover, is not simply that of an alter ego or a projected Other; it is the very nature of the phallic signifier itself. As Thad begins to write, “The words as individual units began to disappear. Characters who were stilted and lifeless began to limber up, as if he had kept them in some small closet overnight and they had to loosen their muscles before they could begin their complicated dances” (264). These stilted and lifeless characters are, of course, both the stock personages of Gothic convention and the material letters of words themselves: both selves and signifiers. And this indulgence of the phallus, this bringing out of the male desire to indulge the phallus of and with an other man, this having the penis and wanting the phallus, is accompanied by no small pleasure. As George and Thad are brought together in their writing showdown, we sense

the homoerotic *jouissance* that *'Salem's Lot* makes horribly vampiric: "For a moment—and it was only a moment—there was a sensation of *two* hands grasping two writing instruments. The feeling was too clear, too real, to be anything *but* real . . . a rush quicker and more satisfying than even the most powerful orgasm" (284). And for Thad, this need to write with George, to share the pleasure of his instrument, is like a "trance," a "harsh imperative; there was something which needed to be written, and he could feel his whole body yelling at him to get to it, do it, get it done. . . . This itch seemed to be emanating from a place deep in his mind" (317). That place, obviously, is where the phallus lies veiled, and the desire to unveil it is both a desire for verbal self-mastery and a homoerotic desire, a desire for the phallus of the other.

Of all King's novels, *The Dark Half* inscribes most vividly the ambivalence toward the phallus that Lacan himself outlines in the (straight male) writer but which he does not, it seems, choose to explore completely. Lacan, as we all know, was adamant that "the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier" (*Ecrits*, "Signification" 285). Moreover, Lacan rejects the tendency to psychologize or biologize this signifier: "the phallus is not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes" (*Ecrits* "Signification" 285). For Jane Gallop, this prioritizing of negatives—the phallus is not this, and it is even less that—opens up a space to read the phallus as all of the above, and thereby allows her to reclaim the phallic clitoris as an authorizing symbol of women's productivity (*Reading* 136).¹⁶ And while such contestation within Lacan might be used to empower feminism to "play *on* the phallic economy rather than *to* it," as Sue-Ellen Case writes ("Toward" 300; emphasis added), it might also be used to queer both Lacan's and King's texts. For Lacan's dismissal of the phallus *as* penis—and thus the desire for the phallus as the desire for the penis—is contradicted in "The signification of the phallus" in his justification of the privilege accorded to the symbol: "It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation" (*Ecrits*, "Signification" 287). This is worth considering, for if the phallus-as-signifier displaces/ replaces the penis-as-organ, it also continually *signifies* the presence of—or the desire for—the penis as organ. While the phallus-as-signifier in Lacan does not equal the penis, nor can it ever be divested of the penis; it must always signify the penis at the same time it transcends it. Language, the phallus-as-signifier, has it both ways (like Harry Derwent of *The Shining*), and its AC/DC nature troubles the straight male writer in that writing itself, as Thad Beaumont knows, is the quest for "*passing some sort of baton*" (437), for a phallic play that is pleasurable, homoerotic.

What Lacan might be suggesting here—and what Michael Warner reads in Lacan’s first seminar on narcissism (202)—is that male heterosexuality does not look all that different from male homosexuality, and precisely because of the elusiveness of the ever-reified, ever-desired phallus. For Lacan, male heterosexuality is distinguished from homosexuality “by reference to the function of the phallus” (*Ecrits*, “Signification” 289). Straight men, Lacan opines, seek in the woman the mirror image of their own phallus, for it is the originary desire of the boy to be the phallus his mother lacks, and so to want the woman is to want to be that phallus, the phallus she can never *be* because she can never *have* it. The gay man, conversely, identifies with the mother’s lack of the phallus and contents himself with being the phallus/woman that the straight man desires (and in Schreber’s case, homosexuality was the symptom of desiring to be the bride/phallus for God by being penetrated by other men). The “perversion” of gayness for psychoanalysis, then, is the insistence on seeing the phallus not as Phallus but as penis, as unveiling the phallus and desiring it *as* penis, as the dedication to being the other man’s Other (*Ecrits*, “Subversion” 322). But as *Ecrits* continually makes clear, the Otherness that is opened up by the phallic repression and splitting constitutes the rupture of *all* identity, so that the straight man’s identification with the woman-as-phallus becomes volatile and embattled: if the man does not have the phallus, then it is he who is inadequate, for she cannot be expected to give him what she herself does not have. As John P. Muller and William J. Richardson explain, “the man must avoid impotence if he is to remain busy being the phallus for women, but he must repress his own desire that the woman be the phallus for him in his never-ending quest for the impossible woman-as-phallus” (353). The crisis in Lacanian heterosexual masculinity, then, is that the man both has the phallus(-as-penis) and desires the phallus(-as-woman) in a display that risks effeminizing him. He must seek the confirmation of his phallic power by identifying with the woman who desires him, and desires him *for his penis*. And this, for Lacan, is the “comedy” of gender: heterosexual masculinity is predicated on desiring a phallus while already having one.

Which brings us back to Stephen King. Although Ben Mears of *Salem’s Lot* suspects that the town sees writers as “either faggots or bull-studs” (106), we might now effect a grammatical shift of our own to “faggots *as* bull-studs,” or more precisely, “bull-studs *as* faggots.” For the prowess of phallic signification that characterizes the writer in this novel, as in King in general, also characterizes the villainous vampire, the highly cultured Other who demonstrates the straight author’s ambivalence to the phallus. And this ambivalence, I want to conclude by arguing, characterizes a particularly postmodern Gothic terrorism. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, homosexual panic in the Enlightenment Gothic took the form of a “wildly dichotomous play around solipsism and intersubjectivity” in which the “transmutability of the intrapsychic with the intersubjective” allowed one man’s mind to be known by another’s, resulting in “an epistemologically indissoluble clench of will and desire” (186–87). For Sedgwick, one man invades another man’s space in a way that suggests the terrors of phallic intrusion. In that tradition is Dick Hallorann of *The Shining*, who shines Jack Torrance thus: “He had probed at the boy’s father and he just didn’t know. . . .

Poking at Danny's father had been . . . strange, as if Jack Torrance had something—*something*—that he was hiding. Or something he was holding in so deeply submerged in himself that it was impossible to get to" (88). And this "probing," this "poking," we remember, is a verbal phenomenon: the shining is the ability to read the signifiers of the other's consciousness. What Jack is hiding is not a classic case of homosexual panic but a postmodern one—an ambivalent desire for and rejection of the phallus, for the language of his paternal and cultural past, for the language of masculinity. Similarly, when Thad Beaumont and George Stark awake from their own (intra)psychic clench in which they fall asleep and write together, King describes the "fugue state" thus:

Stark could vaguely remember dreaming that Thad was with him, in his bed—they were talking together, whispering together, and at first this had seemed both pleasant and oddly comforting—like talking to your brother after lights out.

Except they were doing more than *talking*, weren't they?

What they had been doing was *exchanging secrets* . . . or, rather, Thad was asking him questions and Stark found himself answering. It was *pleasant* to answer, it was *comforting* to answer. But it was also alarming. (282; emphasis and ellipsis original)

Asking and answering questions here is "more than talking" only in the sense that the exchange of signifiers—the exchange of the phallus—is both pleasant and alarming. It marks a postmodern Gothic homosexual panic, the elements of which are specifically discursive. To speak, to write, to engage the phallus with/ of another man is alarming, frightening, invasive. But through a queer lens, it is also comforting, even pleasant.

When Father Callahan of *'Salem's Lot* catalogues the small skirmishes that constitute the (evil) of the contemporary world as opposed to the EVIL of the ancient one, he employs a useful and instructive diction: "The new priests had theirs [e.g. evils]: racial discrimination, women's liberation, even gay liberation" (150). The qualifier "even" here performs the ideological work of designating the greatest horror to hit the town of *'Salem's Lot*. But it also indicates the queer textuality of these novels; it unveils Stephen King's Phallus. As Lacan reminds us, human needs are made public by demand—by articulating them in discourse—but that demand inaugurates a deeper desire, in that language alienates the subject's needs at the same time that it articulates them. This desire, I have tried to show, arises in Stephen King's authors and speaking subjects who must simultaneously acquire place in the symbolic order and reject that order as evil. But as Lacan points out, discourse *itself* is also a demand, in that it requires the attention and recognition of the other who is engaged (or forced) to listen.¹⁷ It is perhaps this demand, then, that is embodied in subjects as diverse as Roger the Dog Man, Kurt Barlow, and Thad Beaumont who speak in an America marked "even" by gay liberation. If discourse invokes a desire *for* the phallus even (or especially) among subjects who *have* a phallus, then the demands of gay men since Stone-wall simply throw into high relief what may be worrying Stephen King's authors.

To speak to other men is necessary to constitute the American social order; but it may also demand an exchange of the phallus whose significance—since Lacan, since Stonewall—cannot be divested of the image of the penis. And the implications of this homoerotic demand are alarming: “I be buggered if he ain’t hypnotizin me,” thinks one of Barlow’s victims (146). The ironies here are manifold, for to be hypnotized by one of Stephen King’s vampires is to be buggered, and what is most alarming is that such hypnotic demand can be *jouissance*, a pleasure which, like the vampire’s bite on the male neck, is “as sweet as silver, as green as still waters at dark fathoms” (146).¹⁸

ENDNOTES

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1. While the three writers here mentioned will be the focus of this essay, they are only a fraction of the writers in distress in King’s fiction. Others include, from the novels, Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone*, Paul Sheldon in *Misery*, Bill Denbrough in *IT*, and Jim Gardiner in *The Tommyknockers*; and from the short stories, Jim Norman in “Sometimes They Come Back” (from *Night Shift*), Richard Hagstrom in “Word Processor of the Gods” (from *Skeleton Crew*), Mortimer Rainey in “Secret Window, Secret Garden” and Sam Peebles in “The Library Policeman” (both from *Four Past Midnight*). The “gunslinger” on his way to the Dark Tower in the trilogy of the same name is, of course, Roland.
2. Other boys who betray King’s obsession with entrance into language are Tad Trenton of *Cujo*, Gage Creed in *Pet Sematary*, and the young Bill Denbrough in *IT*.
3. As I will be quoting from a number of Lacan essays in *Ecrits*, I will include a parenthetical citation of each chapter title in my text. Full citation information can be found in the Works Cited.
4. In “On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis,” Lacan writes:

That Freud, in his essay of interpretation of the Schreber case, which is read so badly that it is usually reduced to the rehashings that followed, uses the form of a grammatical deduction in order to present the switching of the relation to the other in psychosis, namely, the different ways of denying the proposition, ‘I love him’, from which it follows that this negative judgement is structured in two stages: the first, the reversal of the value of the verb (‘I hate him’), or inversion of the gender of the agent or object (‘It is not I’ or ‘It is not him, but her’—or inversely); the second, an interversion of subjects (‘He hates me’, ‘It is she he loves’, ‘It is she who loves me’)—the logical problems formally involved in this deduction have retained no one’s interest. (188)
5. One is reminded here of another male author in distress, Philip Roth. In *My Life as a Man*, Roth depicts the swirling mixture of fiction and autobiography as it is employed by Peter Tarnopol, the novel’s narrator and alleged author. Central to the contest between fiction and “truth” in defining experience is his relation to Maureen, the dead Muse of the narrative from whom he must extricate himself. And significantly, he calls on fiction to do this: “Literature got me into this and literature is gonna have to get me out” (174). Like Thad’s relation to George, Tarnopol’s desire for Maureen is both aesthetically constructed and horribly cloying.
6. King borrows this phenomenon, with important changes, from one of his favorite novels, Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. In this novel Eleanor Vance is terrorized by the house writing her name mysteriously on its wall.

7. While King is most concerned with the placement of boys in this castrating system, his first published novel, *Carrie*, depicts a girl's version of the same phenomenon. Carrie's bodily functions—her ability to menstruate—have been retarded by the puritan Father, the discourses of Jonathan Edwards and *The Common Book of Prayer*. This repression, furthermore, is instituted by the phallic mother Margaret who embodies and promulgates this voice (and is not the only phallic mother in King: see Annie Wilkes in *Misery*). Significantly, the repressed returns in the famous shower of pig's blood dumped on Carrie at the prom, and in the blood bath she then initiates. Carrie wreaks on the town the same textually rooted apocalypse that repressed her in the first place.
8. For Don Herron, such literary borrowings betray King's lack of originality and inventiveness, and at their worst almost constitute plagiarism (161). While Herron's source studies are useful, he ignores what for me is the heart of the problem in King's allusions: the placement of the American writer in the history of American fiction. King's borrowings, in other words, perform a certain problem, an anxiety of influence, more than simply relying on other people's ideas.
9. Such a clear contest between civilization and barbarity has its topographical beginnings in the British Gothic's use of England as the site of culture, decorum, and moral order as opposed to the Catholic countries—Italy, Spain, France—as the sites of persecution, greed, and lust.
10. Danny is not the only person to know what Jack doesn't about the power of language. George Hatfield was a top student on Jack's debating team at his old school in Stovington, Vermont. However, when George got nervous, he allegedly stuttered, a debator's flaw that infuriates Jack. (This stutter, incidentally, is probably Jack's fantasy.) When Jack finally rigs a competition and throws George off the team, the victimized student accuses him of cheating, and tells him: "You huh-hate me b-because you nuh-nuh-nuh-know . . . you know . . . nuh-nuh" (113). Jack cannot imagine what George thinks he knows, but clearly it is that George is much smarter and more articulate than he—not to mention sexier and more successful with women—and that Jack can throw him off the team simply because he has the power to do so. What George knows—and Jack does not—is that power, here the power to decide what is proper speech, a power that Jack reiterates when he *commands* Danny not to stutter—is wielded only by those who are arbitrarily granted it.
11. For the most complete explication of how Lacan can be employed for feminist politics and poetics, see Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* and *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*.
12. After this essay had gone to press, I discovered Douglas Keesey's very provocative article, "The Face of Mr. Flip': Homophobia in the Horror of Stephen King." Keesey and I agree on many of the ways King's characters manifest the subtleties of homosexual panic, but while Keesey sees such panic to arise out of social interactions, I find King's interests to be psycholinguistic.
13. And King makes clear what real, worldly homophobia looks like. In the midst of the panic generated by the presence of two queer men who, by definition, eat little boys, King drops in this significant detail: "At quarter to ten on this Saturday night, two [hospital] attendants were wheeling in the sheet-covered body of a young homosexual who had been shot in a downtown bar" (238). This passage is striking not only for the way it parallels the homophobia in the novel, but also for the way it juxtaposes the wild paranoia of queer vampires with the awareness of real gay persecution.
14. It certainly upsets Susan Norton as she lies beside the sleeping Ben. "Sensitive" is her term, and it invites a specifically verbal problem:

Sissy boy, her mother had called him, and Susan could see how she might have gotten that idea. His features were strong but sensitive (she wished there was a better word than "sensitive"; that was the word you used to describe the local librarian who wrote stilted Spenserian sonnets to daffodils in his spare time; but it was the only word that fit.) (195)
15. In "The signification of the phallus," Lacan writes that the phallus "can play its role only when

- veiled, that is to say, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier" (288).
16. Gallop notes Lacan's insistence that the phallus is gender-neutral, and points to the original 1966 edition of *Ecrits* in which the phallus is preceded by the feminine "la."
 17. In "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis," Lacan says, "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (58). This finding of meaning in the other is articulated through demand which, according to "The signification of the phallus," operates thus: "Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is a demand of a presence or of an absence . . ." (286).
 18. For a specifically lesbian interpretation of the vampire tale, see Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire."

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