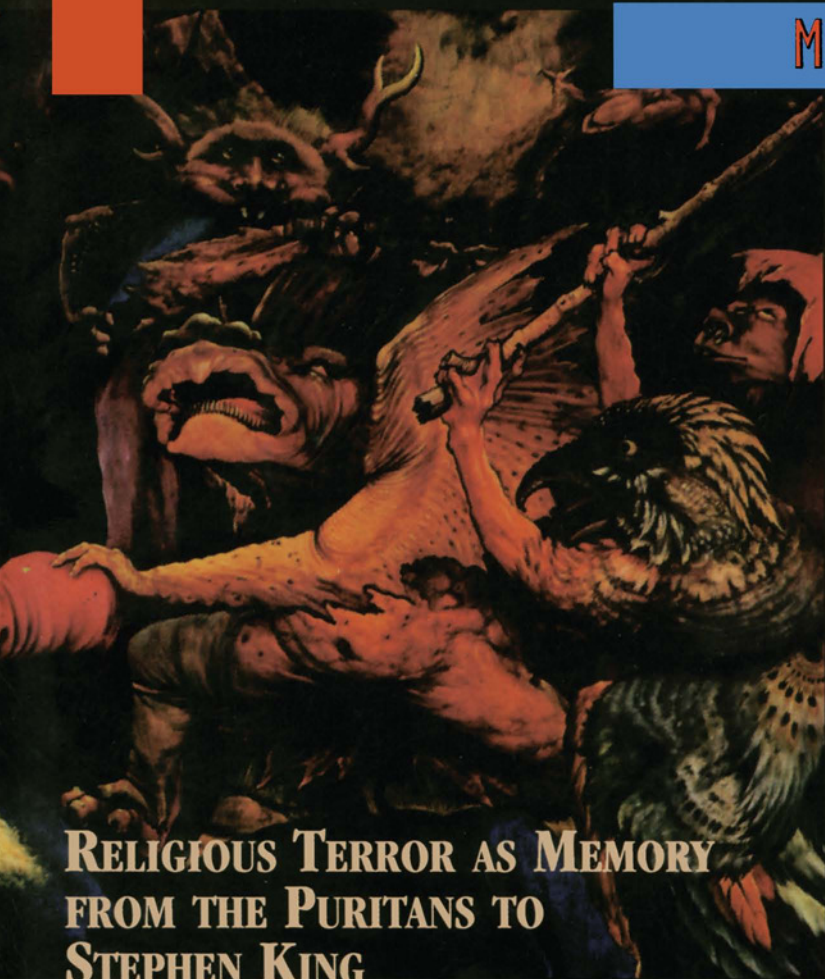


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MAPS OF

HEAVEN

MAPS OF



RELIGIOUS TERROR AS MEMORY
FROM THE PURITANS TO
STEPHEN KING

EDWARD J.
INGEBRETSEN, S.J.

HELL

Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell

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Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell

*Religious Terror as Memory
from the Puritans to Stephen King*



Edward J. Ingebretsen, S.J.

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*Dedicated to my sisters Yvonne and Carol
and my brother, Charles:*

Love to them they love.

*and to my brothers in the Society of Jesus
who take away the terror*

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who have discussed, read, advised, argued with me, and who in small and large ways helped to make this a better book. In particular I wish to acknowledge John Glavin for his initial guidance in this project and John Hirsh for his encouragement and advice throughout.

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Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allows most people to cope with these twin specters."

(Sontag, *"The Imagination of Disaster,"* p. 224)

"The American romancer's concern with the deeper art is synonymous with his search for the buried life; and he is of necessity an evoker of ghosts and a resurrector of dead bodies."

(Joel Porte, *The Romance in America*, p. 97)

"Our fiction is not merely a flight from the physical data of the actual world . . . It is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, non-realistic and negative, sadist, and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque. . . .

(Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 29)

PROLOGUE

Last Things First: A Dante-esque Digression

*And now for love you vengeance prove,
it is an equal thing.*

*Your waxing worse, hath stopped the course
of wonted clemency:*

*Mercy refused, and grace misused,
call for severity.*

—“THE DAY OF DOOM,” MILLER, P. 138



I propose to show how a map of Heaven could only be constructed, as it were, by inversion, beginning with Hell. But first a diversion to another time and to another country, since to explore heavenly maps I must talk about endings, the final things. However, diversions, as the word implies, can be entertaining, and entertaining diversions—especially about Final Things—are, after all, my subject.

The perennial, always-returning subject of American fantasy is the Divine—hidden and disguised, it is true, but, that’s why its search is called a *diversion*, since we are deflected from it at every turn. The Divine is that which must be revealed, the secret hidden away till the end of time. Indeed, the Divine’s uncovering *will be* the end of time. After all, what are the diverting and entertaining qualities of the Apocalypse, if not the grammar by which the Sacred shall be discovered, (recovered, uncovered) and written in time?

Yet it needs to be remembered that the Apocalypse does not come at the *end* of time, as is conventionally thought. Its terror lies behind, not ahead. Even our foundational narratives tell us this. The Book of Genesis, that first map of western culture, makes it

clear that the terror we anticipate has already been experienced, at that moment in the garden when immortality and mortality first intersected, before they went their separate/separating ways. Human drama begins at the East Gate, where the messenger (*angelos*) with the flaming sword compelled the fictive couple out of *U-topos* (no place) and into time: "The world was all before them, where to choose/Their place of rest, and Providence their guide." In that first diversion into topography was the promise of narrative. And in that beginning, then, was the word, the terror. And while the telling of origins in Genesis provides the metaphor of apocalypse, Milton made it myth, a necessary part of the popular iconography of the terrible. For Milton, of course, the apocalyptic *figura* was an actual fact. He had seen the angel's admonitory sword in the death of King Charles and in the Interregnum's subsequent collapse of social hierarchies. He had lived through the terrible revelation and witnessed the passing of the "old heav'ns and earth." So how better than as social chaos to figure the war in heaven? In *Paradise Lost*, Milton captured the anxieties of cultural displacement, describing first the revelation of transgression; then the cost of seeing god's awe-ful face; and, finally, the long search for haven. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

In the beginning, then, all the themes and motives of a Gothic novel were there: scrutiny, expulsion, dispossession; grace and fate; transgression and expiation: the first shock of recognition at the perils of being chosen. There would be others. Like Milton's Adam and Eve, we've been wondering ever since, wandering in the terrors and terrains of history. Eternally seeking return, we try to divine the Divine, the Absent(ing) Father, our trial and expiation. Commemoration is in our blood; ritual, the fate of those lost in time.¹ And yes, the Divine is *still* diverting. The secret "sits in the center and knows" (see Frost, "The Secret Sits") while we stand around and suppose. The secret enchains us; enchants. In His absence you will know Him.

1. In "In Horror Movies, Some Things Are Sacred," Leonard Wolf observes "The great frenzies of chaos, creation, disobedience, disaster, solitude and evil which have been rendered vague or bland in the well-bred church and synagogue services . . . are restored to their terrifying proportions in the half-light of the movie theaters. . . . These are the ways in which the most representative myths of the horror film genre are able to strike chords of religious feeling." (p. 19) *The New York Times Arts and Leisure*, Sunday, Apr. 4, 1976, pp. 1, 19.

PREFACE

The Semiotics of Terror

... fantasy structures are given by a society as maps ... by which a lost audience can find its way.

—JAMES TWITCHELL, *DREADFUL PLEASURES*, p. 87.

You must look through the surface of American art, and see the inner diabolism of the symbolic meaning.

—D. H. LAWRENCE¹

... all ghost stories presupposed a life after death ... no matter how scary the ghosts are, isn't that optimistic?

—STEPHEN KING²



Introduction

There are apparently two books in every American household—one of them is the Bible and the other one is probably by Stephen King.

—CLIVE BARKER³

At the core of American cultic memory is a rhetoric shared by colonial theological text, civic ritual, and contemporary pulp horror formula. This rhetoric is partly habit, partly pragmatic social strategy: the duty of remembering the Holy, writing it into society as transcendent origin and authority. Traditionally, however, to speak of the Holy is to enter a realm of experience that could not be enunciated within earthly grammars; speaking the Holy, therefore, is to invoke the limits of human comprehension.

In addition, the history of religion shows that to speak the Divine is to invoke a metaphysics of uncertainty: God's (or the gods') eye; scrutiny and judgment from on high; human transgression and expiation. In short, to remember the Holy is to acknowledge its horror as well.

This study attempts to discover the connections that exist between the rhetorics of religious terror and the consumerist technologies of horror. I explore, that is, how a theological map of Heaven—a metaphysics—almost by necessity produced its inverse companion, a politically useful map of Hell. I argue that the religious imperatives woven into the fabric of American culture keep its citizenry dutiful during the day and frightened at night. These narratives take many forms, and are active still as polemics, sermons, admonishings. The communal rites of the religious imagination, ill-at-ease with itself, are replayed through misanthropic populist fantasies such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Moral Majority; more indirectly and diffusely, their politics inform the ostensibly nonpolitical genre of fantasy.⁴

I argue that the habit of religious uncertainty (the threat of mystical self-loss, otherwise understood as the promise of conversion and change) articulates and focuses aspects of the American imagination that otherwise remain opaque and unreadable; and further, that the pieties of a traditional American religious discourse, inverted and debased, drive a fertile tradition of dark fantasy.⁵ This then is the paradox situating this study: as mystics from Moses to Calvin understood, God's awe-ful face is complex and ambiguous, awful to behold, at once a dreadful promise as well as terrible threat—as the confusing amalgam of rapture and apocalypse in popular rhetoric suggests. Further, as Calvin the social theorist knew, God's awfulness is politically useful in forming a social order. Terror, then, in the name of religion, whether invoked as positive action or negative threat, functions as an epistemology as well as a semiotics—it is a way of knowing as well as a rite of communal identity.

Nor were the uses of terror lost upon those who organized the Puritan Migration in 1630. One of my themes is that this renegade theological movement begot a separatist political fantasy off a presumptively “new” land, and then, deeply suspicious of its unauthorized and possibly illegal action, distanced itself from

this first transgressive ambiguity by justifying it in a rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and chosenness. The social order established by this movement was predicated upon a holy turn of heart, a return to God involving a basic and radical self-revision. And while the language of conversion was private, nonetheless conversion was public in its effects, as over time the language of the *polis* gradually subsumed the language of God. Consequently, conversion came to embody complex political, even eschatological meanings, as a people hungry for righteousness found themselves adrift between continents, adrift between civic and theological orders. Wavering between the promise of conversion and the implicit threat of apocalypse, they found themselves lost between hope of the Promised Land and threat of dispossession and spiritual landlessness.

History, however, is rarely kind to rhetorics of the ideal, and as declension and perceived failure beset the New England social order, a similar metamorphosis occurred in its institutional rhetorics. As conversion—*metanoia*—was the religious motivation in the first place, change and metamorphosis of various kinds became the great fear, a shadowy threat articulated in sermon and text as a fear of declension, slippage, or falling away. Original visions of inheritance—theo-national dreams of a new Heaven and Earth, for instance—slipped, slid, coalesced, and mixed with less-clear fears of apocalyptic Hell and civil dispossession. Conversion, it was seen, had another face, an unholy metamorphosis covering a range of social distresses.⁶ From this original theological metaphor, I argue, derive the texts of horrific conversion, declension and unwanted metamorphosis commonly gathered under the rubric of American Gothic: dark tales of psychic humiliations, collapsing identities, enslavements, enticements, spontaneous self-annihilations; tales of seduction, scrutiny, and moral bondage—all eroticized, because a culture enthralled by the spirit nonetheless found that while it could repudiate carnal bodies, it could not escape the gravity of their desires.⁷

Linking religious discourse to the transgressive complexities and ideological erasures of fantasy texts may seem, at first sight, surprising. Nonetheless, the alignment of the rhetorics of theology and entertainment is not a recent marketing development, nor merely an exchange of God for gore. The errand into the wilder-

ness and the errand into the movie theaters are, and have been, long-time associates. To anticipate my argument a bit, I cite Daniel B. Shea who makes the point that “Puritan spiritual narratives” compare in strategy with current “entertainment media” (*Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, p. 92); both are moralistic, spectacular, and confessional. Indeed, our word for the ephemera of social diversion—entertainment—has a complex and possibly lethal theological past. In Salem, for example, witches were brought to trial charged with “entertaining Satan.” Even Cotton Mather, that great architect of Puritan interiority, understood the almost necessary association of the Holy and the Horrible, the Deity and the Demonic.

From the very beginning, then, religious habits of imagining the New World spilled messily into other discourses, shadowing everything from its theology to politics. The chapters of this study seek to show how a geo-national metaphysics of uncertainty, deriving ultimately from a tradition of religious eschatology, bred fantasies of nostalgic moralism on the one hand and moralistic, horrid fantasies on the other. The deflective energies of a largely forgotten metaphysical history live on, not only in churches, but in a myriad other centers of displaced worship. Endlessly reappropriated and refigured, commodified for imaginative export, as it were, a habit of religious nationalism provides a compendium of useful policies and civic strategies—producing, on the one hand, technologies of social control (methodologies of witch detection, for one) and, on the other, systems for social diversion and distraction (movies *about* witches, for instance). “Distraction” and “diversion”—the words are significant for what they portend. What are we being distracted or diverted from? Further, a rhetoric of the godly (moralism) would be invoked to manage human societies (Winthrop through Falwell, for instance), while a “theology” of the demonic would be arrayed to display, explain, and perhaps argue the Almighty (Edwards, in particular). Lastly, as Max Weber has famously argued, the language of the Holy has been used to encourage personal discipline in the interests of civic zeal—although as Foucault observes, that same rhetoric effaced the line between public and private altogether, rendering private and interior public and spectacular by means of a rhetoric of confession and communal revelation.⁸

At least two important consequences followed from such a confusion of political and theological grammars. First, in this society of Revelation and imminent Apocalypse, God would inevitably become linked to the *monstrum*—the divine warning and remonstrance. Second, in this order one's soul was, in a manner of speaking, potentially monstrous and always on display; the prospects of its conversion and mystical effacement in God would always be a spectacle. Thus, two early rites of the religious imagination, scrutiny and confession, would become, in time, performance and voyeurism. A need to tell and expose begot a need to watch.⁹ In the secularization of the religious imagination, an epistemology of uncertainty would remain, functioning as popular constraint and as boundary and limit of the civil (and in some cases uncivil) imagination. In the gradual evacuation of theological content, only the forms of religious authority survived, leaving a frisson of terror as emotional trace to mark where the Sublime once had been. Out of the Holy would be born the Horrible.

In *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, Victor Sage argues that the horror genre "is not a literary genre, in the narrow sense, at all. It is a cultural response, which implies a broad series of relationships with the whole of the culture in which it is produced" (p. xiii).¹⁰ In *Dreadful Pleasures*, James Twitchell concurs: "Essentially, horror has little to do with fright; it has more to do with laying down the rules of socialization . . ." (p. 66).¹¹ Traditionally much the same could be said for theologies, as well, which, in their pursuit of God always have at least one eye turned earthward. Thus, to remember the Holy as divine principle is in effect to remember, and in some cases to set, boundaries or limits beyond which the human does not or can not go. In American theological practice, for instance, the rhetoric of religious hierarchy and conformity found in John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" complements Cotton Mather's language of religious grotesquery in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Jointly they invoke a metaphysics of transcendent scrutiny (Judgment) that operates in mundane and earthly ways as communal admonishment and fraternal correction. These religious rhetorics establish civic rituals which in turn are useful for policing the body politic. Already one can observe how private religious metaphors had public civil consequences. Nonetheless, given a cultural confusion around the appropriate-

ness of the private, lines between the private and the public existed, often enough, only in rhetoric and rarely in practice. Thus, in such a civil order as we are discussing, acts of fraternal- or self-correction would be perceived as a communal gesture; toning the private soul would be tantamount to exercising the body politic. But for this reason, then, the threat or fear of transgression becomes an ambiguous metaphor, since transgression is both evidence of sin as well as the possibility of amazing grace. Publicly, too, transgressions were complex events. For instance, Mather was concerned with demonstrating the presence of witches in Salem; he knew well that “dis-covering” evil was a righteous religious duty, but that, in addition, its spectacular display in the courts and other public places gave it value as “entertainment.”

Generally speaking, then, I am arguing that once-religious imperatives can be traced across a variety of American genres, modes, and texts. This prescriptive grammar—routinely unseen for the significant presence it is—accounts for the intimate speech of confessional autobiography; it accompanies the mystification of the universe (Christian allegorizing) in apocalyptic texts; it can be heard in the diabolization of God and the rhetorizing of the self—either downward in ritualistic self-abasement or upward in the rhetoric of civic exaltation. The language of the Holy buttresses civic normalcy, and its various mythifications in civic texts show how extensively a founding politics of the Enlightenment rests, often uneasily, upon other premises as well. Beneath or perhaps to one side of the Jeffersonian abstractions and committee compromises of a patchwork Constitution can be discerned other memories—in particular, of vernacular American Christianities (for there were more than one). For example, the secularized City of God familiar to nineteenth-century utopic thinkers barely disguises its origins in seventeenth-century apocalyptic discourse. If Locke and Jefferson emphasized the reasonability of Social Contract, the protesting religious communities formed throughout the colonies emphasized something rather different. They focused upon God’s unknowability and upon the futility of social covenant (works) without grace. Thus, the metaphysics of uncertainty that had given them origin by providing a hierarchy of divine terrors, still continues to shape a civil order in its image. Over time these terrors, disavowed and repudiated as theology, took refuge in

discredited, weird texts of all kinds—perhaps by way of ironic reminder that dispossessed religionists themselves had once taken refuge in a geographic fantasy called the New World.

New Worlds Westward

Religion is the soul of culture and culture is the form of religion.

—PAUL TILLICH

The genre of “American Gothic” consists, in the main, of what one critic calls a tradition of “terroristic literature” (Coad, p. 73).¹² This literature has roots in the theological distress of an Old World order; I argue, in fact, that the history of Reformation theology continues to have political and social consequences. Indeed, the New World and its foundational old-world eschatologies cannot be separated.¹³ For example, the Puritans fled to New England in fulfillment, as it were, of the fantastic end to which their zealotry committed them. Seeking a kind of communal dark night, they first embraced dispossession, then exile, and finally, death by final fire—that last rapturous and apocalyptic intimacy with God. The New World was to be for them a type of Paradise Found, the Imagined Land Eastward. These immigrants thought of themselves as spiritual vigilantes, a homeless people blown outward through history beyond the angel’s flaming sword. In the extreme of their narcissism they likened their New England settlement to a city on a hill, a light lit for all the world, rising phoenix-like from the ash of old theological hopes. It was to be a Promised Land where they could take their rest, as they left the lost (or perhaps abandoned?) garden behind them. This habit of ecstatic fantasy continued beyond their time, refined and shaped by new generations to new needs and ends. The habit of religion found new avenues, created for itself new, sometimes surprising, homes. So it was that political and theological dreamweavers (from Shakespeare to Stephen King, from John Winthrop to Ronald Reagan) would find in this blustery wilderness what they needed: New World, Utopia, Proof-text, Escape, Paradise, Providence, *exemplum*.¹⁴ All these geographies of the imagination, these conditionals and night visions would be cobbled together as

religio, the binding sacred myth—the way a culture lies to itself in public.¹⁵

Thus it was that the rhetorical place called “America,” sentimentalized in political speech and populist myth, began as an act of repudiation—a rejection of the failed spiritual order that the Reformation was to have been.¹⁶ Indeed, the rhetoric of apocalyptic fantasy was already a cliché, old and worn long before the land was discovered whose terms it was thought to fulfill. For example, the phrase “New World” itself indicates its provenance in Renaissance geo-mythology, a memorial preserved in the dreambanks of a culture. Even the language used to describe the New World is language-at-its-end (metaphor, *figura*), and thus, a grammar of eschatology:

*Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;
The four first acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
Time's noblest Offspring is the last.*¹⁷

Bishop George Berkeley's sentiment expressed an understanding common to the time, that the “westernmost country . . . was destined to become the seat of the most highly advanced civilization and of mankind's greatest achievements” (Freese, p. 81). Thus, the place now called “America” is an *arriviste*, the *Novus Ordo* a come-lately ideological dream, whose “individualistic, pietistic, perfectionist, millenarian” (McLoughlin, p. xiv) politics were ideals heavily hammered into place by equally violent rhetoric, hope, and law.¹⁸

Reading this theologically dense but diverse culture is like reading a palimpsest; one uncovers literal pretexts hidden beneath later accretions and additions, and sometimes one finds texts willfully erased and silenced. Religion is one such silence; displaced and hidden from public view, it shows itself as a kind of shadow or trace, which is perhaps what D. H. Lawrence meant by the “inner diabolism” he finds characteristic of American culture. But to start at the beginning, we must acknowledge that the term “American” itself contains more than its share of ambiguities. As numerous commentators have pointed out, it functions poorly either as a geographical or political description, although its metaphorical duplicity is evident in that the expression is routinely used

for both purposes. Nonetheless, “America” ought to be considered a rhetorical strategy rather than descriptive term. That is, while neither descriptive of any demographic or empirical data, “American” represents a utopic, imaginative topography—a template of often unconscious responses operating more or less rigidly as emotional habits. Perhaps “instincts” might not be too strong a word, since for all practical purposes these visceral, personal investments lie, as the word implies, in the comforts of flesh, hallowed by habit beyond the reach of conscious reflection. Now widely dispersed through all levels of American culture, these habitual patterns function as ideological buttresses to a rhetoric of the Sacred. This transcendent, ideal order is presented as authority and justification of a civic order by means of a network of interlocking rhetoric and civilly authorized restraints.

In this study, I shall use the word “American” in a limited sense to represent a broad set of attitudes toward self and society traceable to the scrutiny and transgression-based theo-social order of colonial Massachusetts. Bits and rhetorical pieces of this New England Way, as this order came to be called, would later be recommodified, shaped into a homogenizing rhetoric of identity, functioning as national ideology (as, for example, in the phrase “popular American culture”).¹⁹ Here fantasy and politics function in inverse ways, showing how a putatively geographic or nationalistic discourse can nonetheless disguise a coercive and moralistic subtext. Indeed, the utopic origins of the word “American,” as well as its continued deployment in a grammar of nationalist fantasy, reflects the hegemonic tension of “the melting pot” that belies it.²⁰

My point in these initial reflections is simply that the geographic mapping of the New World followed, and depended upon, a prior metaphysical mapping of the imagination, with all the proscriptions, imperatives, and repudiations that such a governance reflects. A culture authorized by Revelation in effect organized itself according to a semiotics of terror and uncertainty. Such a culture moved toward self-identity and self-possession by way of a “negative dialectic” (Jameson, p. 51). Broadly speaking, an allegorical privileging of the spiritual resulted in a denial of the carnal—in Puritan phraseology. This denial would be located in the body itself, since the health of the communal body politic could—

indeed, would—demand the effacement of the individual. Other repudiations followed; the quest for interior perfection (the spiritualized self) eventually registered a fear of exterior difference, as religious perfection came to signal civic conformity. Finally, interiority itself was sacrificed to the demands of religious correctness and social compliance. A discourse of surfaces and style would be the result—a denial, in effect, not only of history but of community, evident most especially in the American apocalyptic mode. Finally, the Sacred itself would be sentimentalized, emptied of any significance except as political icon. Though everywhere present in civic language and public emotion, it would thereby be safely and routinely denied any power. Its once transcendental authority would be used to buttress a rhetoric of coercion in the service of a politics of comfort.

In this discussion of the origins and meanings of American theological rhetoric, it must be kept in mind, finally, that the Puritans did not so much find a new world as recreate the transgressive and hierarchical (and, paradoxically, antinomian and lawless) one they thought to repudiate. They did not so much *pursue* the Holy as *construct* one in their own dispossessed and land-hungry image. Thus did writing the Holy become for them and subsequent generations an exercise in detailing the Unholy, as a society-wide effort at righteousness compelled the language of terror and fantasy in order to do so. If the lands of New England were thought to be utopic and gracious, its wildernesses, conversely, were demonized—darkened, populated with demons (and later, by their agents, the Indians, or “heretical” persons like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams). Both mappings—utopic and “infernal”—reflect the early colonial strategy of allegorizing the cosmos. Reading its powers into the particulars of daily life is a tactic still covertly employed in varying ways to define—and police—the “American.” Victor Sage explains, “Protestant theology contains, at the subjective level, a complete preemptive description of the most obscure processes of the mind; it also consists, at the outward or objective level, of a sophisticated set of models for the recognition and control of social behaviour” (*Horror Fiction*, p. xvii). A most uncivil religion, the New England Way; under pressure of time, habit, and market, it would become increasingly more so.

Religious Culture and Gothic Religion: Mapping Interiors

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

—LEWIS CARROLL, *THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS AND WHAT ALICE FOUND THERE*

I wish now to consider the problem of "reading" culture—and, implicitly, the difficulties of reading a so-called "pop" culture that inevitably connives with, while parodying, some other, "higher" culture. There is always a public dimension to the seemingly private contours of the imagination, despite often rigid, sometimes defensive attempts to render the private as "personal," and therefore, by implication, "not public."²¹ Yet private and public cannot be kept separate. Indeed, Victor Sage makes a "direct connection" between the "essentially random activity of the individual subconscious and the determining pressure of the political culture" (*Horror Fiction*, pp. xi–xii). Similarly, Fredric Jameson points out:

To imagine that . . . there already exists a realm of freedom—whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions—is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge. . . . (*Political Unconscious*, p. 20).

The political, the *social*, as Jameson suggests, must be the "absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (p. 17). It is this space between private and public—the place of tension between nightmare and the conventionalities of social mores—that must be negotiated and which is always being transgressed. This is the site of contention I wish to consider in this study: where intimate encounters of an imaginative kind are, in every sense of the word, socially produced; and where they are theologically constructed to provoke a range of useful affects. Two in particular interest me: the civic emotions of sentimentalized love and eroticized terror, especially as each is framed in a rhetoric of paradoxical self-aggrandizement and self-loss.

A culture's main task is to survive its own imaginative demise—when, that is, its long memory ceases to wield any effective power. That is why custodians of culture, those who monitor core values and imperatives, must act as moral topographers. Their job (generally self-appointed) is to map the lands of the imagination, to draw its permissible terrain, and, in particular, to define the realm of the emotionally acceptable: What are the limits of love? Whom may one love, and how? Who and what ought to be feared?²² For example, a popular version of contemporary American self-speak insists loudly that its citizens are politically free. We are, as the rhetoric suggests, in effect free to love and fear whom we wish. However, upon reflection one can see that this is hardly the case. Self-narrative—personal or cultural—is rarely descriptive of *praxis*; one must not be seduced by point of view. For example, the posturing of the Religious Right around so-called “family values” is a case in point. The call for a return to “traditional” forms of domesticity—subsumed within, and authorized by a debased and therapized biblical rhetoric—means precisely that one *may not* love just *anyone*, nor in any way one pleases. Love, unlike terror in this respect, has its limits. The target of such rhetoric, of course, is the perceived threat of homosexuality (among other irregular sexual modalities) to the social order, here understood as an economic construct that maintains an abiding interest in controlling all sexual technologies. Indeed, social deviations are moralized by religious rhetoric in order to permit their criminalization. Yet this is not a new political strategy, nor is it even particularly religious. Quite to the contrary. The rhetoric is political in intent and its current vogue reflects the argument's proven success in organizing social emotions.”²³ For example, in *Growing Up Straight: What Every Thoughtful Parent Should Know About Homosexuality* (1968) Peter and Barbara Wyden cut to the chase: “No parent sets out deliberately to produce a delinquent—or a homosexual. Yet it is recognized today that delinquency and homosexuality are both rooted in the home.”²⁴ Part of the energy behind this book is to show that the identification of the deviant is often a case where a political order creates *ex nihilo* the monsters it needs to delineate and protect its boundaries. In the struggle to claim the imagination, it is never good to leave such strategic choices to chance. Where cannons are few,

fear must suffice. Terror must be authoritative in order to be effective.

In point of fact, then, love and hate are both socially construed; both are purposefully shaped by practical politics. Love presumes focus, permission. It suggests a passion for possession, particularity, and thus, implicitly, it easily can be inserted into a capitalistic social economy, because the institution that grants permission to love also can withhold it. Love, then, or at least its permissions, are conservative in their effects. "Deviants"—"criminal or homosexual" (p. 48) (Wyden's explicit linkage of the two should be noted) are in surprising ways supportive of the status quo. In the same way, terror likewise presumes a prior discrimination and its use suggests implicit authority. Those who create the monster (or the monstrous) must either continue reminding us of the fact or convince us to do that work ourselves. Consequently, neither love nor terror can be considered "merely" natural or, in a democratic regime, "freely chosen." If a society is to survive its own inevitable tensions and contradictions, the power it gives away to love or hate—in liberal discourse, its putative "rights"—must be carefully monitored. For beyond these limits lies the Unspeakable, the unimaginable, even the Ineffable: the nightmare of limitless possibilities, metaphorized as Holy and Horrible, against whose death-filled yearnings culture shields itself.

Theologies—stories of God—are, of course, also poignant reminders of the human condition. In effect they are stories we tell on ourselves, reflecting our conditions and possibilities. Entangled and complex webs of speaking and silence, spelling and dispelling, theologies weave political needs together with seemingly transcendent valuations. I find particularly interesting the way religious discourse in its many hybrid forms serves as a flexible American paradigm of personal *and* civic identity. To switch again to a metaphor I employ throughout, religious discourse *maps* the individual onto a civic terrain; permits her or him to be located in respect to questions of Self and Other, and to the *civitas*, whose permissible boundaries are established and maintained by community sanction.

In this way American theologies and its traditions of horror support each other as discourses of the outer limits; each demarcates in different ways the domain of the Divine and the monstrous. Theological discourse can be said to police the vertical

dimension of the human, since it establishes the necessary boundary between the community and the Divine. Gothic discourse on the other hand polices a horizontal boundary; its texts expose tensions and struggles, areas of silence and the unspoken that constitute the self in relation to its society (DeLamotte, p. 8). Theology and Gothic, then, are in effect narratives of the Unspeakable; together they fence off that which cannot be spoken—either because it exists *beyond* boundaries of grammar (and thus beyond human knowing) or because it cannot *permissibly* be spoken within human boundaries.

However, it must not be thought that this blending of metaphysics, politics, and entertainment is merely a “New England” phenomenon. From time immemorial witches have been burned and saints canonized; the pragmatic functions they serve are clear. What is feared, of course, from the witch or monster is contagion—the collapse of boundaries and human definitions. The witch, then, conjures up curse and imprecation, while the saint invokes prayer and blessing. In either rhetorical direction—Hell or Heaven—human society is protected, bounded, and fenced. The rhetoric (and bodies) of the Holy and Unholy proclaim social boundaries secure at each end, while offering, at the same time, models, *exempla*, spectacles—rhetorics of moral suasion. Fear, then, keeps a community vigilant, and in that word we should hear yet one more theological echo: vigil.²⁵ Rhetoric and fantasy—the Holy and the Horrible—keep vigil over the imagination, and for this reason, on the metaphysical map holiness and hellishness are contiguous.

Further, I argue that America’s metaphysics of the Sacred and its traditions of Gothic fantasy are intimately linked as “mode of history” and, therefore, as “mode of memory” (Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 409).²⁶ One could, however, argue that American theological history is, in its more recent forms, merely a nostalgic tale and not history at all—a deliberate forgetting rather than remembering.²⁷ These insights are not necessarily new. I differ from previous scholars (Joel Porte, Louis Gross, Victor Sage, for instance) only by making a more radical, or perhaps more basic, claim—arguing that the American tradition of the forgotten and unadmitted (its Gothic tradition) *is* its tradition of idealizing theologies, covered (hidden) and recovered as something else.²⁸ To name two places in particular where metaphysics and politics

(maps of Heaven and earth) intersect: first, in the very place we say they do *not*, in our social policies, where we erase and expunge the Sacred—literally “unsay” it—through means called, rather unpoetically, Disestablishment.²⁹ However, traces of religious habits of reflection nonetheless remain visible around the edges of public civic economies, as, indeed, the scrutinizing eye is literally visible on our money.³⁰

A second connection will prove more central to this study, and this is where metaphysics and poetics cross, and sometimes collide, in texts of dark fantasy and so-called Gothic pulp. Jonathan Edwards inadvertently provides a name for the connection I seek: the “Images or Shadows of Divine Things.” His phrase is felicitous, as will become apparent. Where does religion hide when by law it can no longer be spoken as (civic) discourse? It is locked in the literary basement with the “nasties” (Barron, p. 207), hidden in the wick-edary of a culture. A society authorized by divine revelation is, also and therefore, a society of secrets and scrutiny, its social order one of undressing and exposure. Such a theology, then, offers in effect an erotic grammar of transgression and expiation, of covering and uncovering, and *this* secret—the Divine’s twin faces of fear and ecstasy—is the secret hidden away in repudiated pulp horror. The Sublime—erased by law and denied by commodity economics—nonetheless continues to speak. By its terror you shall know it, whatever forms its denial takes.

I propose, then, to uncover the American Holy by reading its traces in the Horrible; I will read the Divine by tracing its shadows in the contrived, constructed, and generally formulaic terrors by which the Holy is, traditionally, deflected into and through public discourse—and in which the Sacred is misspoken, as it were, in the Scary. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto builds on Edmund Burke’s theories of the Sublime, arguing that terror and the Holy are closely, even intimately, associated. Otto writes that “the sense of the numinous, cut loose from a context of rational religious belief, could return in the most primitive form, that of demonic dread” (cited in Geary, p. 19).³¹ Unlike Otto, however, I do not posit a numinous, post-Kantian category in which terror inheres.³² For my purposes, the word “terror” itself hints at its provenance and its mundane purpose. Though often associated with the conventional structures of religion, simply stated, terror is less of

Heaven than of *terra*, earth. It survives, even thrives, from age to age because it is good for commerce. The use of God to damn this or that “monstrous” person or “infernal” cause may be politically expedient and socially effective even when not doctrinally clear. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that “Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse” (p. 17), and I argue, ultimately in agreement with her, that the fertile field of American horror is the “socialized appearance of the object” (p. 16). In short, and again, where can theologies of scrutiny and abasement be found? These religious structurings reappear, discarded and devalued, in works of horrorists like Lovecraft, or Stephen King, whose tales unintentionally remember Jonathan Edwards’s divine pyrotechnics or Mather’s demonic energy. Thus it is that the traditional focus of theological narrative—the deity, the unnameable creator—becomes, by slight of hand, the darkly unspeakable—admissible, as Fiedler puts it, only at “the backdoor of culture” (Underwood, *Kingdom of Fear*, p. 52).

Textual Mappings: Maps of Heaven and the Road to Hell

... so we understand how the highest angel can turn into the most base devil by a simple act of renouncement.

—FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA’S
PRODUCTION JOURNAL, *DRACULA*

Why *is* it easier to imagine Hell than Heaven? Why does Milton’s Satan have all the best lines? Even Dante knew that Hell was always the more familiar site on the metaphysical map; preachments and policements from time immemorial made sure of that. Perhaps in some deep chamber of the soul Hell was a comforting thought because for most people—or at least for many—Hell was, presumptively, their imagined lot, cold and claustrophobic, gray and cheerless—a domestic sort of end, after all. Hadn’t Calvin and his interpreters made it perfectly clear that the road to Hell was well paved? And that only a chosen elect would survive the revelation of God’s awe-ful grace? In terms of the great masses of humanity, as a matter of fact, only a mere handful would. It is no wonder, then,

that the expressions “Holy Terror” or “Holy Hell” survive, or that terms of piety such as “awe-ful” and “dreadful” twist like a snake upon the teller. Nor is it a surprise that the Puritans’ efforts to map the City of God onto the *civitas* of man reads like a Gothic novel: weak mortals straining against unknown fates and destinies—or, in the fittingly apocalyptic language of Henry James, “. . . the spirit engaged with the forces of violence.”³³ In retrospect it can be seen that the Puritans’ spiritually civilizing project was doomed to fail; that the Holy strained at its own limits, since righteous orthodoxy and woeful declension alike led to apocalypse and annihilation. No surprise, then, to twentieth-century H. P. Lovecraft, as he read seventeenth-century Cotton Mather, that reasoned explications and theologies of God’s mercy quickly gave birth to monstrous tales of cosmic terror. Hell might be hellish; but so was Heaven—or at least so it seemed to the architects of Puritan interiority.

This book is, partly, the story of *that* story. Chapter One, “Nostalgia and Terror: Holy Ghosts,” argues the construction of a national myth of the Holy, a federal eschatology both transcendent *and* transgressive, broad enough to serve church as well as meeting house. I will consider John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” to see how he derives a taxonomy of corporate identity and self-reflection from primarily religious categories, images of which—possession, dispossession, conversion, to name a few—were then dispersed through a variety of cultural discourses and socializing gestures. Chapter Two, “‘Entertaining Satan’: The American Rite of Deviancy,” examines how the allegory of transgression organizes a grammar by which to write/right the social self. Evil is rarely allowed to remain abstract in any society. God might be faceless; the demonic, never. For Salem authorities in 1692, the stability of the body politic necessitated, and was used to justify, the rhetorical (and *actual*) effacement of individuals. This ritual of necessary deviancy lives on still; in time the authorized violence of civic dismemberment would become a routine civic strategy, occasioning communal self-reflection for the body politic. The pleasures of perversity would always succeed as spectacle. Finally, Salem is an important national event because, as the Red Queen insists to Alice, memory works forward as well as reverse. As narrative, history is less concerned with *what happened then* than with *how it is remembered now*. Nor can the past ever be safely