

Writing the Unreal: Authorship and Identity in Henry Darger's *In the Realms of the Unreal*

by

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### Abstract

Henry Darger's work is often characterized as naïve and talentlessly executed, worth psychological analysis, but not literary analysis. This paper looks at issues of authorship in Darger's main work, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, to show that narrative and stylistic control are evident in the writing of the book, and that Darger's work shows conscious and intentional crafting. This implicit goal is accomplished in two chapters that examine authorship, the first discussing authorship within the narrative of *The Realms*, and the second examining authorial appropriation in the writing of *The Realms*.

Henry Darger appears in his work as multiple characters, all named "Henry Darger" or variations thereof. The manuscript of *The Realms* also appears in the narrative. At various points, all of the various "Dargers" claim to have written or to own the manuscript. This paper approaches the issue with the view that these multiple "Dargers" are representative of splits and divisions within Henry Darger's sense of self and identity, and that the struggle between the "Dargers" represents the struggle between Henry Darger's competing ideas of self. As he struggles with his identity, various ideas of self get the upper hand in the competition for authorship of *The Realms*.

In the second chapter, this paper looks at Henry Darger's use of appropriation, lifting characters, plots, scenes, and sentences from various other works and putting them into *The Realms*. This is done mainly for two purposes: legitimization and identity work. By appropriating elements from authoritative sources—*Pilgrim's Progress* and martyrdom narratives, for example—and then subordinating these sources to his own text, Darger borrows and then supersedes the authority of these sources, thus legitimizing his own work. He also borrows from previous sources, and then alters the elements he borrows in ways that reflect and build his own identity and sense of self, contradictions included.

The explicit argument of this paper is that Henry Darger used his role as an author both within *The Realms* and in reality to reflect and carry out his identity formation, and to make legitimize the work he was doing. The implicit argument is that contrary to many voices in Darger studies, Henry Darger was a talented and intentional author, and his text deserves to be treated as a literary text, not just a psychological artifact.



## CONTENTS

Introduction-----	1
Chapter One: Self & Author-----	9
Chapter Two: Borrowing <i>The Realms</i> -----	31
Conclusion-----	50
Works Consulted-----	52

## INTRODUCTION

Those who know Henry Darger know him mostly by his art; large, bright watercolor paintings of violent war scenes, colorful creatures, and merry children, among other things. His writing is often relegated to the status of an interesting tidbit: "Did you know that this artist also wrote a 15,000 page novel, which tells the story that his paintings illustrate?" Most do know, but the interest goes little further than being aware of the fact; there are few who are interested in reading 15,000 pages of text composed by a janitor in Chicago, working alone from the time he was 19 until he died at the age of 81 years and 1 day.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Darger was born in 1892 into a rough childhood, to start a rough life. His mother died when he was 4, giving birth to his baby sister, who Henry never met, as she was immediately adopted by another family. Henry was bounced between schools for awhile, but was somewhat violent and odd, and did not get on well with the other children. He eventually landed at the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-minded Children, a place he stayed at for several years until he escaped at the age of 19. At this time, he went back to Chicago, and got a job working as a janitor and dish washer in St. Joseph's Hospital. He held these positions in Chicago hospitals until physical ailments forced him to retire decades later. Raised to be deeply religious, Darger attended church as much as three times per day, in his later years. Aside from going to work and going to church, Darger spent most of his time in his small rented room. That, as they say, is where the magic happened.

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<sup>1</sup> All basic biographical and textual information in this introduction is readily available in any study or introduction to Henry Darger, including: John MacGregor's *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*; Michael Bonesteel's *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings*; and Klaus Beisenback's *Henry Darger*, among other books.

Darger's main work is the 15,000 page *In the Realms of the Unreal*, the story of a war between an atheist nation that owns child slaves, and a group of Christian nations who are fighting to free those slaves. The main characters in the book are children, and the book is written largely in the style of a children's story, an oddity that will be discussed in chapter two of this paper. Though the main characters are children, the characters on which this paper focuses are by and large adults; adults named Henry Darger. Darger wrote himself into *The Realms*, a fact which heightens the readers awareness of how personally Darger was invested in this book, but also a fact which often strengthens the resolve of academics who want to study his work purely as a psychological artifact, chronicling his internal condition—a view that we'll return to in a moment, and a view against which I argue in much of this paper. Darger did not appear in *The Realms* as only one character, but as several, most notably as two generals at the head of opposing armies. These will be discussed thoroughly in my first chapter.

Characteristic of Darger's writing is his deeply religious worldview, but existing side-by-side with that, we find a deep well of anger against God. Many of the heinous acts of the atheist army in *The Realms* are deliberately set up to be inflammatory to God, and to display anger with him. These two attitudes existed in constant struggle within Darger, and his writing is an articulation of this tension, and of his fight to form an identity for himself through this struggle. One of his most telling quotes is a note in which he says "God is too hard to me. I will not bear it any longer for no one! Let him send me to Hell, I'm my own man,"<sup>2</sup> This can come as a surprise, after reading many pages of Henry Darger praising God, and speaking in a hyper-pious register, but these zigzags in his attitude are an important part of who he was, and of his work as a writer—a part of him to which this paper is dedicated.

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<sup>2</sup> Kiyoko Lerner, Nathan Lerner, David Berglund, and Henry Darger, *Darger's Room*, (Tokyo: Imperial Press, 2007), 83.

Before diving into the outline and mission for this paper, I'd like to give a context on my method. There is a very popular strain of academic thought these past few decades which wishes to separate the author from his text, saying—as Roland Barthes did in his essay "The Death of the Author"—that "to write is... to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'... it is language that speaks, not the author."<sup>3</sup> This view can be useful in some instances, but does not seem entirely appropriate for universal use in a discipline that has long been caught up in the workings of the human spirit, and emotional expression. Henry Darger is one such author that is very difficult to read and interpret to any depth or sophistication without taking him into account as a living, feeling human being whose work emerged from his own emotions and experiences. Because of such considerations as Darger, and other writers deeply connected to their works, the ideas expressed by Barthes have generated significant pushback from those like Sean Burke and Camille Paglia, who claim (respectively) that ideas like Barthes' "function to keep the non-academic at bay,"<sup>4</sup> and that "behind every book is a certain person with a certain history. I can never know too much about that person and that history. Personality is western reality."<sup>5</sup>

This view, that personality and other such biographical concerns do have a place in the study of literature, informs my paper, and the first chapter in particular. That said, there is obviously a balance to be struck. As Tomasevskij puts it in his essay "Literature and Biography," "many biographers cannot be made to comprehend an artistic work as anything but a fact of the author's biography; on the other hand, there are those for whom any kind of

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Sean Burke. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 126

<sup>4</sup> Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992) ix

<sup>5</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, (New York: Vintage, 1991), 34

biographical analysis is unscientific contraband, a 'back-door' approach."<sup>6</sup> One must not be dogmatic, in other words; if biographic information and textual analysis are our tools, we must use the right tool for each job, rather than using only one tool out of a misplaced sense of dogma—the trick, ideally, is being attuned to the presence of the author within the text, both in where he should be invoked, and in where he should not.

The balance is something this paper strives for, though Henry Darger does lend himself to difficulties in this area. He is so entirely present in the text that we are apt to see him even in places where he needn't necessarily be invoked. It is exactly this fact that explains why Darger studies exists almost entirely in a state of hyper-biographicist criticism. It does so perhaps following the lead of top Darger scholar, John MacGregor, who is a dyed-in-the-wool Freudian and seems to have little appreciation for Darger's work as a work of literature, treating it more often than not as a purely psychological artifact. Though a great scholar, and almost startlingly insightful with respect to the mind behind Darger's text, MacGregor does have a habit of not seeing *The Realms* as an artfully executed text, which it often is, and as such, he (and most of the work on Darger since him) does not appreciate some of the sophisticated methods Darger uses to communicate within his text. Instead, such critics as MacGregor see anything that happens in the text as unintentional, naively placed there by a mind that did not realize what it was doing, but did so unconsciously. One representative example is Michael Bonesteel, who says "[*The Realms*] is by no means a well-crafted novel, [and] what gives the saga a kind of artificial life is Darger himself."<sup>7</sup> I believe that the benefit of a doubt must be paid to Darger; though he was not highly educated, much of his work does tell of an intelligence and understanding of the craft of

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<sup>6</sup> Boris Tomasevskij, "Literature and Biography," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Sean Burke. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 81

<sup>7</sup> Michael Bonesteel, "Henry Darger's Great Crusade, Crisis of Faith, and Last Judgement," in *Henry Darger*, ed. Klaus Beisenbach, (New York: Prestel, 2009), 272

writing. As Joseph Campbell wrote, "poets and artists... are endowed with a developed organ for the understanding of myth that is too often lacking in the merely learned."<sup>8</sup> Part of my mission in this paper is to show that *The Realms* has many aspects that, while deeply personal and rooted in Darger's search for identity, are more artful than naïve.

So my paper works in two arguments, one implicit and one explicit. The implicit argument of this paper—which I attempt to keep in the readers consciousness as much as possible throughout—is that Darger was an artist, and that his work, though quite revelatory with respect to aspects of his personality and psychology, needs to be read as *more* than a purely psychological artifact, and that to be fully appreciated, it must also be treated as a work of literature, something few students of his work seem willing to do. The explicit argument of this paper, which works within the axiom of the implicit one, is that the issue of authorship within *The Realms of the Unreal* acts as identity work<sup>9</sup> within the text, using literary techniques to establish and reflect Darger's quest for identity—thus utilizing the literary side of Darger's work to accomplish the more psychological aspects. The explicit study of authorship is carried out in two chapters, the first on divided authorship between multiple Dargers within *The Realms*, and the second on the place of appropriation in the writing of *The Realms*.

To the end of revealing Darger as a craftsman whose work was anything but unintentional, this paper will first examine the ways in which the question of authorship within the narrative reflects the larger themes of the whole narrative, particularly the struggle between opposing ideas of selfhood and identity. Within *The Realms*, the manuscript of the book itself

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, (New York: Penguin, 1968), 309

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the term "identity work" from the study *Escape Attempts*, by Cohen and Taylor. I am unsure of the term's exact origins, but I use it here to mean the work that one performs in constructing an identity for oneself.

makes a number of appearances, and several characters claim to have written it, or to own it. The characters who do so are all avatars of Henry Darger within the story, and they are personifications of his divided identity—one is evil, one is good, one cowardly, one professorial, one innocent, etc. I argue that the tension between these characters, as to who is the author of *The Realms* within the narrative, is an expression of the conflict of identity within Henry Darger, which is a recurring component not just of Darger's life, but of *The Realms*' narrative. An important aspect of these tensions is the overlap that exists between these various Darger-avatars, and the ways in which their histories merge and split, showing that the divisions in the story's authorship—and Darger's sense of self—are not the stark, total separations that they could be, but something more ambiguous, always pointing back to the common origin of the identities and authorship in Henry Darger himself. But though the text points towards a unity, this unity is never fully realized.

In the second chapter, this paper will explore how Darger's use of appropriation—which is often characterized as utterly naïve, and an act necessitated by Darger's inability to execute certain effects for himself—is actually one of the most important aspects of the text, used artfully by Darger to legitimize his own text and to reflect his identity work within the text. In order for the view of Darger as a naïf to be correct, he would have had to appropriate sources external to his text, and use them more or less as they had been used in their original context; he could not have been sophisticated enough to change and alter the original sources in meaningful ways. This view cannot stand up to scrutiny. In this chapter, I will examine the numerous alterations Darger makes to his appropriated characters, plotlines, and tropes, and how these alterations, far from being random or naïve, serve very definite purposes within the text, both legitimizing *The*

*Realms* in its literary and religious purposes, and expressing the identity work that Darger carries out in the story, trying to find a balance between giving himself to God, and being his own man.

These two chapters both serve as studies of Darger's identity work, and how it is constructed within *The Realms*, but they also work to combat the all-too-common idea of Henry Darger as a naïve writer, whose writing's only value is as a completely unconscious reflection of his psychology. I instead aim to show that while the text is deeply personal, and indeed cannot be fully appreciated without knowing its importance and relevance to Darger's life, it is also a beautifully constructed text in its own right, and to not acknowledge this is to disrespect both the man and the text.

Before beginning the first chapter, a note on the source material: Henry Darger's *In the Realms of the Unreal* is 15,000 pages long, written by typewriter. His other works, *The History of My Life*, and *Crazy House* do not have set page-counts—estimates for either one range from 4,000 to 8,000 pages, handwritten. Part of this uncertainty is due to Darger's erratic pagination (in the middle of a sentence in *Crazy House*, he goes from page 2460 to 4461),<sup>10</sup> but on top of that, these books all just have too many pieces of paper involved to keep an exactly accurate count. This said, they are also too long to be read by any one person without dedicating a good portion of their life to it, and as yet, no one has been up to the challenge of reading even the entirety of *The Realms*. Given this fact, and the fact that Darger's work is almost entirely unpublished, the quotes and materials I use for this paper come from a few main sources: 1.) ten hours I spent with the microfilm of Darger's work at Intuit: the Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago, over the course of two days, 2.) the numerous quotes that John MacGregor includes in his monograph on Darger, *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*, 3.) two books

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Darger, *Crazy House: Further Adventures of the Vivian Girls in Chicago*, (Unpublished manuscript), 2460-4461

with selections of Darger's writings, edited by Klaus Beisenbach and Michael Bonesteel, and 4.) the well-sourced quotes from Darger's work included in the studies of other scholars who have written on his writings. It may seem odd to need to access the primary text in often such a second-hand way, but given the extraordinary length of Darger's literary production, it is a job that scholars must work together on, trusting one another to pick out the important parts and publish them. I hope this paper has added something to this endeavor.

## CHAPTER ONE: SELF AND AUTHOR

In this chapter, we will explore the ways in which Henry Darger uses the clash over authorship that takes place between characters within *The Realms* as a way of expressing the fractured identity and the struggle for unification that is a major theme of both Henry Darger's work, and his life. When thinking about his divided identity, we must be mindful that Darger was caught between two separate ideas of self. On the one hand, he was devoutly religious; on the other, he said things like "let [God] send me to Hell, I'm my own man."<sup>11</sup> According to an area of psychology called Identity Control Theory, "people act in a self-regulatory manner with the goal of matching perceptions of themselves in situations with the standards they hold for themselves."<sup>12</sup> In other words, people have a self-image, which they try to match that with their behavior. Henry Darger had multiple self-images, and in the tension between these operates the troubled authorship of *The Realms of the Unreal*. In this technique, we can clearly see the ways in which the literary side of *The Realms* (concerns over authorship) reflect the more-studied psychological side (identity and his struggle with God).

Part of the reading experience of Darger's major work, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, is the sheer bulk of it, and the awareness of how much time and effort it took to create. It is a behemoth among books, 12 enormous volumes long, somewhere in the neighborhood of 15,000 pages. No one, not even John MacGregor, the lead scholar in Darger studies, has read every word.<sup>13</sup> The physical presence of the book drives home the point of just how very much time and effort Henry Darger put into this creation, which is something quite difficult to separate from

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<sup>11</sup> Lerner *et al.*, *Darger's Room*, 83

<sup>12</sup> Jan Stets and Teresa Tsushima, "Negative Emotion and Coping Response within Identity Control Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2001): 283.

<sup>13</sup> John MacGregor, "Further Adventures of Darger's Vivian Girls," *Raw Vision*, #39, 69

our experience of the book—and nor should we try to separate it. As Michael Owen Jones argues in his behavioral study of art-making and artistic production, the process of creating something is inseparable from the created thing itself.<sup>14</sup> We are always aware, with such obviously time- and effort-consuming ventures, of the process that brought them before us. It is a part of the experience. And in the case of Darger's work, it drives into us one of the most important aspects we need to sit up and take notice of: this work constitutes a parallel life for Henry, one that he created every day, every moment he was not at work or in church. We should not, however, take this claim as an excuse to treat *The Realms* as a hunting ground for discovering Henry Darger's unconscious tics and drives and desires. These are undoubtedly present within the text, and many of them do merit our attention, but to use the text primarily as documentation of Henry Darger's internal psychological state is to disrespect the text and its author. Too often, Darger is treated as an utterly naïve writer, giving us an utterly unplanned look into his mind through his utter lack of guile or knowledge about storytelling. While it's true that the text was a very personal project for Darger, it is also a project that was executed with a surprising degree of art and talent.

One mode of study in this text that reveals an intersection of the personal and artful sides of the text is in the treatment of identity-work carried out through narrative struggles over authorial dominance. That is to say, Henry Darger was a man of many contradictions, and he was unable to reconcile these internal divisions. He wanted to “be his own man,” and do as he wished, but he also wished to identify himself strictly by his religion, aligning his personal identity with his relation to God. These internal divisions are represented in *The Realms* through

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Owen Jones, "The Aesthetics of Everyday life," in *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art.*, ed. Charles Russell, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 48-60

a literalization: there are many characters named Henry Darger wandering around in *The Realms*, each of them representing a different side to Henry's contradictory desires. These separate characters have a habit of each claiming to have written the manuscript of *The Realms* that we are reading, and this struggle to assert authorial dominance reads as a struggle between the opposing sides of Darger's contradictory desires, each seeking to become dominant over its opponent. In this way, Darger uses the claimed authorship of his books as a way of reflecting the struggle between impulses towards religious identification, and towards identification through individuation; authorship of the text represents "authorship" and control of Darger's life and psyche.

Before further discussing the implications of the various claims of authorship within *The Realms of the Unreal*, we must first acquaint ourselves with the author's (Henry Darger's) place within the narrative, and how this relates to the construction of the manuscript of *The Realms* itself within the text, as the volumes that constitute *The Realms* make appearances within the story, and their authorship is attributed to different people almost every time they are mentioned.

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Henry Darger is the author of *The Realms*, but he is also some of the main characters. To clarify, there are a number of characters who are named "Henry Darger," "Judas Darger," "Whilliam Darger," "Hendro Dargarius," and variations thereof.<sup>15</sup> The first problem that we run into in a discussion like this is knowing exactly who we are referring to. Darger liked to play with the possibilities of this very problem within his story, leaving the reader to wonder which Darger had been involved in an event or conversation, or—in some cases—actively misleading the reader to make us believe that it was one Darger we were seeing, when in reality, it was a

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<sup>15</sup> John MacGregor, *Henry Darger: In The Realms of the Unreal*, (New York: Delano Greenidge, 2002), 236-250

different one. Through calculated confusion, Henry at one point makes us believe that the Good, Christian General Darger has attacked his friend Jack Evans—but soon after reveals that it was actually the Evil Atheist Darger.<sup>16</sup> Such confusions can lead to a fun reading experience in fiction reading, but should be avoided in an academic setting. To that end, I will list and describe the major "Dargers" at play in the conversation here, leading with the name by which I will be referring to them, followed by a brief description of their place in the world of the story and their basic characteristics. Throughout the conversation, I will use distinct names for each "Darger," but will also leave as many contextual clues as possible, so the reader can better keep track of who is being spoken of.

**Henry Darger:** This is how I will refer to the living and breathing man who lived in Chicago and spent his nights writing *In the Realms of the Unreal* on a typewriter. I will call him either by his full name, or by his first name alone; this will distinguish him from the other Dargers, and will also serve to remind us that although Foucault might have us believe that "The Author" is just a function for organizing texts,<sup>17</sup> Henry was a flesh-and-blood man with a very real inner life, which informs our interpretation of his work. This "real" version of Henry Darger also makes some appearances in *The Realms*, free from any of the other masks listed below.

**Good Darger:**<sup>18</sup> General Henry Darger of the Christian Angelinian armies. A high-ranking officer in the armies of Angelinia, a good, Christian nation which is at war with the evil, Atheist nation of Glandelinia. Like most "good" characters in *The Realms*, he often comes off as laughably pious. When a character is meant to be a Christian ideal in *The Realms*, (s)he usually

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 238

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Sean Burke. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 235

<sup>18</sup> All the following information on the multiple Dargers is taken from chapter 5 of MacGregor's *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*

becomes rather homogeneous with the other good, pious Christians. In describing Hendro Dargar, Henry writes, "he must be in a state of grace, never use any profane language, like he once in a while did, and must be better in controlling his hasty temper which he generally had. He did it is true go to confession and Holy Communion generally three times a week."<sup>19</sup> Lines like these abound, describing a perfect and holy lifestyle. This is Henry's vision of how it should be to be a Christian: easy and pure. His own religious reality was much more of a struggle, as can be seen in:

**Bad Darger:** General Henry Darger of the Atheist Glandelinian Armies. A very evil man who keeps and tortures child slaves, and fights for his country's right to keep these child slaves. (Large parts of *The Realms* were inspired by Civil War history.)

**H.J. Darger:** A newspaperman named Henry Joseph Darger. He is somewhat of a cowardly figure, not fighting in the war himself, but merely describing the battles from an almost omniscient point of view. Darger scholar John MacGregor speculates that there is significant overlap between H.J. Darger and Henry Darger, not just in the obvious ways, but also in the fact of the omniscient narration, which a character within *The Realms* should not be able to provide. More on overlap in a moment.

**Hendro Dargar:** A professor and protector of children, this man is named Hendro Dargar or Dargarius, depending on the scene, and is the head of the Gemini Club, an organization to help protect and free the child slaves. An expert on an eclectic range of subjects, notably geology and meteorology. We should note that in his own autobiography, Henry

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Darger, *In the Realms of the Unreal*, (Unpublished Manuscript), quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 241

Darger—whose father came over from Germany—claims Brazilian Heritage, and claims his name "in Brazilian" is "Dargarius."<sup>20</sup>

These are the most notable of the "Dargers" operating within *The Realms*, though these stark divisions are somewhat misleading, as there is often significant and confounding overlap between these characters, as well as their author—overlaps which point to the fact that though Henry presents them to us as separate characters, there is much unity between them, a shared point of origin in Henry's own identity. I already mentioned above that H.J. Darger and Henry Darger seem to merge at certain points, though H.J. Darger is his own distinct character in *The Realms*, but there are also numerous other points of overlap, which will be discussed in more detail below. As Darger scholar John MacGregor puts it, "at certain moments, [the multiple Dargers] can appear to be one Darger during different phases of his existence."<sup>21</sup> This possibility though, he notes, is precluded by various Dargers physically facing one another in battle. Additionally, the overlap between characters is even noticed by certain characters within *The Realms*. One of the central characters, Joice Vivian, says "We have two General Dargers, and the only difference between them is that they are taller than one another."<sup>22</sup> This playful linguistic loop of each Darger somehow being taller than the other one is a delightful piece of writing, but also a troubling one. Not only to readers of *The Realms*, but also within the world of the story, the "Dargers" overlap, separate, and merge.

Henry Darger was present within *The Realms* not only in characters that shared his name, but also in characters he lifted from other sources. There are a number of these, too many to list, and I will point them out as they arise. One of the main ones to be mindful of is Penrod, a

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Darger, *The History of My Life*, in *Henry Darger*, ed. Klaus Beisenbach, (New York: Prestel, 2009), 281

<sup>21</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 237

<sup>22</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, 3507

character who was originally featured in a series of children's books that Henry was fond of, written by Booth Tarkington. Penrod's happy, carefree childhood in the Midwest may have called to Henry, who suffered a rather dark childhood in the same time, in the same area. No matter how it happened, Henry's own thoughts and feelings are often visible in the character Penrod, as well as others.<sup>23</sup>

Here, we must stop to appreciate the oddness of the situation, and provide an explanation for it. We may be used to authors putting themselves into their work, having seen this tactic used by Kurt Vonnegut, John Steinbeck, even popular novelists like Stephen King, among others. But the author placing *multiple* copies of himself into the work is a stranger breed, especially when the copies are so vastly different, placed on opposite sides of a bitter war, and when, for as different as they are, seem to merge and overlap again and again. This strategy demands a closer look, starting with the author from whom these copies are emerging. In William James's discussion of "The Divided Self," he says that

there are persons whose existence is little more than a series of zigzags, as now one tendency and now another gets the upper hand... the man's interior is a battle-ground for what he feels to be two deadly hostile selves.<sup>24</sup>

In Henry Darger, we find just such a person, apt battle-ground metaphor included. A deeply religious man for whom the existence of God seemed to be an absolute fact, Henry spent much of his life zigzagging between religious and irreligious impulses.<sup>25</sup> His diary reads like a balance sheet, cataloguing "Mass & Communion" on the one hand (often 3 per day), and "Tantrums" and

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<sup>23</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 262

<sup>24</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134-135

<sup>25</sup> Michael Bonesteel, "Henry Darger's Great Crusade," 272.

"Bad Words" on the other.<sup>26</sup> He kept a collage of pictures of Christ and the Pope in his room,<sup>27</sup> and filled his work with religious references and images, yet he also tells us that as a young man, "when angry over something, I burned holy pictures and hit the face of Christ in pictures with my fist. ...I've got an awful nasty temper."<sup>28</sup> Nasty temper indeed; he reports having cut a teacher with a knife when he was a child,<sup>29</sup> but also reports a deep tendency to care for and want to protect young children, to whom the world can be so cruel.<sup>30</sup> The contradictions of Henry Darger do not sit easily side by side. We can see part of the origin of his trouble in the fact that "the Catholic religion... places great stress upon the need to banish bad thoughts, suggesting that these are placed there by alien sources."<sup>31</sup> So while much of his work does try to give voice to these "bad thoughts" he has, and to find a way for Henry to be his own man, separate from God, this is all complicated by the uncertainty as to whether giving into these bad thoughts would be being true to himself, or letting some "alien sources" control him. This Catholic paranoia adds another dimension to Henry's zigzagging contradictions.

All of these "zigzags," as James describes them in "The Divided Self," may have another explanation in another study of the same name, this one book-length and written 58 years later, *The Divided Self*, by R.D. Laing. In this study, Laing notes that certain people feel a split in their notion of self, one factor of which may be that the suffering person "may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness."<sup>32</sup> Henry Darger very obviously felt a lack

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<sup>26</sup> Darger's Journals, available on microfilm at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago

<sup>27</sup> Lerner, *Darger's Room*, 77

<sup>28</sup> Darger, *The History of My Life*, 291

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 299

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 282

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96

<sup>32</sup> R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*, (New York: Penguin, 1970), 42

of cohesiveness between his warring tendencies, and what's more, he seems to have wanted to destroy certain tendencies in favor of expressing others all the better—maybe because, as described above, he may have sometimes felt that some of these tendencies were not entirely his own, but from "alien sources." To this end, he puts his good, God-loving side against his angrier and more vicious side, both of them Generals of an army, fighting against each other. But which side is he trying to get rid of? Most often, the text seems to favor the side of the Christians, espousing a life of devotion to God, but there are many subtle notes of dissent, even in seemingly-pious passages. The most notable, and probably the longest of these passages will be explored later in chapter 2, involving the appropriation and dissenting alteration of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. One side or the other might seem to be the one to be eradicated, but in the end, this is just the story of contradictions meeting and sparking—not defeating or being defeated.

Strengthening the case for this reading of Henry's work is his second novel, a sequel of sorts to *The Realms*, which I will discuss only briefly, for the sake of the rather clear and poignant metaphor it provides for the seeming mission of Henry's life, and the picture he gives us of his inner life. In the novel, Penrod—the character Henry lifted from a children's series, and who often serves as an avatar for Henry within the fictional world—is with the Vivian girls (the main characters of *The Realms*) helping to exorcize a haunted house in Chicago, referred to as the "Crazy House." The method of exorcism Penrod and the Vivians choose is performing Catholic Mass in the Crazy House, and separately, holding Communion within the house as well. These are the two methods repeated again and again to drive the demons out.<sup>33</sup> If we remember Henry's diary, we see that he himself attended multiple Masses per day, which he measured

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<sup>33</sup> These scenes repeat again and again, but a representative smattering of them can be found in Darger, *Crazy House*, 10,137- 10,285

against how many “Tantrums & Bad Words” he did and said.<sup>34</sup> We could easily say that he was hoping to drive out his own demons with Mass and Communion—which again leads us back to the ways that he sometimes appears to see his bad tendencies as coming from “alien sources,” while at other times treating them as a way for him to be his own man. Additionally, everything in or around the house that suffers from demonic possession is also referred to as “Crazy”: the Crazy Chandelier, Crazy Forest, Crazy Staircase, etc. Henry himself never quite got over being nicknamed “Crazy” in grade school.<sup>35</sup> This, combined with the fact that the demonic activity within the Crazy House is referred to as a series of “tantrums”—the term which Henry used in his diary to describe his own sinful activities—provides credibility for a reading of this book in which Henry's good side, represented by Penrod, is trying to drive the demons out of his bad side, the “Crazy House.” This reading gains more credence when we look at the final scene in the book, in which Hendro Dargar falls into the Crazy House, and has to be helped out by Penrod (as well as the Vivians), using Holy water to open the door and get him out.<sup>36</sup> Notice how similar this very simple and plausible reading is to the reading of *The Realms* put forward here, wherein Henry's good side is at war with his evil side, trying to stamp it out. These readings are vast oversimplifications of the text, but are still emblematic of a very important theme within the text.

I caution once again not to take this reading and apply it only to Henry's biography, turning his work into a mere symbolic psychological diary. These themes of extirpation, expiation, and struggle for self-definition show up and repeat in Henry Darger's work because he was greatly concerned with them, and they were often on his mind, true—but this is also true of

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<sup>34</sup> Darger's Journals at Intuit

<sup>35</sup> Darger, *The History of My Life*, 284. Writing this late in life, Darger's tone is still bitter.

<sup>36</sup> Darger, *Crazy House*, 10,530

most writers. Yet when we read Nabokov or Woolf or Joyce—all Henry Darger’s contemporaries—we do not treat their books as psychological documents, but as works of literature; though Henry’s work is undoubtedly more private and personal, we should still leave room for a treatment of his work as literature, rather than strictly psychological.

The recurring themes of extirpation and expiation is an integral part of understanding Henry's work. Having established the credibility of this reading of Henry Darger's work, and having provided a description and explanation of the multiple "Dargers" present in *The Realms*, we can now move on specifically to issues of authorship within the realms, and their relation to Henry's own struggle for identity.

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Possibly the broadest way in which the unstable authorship of *The Realms* reflects the struggle for authority and control is in the tug of war between reality and fiction in the narration. The title of the story itself is indicative of the desire to see the book as “unreal,” or fictional—but there is another strain existing side by side with this one, insisting that the book is a historical document, filled with facts and figures and accurate maps of battlegrounds. Each volume of the manuscript has its own introduction, and even in these introductions, the relationship between reality and fiction shifts. In one spot, he declares "It is a comfort... that the accounts here are of fiction only and not of truth."<sup>37</sup> But alongside comments like this one, pointing to the fictitious nature of the story, we have lines assuring us that "[e]ditors of great experience will be in due time allowed to go over the whole work most carefully and verify every date of incidents, disasters, battles, and great adventures so as to prevent the possibility of error"<sup>38</sup> The text is

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<sup>37</sup>Henry Darger, "Introduction" in *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Bonesteel, (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 40

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 44

treated first as fiction, then as a history, a cycle that never ends, seemingly each comment and implication reversing the previous one. This reality-fiction dialectic is one more expression of the split identity that roams these pages. On the one hand, we have a narrator who is (mostly) separate from the text; Henry Darger, clacking out the manuscript in his rented room in Chicago. This is the Darger that asserts his authority in saying he is grateful that "the accounts here are of fiction only." But in the fragmented psyche of this Darger lie the others—to these Dargers, who are also authors of *The Realms*, the story is real, the world is real, and it is all to be taken as a history. And yet, we still see that the Dargers cannot be separated out so cleanly and easily. One strong example of this is the scene in which Annie Aronburg's ghost tells Darger, "you alone have the situation of both sides in your power,"<sup>39</sup> a scene that will be treated in-depth later. The Darger she is speaking to exists within the story, and is fighting in the war. To him, this war and these scenes are real. But at the same time, Aronburg is invoking his status as the author of a fiction. In the same scene, these two interpretations of the text's (un)reality sit side by side. In scenes that are just as complex in their implications, Darger's room—the room in Chicago in which he wrote the story—appears to certain characters in *The Realms*,<sup>40</sup> recurring several times to various soldiers. When it appears to the Vivian Girls' friend, Jack Evans, he notes the large manuscript ("big books and papers") sitting on the table.<sup>41</sup> Here we have the creation of the fiction being woven into the history of the war. Darger's room is where this is all being written from, a fact which is acknowledged by Jack's focus on the manuscript. Yet this place of creation, this symbol of the text's fictionality, takes its place within the world of the story, where the manuscript is seen not as fiction, but as a history. In these ways, the status of the text as

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<sup>39</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, Quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 515

<sup>40</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 235

<sup>41</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 236

reality or fiction also reflects the division of self that is the hallmark of the book's narrative, as well as its claimed provenance.

The appearance, within the narrative, of the written manuscript of *The Realms*, as well as Henry Darger's room in downtown Chicago, invite the question of who within the story produced the manuscript. In the story, it serves as a history of the war between the Christian and Atheist nations, being kept by first one character, then another. This is not to say that the manuscript is multiply authored, one character writing one section of the history, then turning it over to another for the next section. It is to say that the ownership and authorship of the manuscript are at different times claimed by different characters, or claimed to be the property of various characters, so that at some points, by some characters, it is claimed that Good Darger, the Christian general, owns the manuscript, and is the author of it.<sup>42</sup> Later, it seems that the newspaperman H.J. Darger is the writer of the manuscript, or at least that it is made up of his reports and articles. Several other times, the real Henry Darger breaks in to the narration to make clear that he is writing this manuscript from a room in Chicago.<sup>43</sup> The text refuses to settle on an author. One of the claimed writers is actually a young girl, Annie Aronburg, who died at the very beginning of the war, and with whom Darger felt a close connection.<sup>44</sup> If we closely examine these claimed authorships, the first, most obvious thing we notice is that authorship of the text is always claimed either by Darger, or by an avatar of Darger within *The Realms*. Looking closer, a story starts to emerge—one hinted at earlier, in the merges and overlaps of the various Dargers. The relocation of authorship within the narrative of *The Realms* is an

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 234-289

<sup>43</sup> Darger, "Introduction," 42

<sup>44</sup> Macgregor, *Henry Darger*, 506

expression of the identity work, particularly in relation to God, that Henry engages in throughout the writing.

All of these characters engaged in a narrative battle for authorship, all claiming to own or have written *The Realms*, is representative of the struggle for dominance between Henry's opposing ideas of self and God. We have seen how deeply religious Henry Darger was, and how angry and forlorn he could become with his God; this religious struggle of his is everywhere present in the text of all his writings, so it's no surprise, being such an intrinsic part of the worldview that produced the text, that it also shows up in the question of authorship within the narrative. Leaving aside the flesh-and-blood Henry Darger for a moment, one of the major themes of the story is still the struggle to align one's "self" with one's God. The multiplicity of Dargers in the story is not simply accepted as fact by the other characters—they find it odd, and quite difficult to grasp, how there can be more than one of the same person walking around in their world.<sup>45</sup> The little girl soldier, Violet Vivian, for instance, says to her sisters "Anyway, there seems to be a man either on the Christian side, or on the enemy's side by the name of Henry Darger. ...And he looks the same as the one whom we returned the manuscript to... either he is treacherous, or there is something else... we will have to watch them, or him."<sup>46</sup> So even within the story, without looking at the title page to find the author's name, there is the sense of a split in the character of Henry Darger, presented most vividly in the characters of Good Darger and Bad Darger, one leading the charge for piety and God, the other on a crusade to destroy everything good and infuriate the God he hates. The mere fact of the separate existences of these two, and the confusion between them, combined with the fact that both are, at various times, presented as the authors and owners of the manuscript—all of this justifies, even demands a reading of this

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<sup>45</sup> Macgregor, *Henry Darger*, 517

<sup>46</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 238

narrative as a representation of a divided self, a self at war, trying to reconcile itself and its relationship with God. On the subject of "The Divided Self, and the Process of Its Unification," William James has this to say:

The normal evolution of character chiefly consist[s] in the straightening out and unifying of the inner self. The higher and lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us—they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination. Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle.<sup>47</sup>

James may be right that that the religious person needs to "unify the inner self," and even that this "period of order-making" is apt to be an unhappy one—but all of this is heightened by a quote he presents earlier, by Robert Louis Stevenson: "Whatever else we are intended to do, we are not intended to succeed."<sup>48</sup> No definitive conclusion is reached within *The Realms* as to who is the writer of the manuscript, a fact which demonstrates the ongoing failure to relate to God in a way that is consistent and free of tension and contradiction. Frank Scafella, in his essay on "Authorship as Moral Action," suggests that a certain unity or authorship is needed for an author to have real moral authority, saying that that "his masks and modes of address are many but his actions are one."<sup>49</sup> And yet with Darger, much of the moral thrust of the text comes through the many "masks and modes of address" within *The Realms* being representative of the failed struggle to unify his actions with his spirituality, or vice versa—not from already being unified in this way. The narrative of *In the Realms of the Unreal* does indeed seem to be about a divided

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<sup>47</sup> James, *Varieties*, 135

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in James, *Varieties*, 130

<sup>49</sup> Frank Scafella, "Models of the Soul: Authorship as Moral Action in Four American Novels," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (1976): 475

self and some attempts at undoing that division, but there is no indication of a satisfactory unification, either in the text, or in the facts of the author's life.

That is not to say that the warring selves presented in *The Realms* are utterly distinct, with no unity whatsoever; as mentioned earlier, there is a troubling overlap between many of them, and this also enters the question of authorship. It is often unclear whether Henry Darger or H.J. Darger is the one being spoken of. This is made much harder by the fact that there are many scenes which are written as newspaper dispatches from the front—which points to their being written by H.J. Darger—but which contain much information that no one on the field would have had access to. The path of certain bullets is followed, as well as the sweep of the enormous battle, and small personal fights between aggressors.<sup>50</sup> No person would have had access to both such close-range experience, and the wide zoom of the whole battle; no person but the omniscient Henry Darger, who reveals himself as the author many times. There's no way to tell exactly where Henry ends and H.J. begins.<sup>51</sup>

H.J. Darger isn't the only character who undergoes this merging and overlapping; Good and Bad Darger also have intertwining and overlapping histories, both with each other, and with their author—a set of inconsistent overlaps and retconned character histories which reflect the ongoing struggle in the text between whether to be loyal to God, on the one hand, or to strike out and form an individual self, separate from religious identity. One of the most interesting sites of this dynamic is found in the appearances of the ghost of Annie Aronburg, the little girl who died before the war, but who is still claimed to be the author of *In the Realms of the Unreal*. After her death, she makes four ghostly appearances to one of the Dargers, though it is unclear exactly which one. The accounts are written in the first person, which is unusual, and could suggest

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<sup>50</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 243

<sup>51</sup> See MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 242-244

almost any of the Dargers. In her first appearance, the Darger refers to the suspicion of a "skulking Glandelinian" following him, an ill-will towards the atheist nation that would suggest he is either Good Darger, or Hendro Dargar. Annie Aronburg then asks him to "withdraw the curse on the christians [sic] because of your loss."<sup>52</sup> Here, she is referring to a number of threats Henry Darger had made to God in a notebook attached to *The Realms*. Henry had lost a picture, clipped from the newspaper, of a girl he was going to use as the image of Annie Aronburg in his paintings. For a reason we might never know, this loss affected him greatly, and he started threatening the destruction of the Christian armies should God fail to return the picture to him. He related very strongly to Aronburg, and often signed his own name as "Henry Aronburg Darger," a fact which sheds light on Annie Aronburg's claimed authorship of *The Realms*. In this scene, Annie's ghost is asking him to withdraw this curse, as it is causing losses for the Christian armies. This move on her part means that she is aware of the text being written, and of the author being more than a historian, but an actual controlling power behind the war. Because of this, we can judge that she is talking either to Good Darger, or directly to Henry Darger.

This is both confirmed and complicated with her third appearance, in which she leads Darger away from a battle—a battle in which he appears to be fighting with the Christians—and says to him "as you was the one who had secured my picture, and many other articles once belonging to me, I had trust that as you alone have the situation of both sides in your power, I decided to appeal to you."<sup>53</sup> This exchange is highly complicated, in terms of authorship of *The Realms*. The picture Aronburg is referring to is the picture that Henry lost, though it is often ascribed to Good Darger throughout *The Realms*, so the passage is still consistent with the addressee being Good Darger. The "other articles" she refers to are, we can assume, a number of

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<sup>52</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Macgregor, *Henry Darger*, 513

<sup>53</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Macgregor, *Henry Darger*, 515

papers found in Henry's room which he signed in her name, including letters, and a handwritten copy of a catechism, with an introduction by Annie Aronburg. In this introduction, she says "I am the full writer of the manuscript, as far as it goes, of the battles raging with the Glandelinians [Atheists] and the rebels at the child labor places, and will have them published as soon as I can."<sup>54</sup> In other words, she is the author of *The Realms*. And by referring back to her "articles" that Darger had gotten hold of, including this catechism and its introduction, the scene of her ghost's third visitation reaffirms her status as author. However, in the same breath, she tells Darger "you alone have the situation of both sides in your power." In other words, he alone can write them out of this mess, meaning that he must be the author. If he can write and alter events, then he cannot simply be Good General Darger, whose only interest in the war is chronicling it, and who, as a participant in *The Realms of the Unreal*, cannot simply change them by writing about it—so while it appears to be Good Darger (Aronburg talks to him during a battle against the Glandelinians), there are also shades of Henry Darger and his authorial power here. Add to that the reference to Aronburg's own authorial status, in the same sentence affirming the authorial power of Darger, and we have a very confounding Venn diagram of who is writing *The Realms*. This confusion presents to us the confusion and tension of the contradictions between the various Dargers, all struggling for dominance within the text, and within Henry's psyche.

Confusion of the above scene and its implications notwithstanding, it still leaves aside the second appearance of Aronburg's ghost, as well as comments at the end of *The Realms*, which imply, then state, that the Darger she is appearing to is actually Bad Darger, General of the Glandelinian armies. In her second appearance, Aronburg screams at Darger, calling him "friend

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<sup>54</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 505-6

of the Glandelinians."<sup>55</sup> This doesn't speak very kindly to which Darger we're looking at, and implies it may be Bad Darger. This is reinforced later, towards the end of the book, when the history of the encounters is recounted by other characters, and altered so that all the appearances were made to Bad Darger. A child soldier, Jennie Turner, confirms that "[Annie Aronburg] told that [evil] general herself, who she appeared to in her celestial form, that all of it was true, and that the war would not be lost if he desisted in his efforts recovering her picture."<sup>56</sup> MacGregor notes that Henry Darger, as author, "plays fast and loose with history, changing facts and inventing personalities and events with wild abandon," especially as we near the end of *The Realms*.<sup>57</sup> These changes in the histories of certain characters rewrite whole sections that were once at least somewhat clear. Even the appearances Aronburg's ghost made that were surely described as being to Good Darger, those are now ascribed to the Evil Darger, along with the ownership of Aronburg's "Picture and many other articles," which were described at many other points as belonging to Good Darger; Catherine Vivian, a leader of the child rebellion, now is quite malicious about Bad Darger's loss of the picture, saying "He lived in a house which he never locked up when he went out, and some outsider came in when he was away and cleaned out everything he had. And it serves him right for his carelessness."<sup>58</sup> This confidence that the picture and objects belonged to Bad Darger is a stark change. In fact, Good Darger makes a spectacle of himself by going on about his loss of that very picture, and how it was surely this loss that caused the war. One of the great leaders of the Christian army, General Hanson, when told that Good Darger believes the loss of the picture caused the war, says "Oh bosh... The man must be a nut, for how could the loss of a picture be responsible for the disaster? Pictures don't

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<sup>55</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 514

<sup>56</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 518

<sup>57</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 518

<sup>58</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 519

cause terrific battles like this.”<sup>59</sup> In light of so much being made of Good Darger's having owned the picture, this rewrite of history to say it belonged to Bad Darger is a very strange and brash move, but one that makes sense if we look at these characters as they most often appear to the reader: as two sides of one psyche at war with itself. Control over the manuscript represents control over Henry's life and thoughts—through the authorship, the good and evil angels of his nature are fighting for control.

The various and confounding overlaps, mergers, and abstruse divisions between the Dargers, particularly the Good and Evil generals Darger, as well as the confusion about multiple Dargers being present in the world, are a nod to the fact that the boundaries between these characters are ultimately artificial and arbitrary; in terms of authorship, this translates into a fight for control over the story, and ultimately, control over the psyche that has been split by this internal struggle. The side of Henry and of the Dargers in *The Realms* that wishes to please God and be pious is quite evident. Henry himself often attended multiple church services per day, and his room was covered in religious images. Within *The Realms*, the desire to please Darger's silent God is clear on almost every page; the protagonists are all devout Catholics, fighting a war against atheists, not for themselves, but for the glory of their God. And yet there is another side to Henry Darger, and to the text. Henry is still the same man who burned pictures of saints and punched pictures of Christ and who wrote in his journal, "God is too hard to me. I will not bear it any longer for no one! Let him send me to Hell, I'm my own man."<sup>60</sup> This statement shows another side of the man and his story. This is not just a man who slavishly devotes himself to his God—it is also a man who wants to keep his own identity, who is willing to risk Hell to prove he is his own man. This side of him shows up clearly in *The Realms*, not just in Bad Darger, but

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<sup>59</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 497

<sup>60</sup> Lerner *et al.*, *Darger's Room*, 83

also in the threats Henry makes against God. When Henry lost the picture of Annie Aronburg, he demanded it be returned, threatening loss for the Christian armies if God did not make sure the picture found its way back to him, delivering his ultimatum in a notebook attached to *The Realms*, called "Predictions & Threats." "The Aronburg picture must be found before the end of March," he writes, "or all will be lost."<sup>61</sup> These distinctly un-holy tendencies are not hidden away in the text—they are everywhere present, bursting to come out. They are there in every atheist victory, and every time God stays silent at the atrocities committed against him. They are there in the uncertain ending of the book—actually two endings, one showing a tentative win for the Christian armies, the other showing a continuation of the warfare, with no end in sight. "The lives of saints are filled with such blasphemous obsessions,"<sup>62</sup> William James tells us, but we cannot be sure if this is the case with Henry Darger. For all his stiff piety and Christian themes, there is a very definite current of anger and hatred for God in *The Realms*, a desire to cut free and be defined by his defiance, rather than his adherence to his faith. The overlap between Dargers and the uncertainty of their authorship reflects this central struggle in *The Realms* by changing who has the upper hand; whose story is this, Good Darger, or Bad Darger? Or does it belong to the cowardly newspaperman, H.J. Darger, afraid to actually fight for anything? The fight for the upper hand is carried out throughout the 15,000 pages of the novel, battle after battle, but it also takes place in the fight for authorship.

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<sup>61</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, 295-304, item dated March 12, 1916, quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 496

<sup>62</sup> James, *Varieties*, 135

Whose book is this? As Phillip Herring said about the work of James Joyce, "The reader was meant to live with uncertainty, not surrender."<sup>63</sup> Authorship and authority are passed about and claimed by many in *The Realms*, but ultimately, it belongs to Darger in the larger, encompassing sense. Both in the text and out, he was a man caught between his desire to live for himself and go his own way, and his desire to love and be loved by his God. He wanted to make an identity separate from God, and he wanted to identify himself completely as belonging to his God. The contradictions could not peacefully coexist, and so they struggled for dominance within Darger, and within the story he wrote. A given faction of Darger may claim the text, as Good Darger, Evil Darger, Aronburg, and others do, but ultimately, all the claims and overlapping identities point to the truth of the matter. The result of the struggle for dominance and authorship doesn't matter; the struggle itself is the real focus. We'll return to the struggle borne out of these contradictions in the latter half of the next chapter, after first attending to the broader issue of appropriation and alteration in Darger's work.

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<sup>63</sup>Phillip Herring, *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) quoted by Robert Newman, review of *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle* by Phillip Herring, *South Atlantic Review*, 1989, 141-3

## CHAPTER TWO:

### **BORROWING *THE REALMS***

We accept nowadays that a part of self-identification is carried out through the consumption of culture and entertainment. As Ayla Demir puts it in her essay “Consumerism and Identity,” “The products that we buy, the daily routine activities that we do and the philosophies or beliefs that we pursue, tell the world stories about who we are and with whom we identify.”<sup>64</sup> Looking at the work of Henry Darger, and seeing all his borrowings from other pieces of art, culture, and tradition, we could be tempted towards the interpretation that he was, magpie-like, scavenging together an identity cobbled together from various things that touched and affected him, the same way that modern day teens can create an identity for themselves based off what music they listen to and what movies they like. While this is a part of the picture we can’t entirely avoid, it is far from the entire story. Darger borrowed heavily from many sources, and from many types of sources, stealing passages and characters from children’s books, comic strips, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Wizard of Oz*<sup>65</sup>—just about everything he came across that hit home for him in one way or another. The entirety of *The Realms* could be described as a patchwork of appropriated characters, plots, sentences, and tropes, much like his artwork, which is largely made up of appropriated images; but also like his artwork, Darger’s compositions of these appropriated elements are entirely novel, and speak to a very intentional and artful approach to these various appropriations. His constant borrowing makes his authorship of *The Realms* more complex, turning him not just into a creator, but also an arranger of previous

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<sup>64</sup> Ayla Demir, "Consumerism and Identity: Some Psychoanalytic Considerations," Accessed February 28, 2013, [http://www.academia.edu/2428249/Consumerism\\_and\\_Identity\\_Some\\_Psychoanalytic\\_Considerations](http://www.academia.edu/2428249/Consumerism_and_Identity_Some_Psychoanalytic_Considerations)

<sup>65</sup> Kevin Miller, "The Art Student: Henry Darger and *A Step-Ladder to Painting*." Accessed February 12, 2013, [http://www.folkartmuseum.org/sites/folk/files/Darger\\_ArtStudent2.pdf](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/sites/folk/files/Darger_ArtStudent2.pdf)

creations, giving them new meaning by how he places them. His talent here is considerable, and displays another side of his authorial prowess. Darger is able to put across his own message not just by copying from other sources, but by subtly manipulating those sources to his own needs, a talent which required no trivial amount of finesse. In this chapter, we will look at Darger's appropriations, and how he gives new meanings to the materials he borrows, creating his own unique message by using older elements. In the course of this, I will combat views of Darger as a man who simplistically and naively borrowed from various sources just because he liked them, or that he chose them for purely unconscious reasons; again, while these considerations must be made, they risk obscuring some very powerful messages in the text, which arise from his often masterful use of appropriation and alteration, which are time-honored literary techniques, dating back at least to ancient Greece.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, we will closely examine his various appropriations, and how they are applied into the new composition in unique ways, through which we see distinct strategies operating in the text. The first strategy is towards a legitimization of the world that Darger is creating, which he accomplishes by acknowledging previous authoritative texts, and then asserting his own text over the previous one. The second strategy is a strategy towards the performance of identity work, the discussion of which ties back into my first chapter; many of the alterations he makes to his appropriated materials display the same sort of tensions in identity-making as his shifts in authorship, first altering something to a more God-pleasing version, then to an individuating version, with many ambiguous ones in between. The alterations he makes along these lines show warring tendencies, desiring both to be God's man and his own man.

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<sup>66</sup> Maria Jesus Martines Alfaro, "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of Its Concept," *Atlantis*, 1996, 269.

First, we will examine some of the materials and tropes from which Darger borrowed, and how borrowing and altering these sources carried out work that is beyond what MacGregor claims, which is that all the things Darger “borrowed or adapted [were] but reflections of an internal climate fluctuating from day to day within one man.”<sup>67</sup> Rather, I argue that the borrowings within *The Realms* often show a sense of purpose, and that much of Darger’s message could not be carried out as effectively without deploying this artful strategy.

To start with the form of the book itself: the story is written in most places as a children’s story. This clashes against the content of the book, which is unsuitable even for most adult audiences, let alone for children. In this story that takes the narrative form of a children’s book, children are conscripted into the army, work as spies and as slaves, are chased, tortured, dismembered, and eviscerated. This is no world to be a child in. Even the main characters, The Vivian Girls, who escape unharmed from everything and are the bastions of purity and heroism—even they suffer from burns and almost die in the hospital, before a miracle heals and transfigures them (a situation repeated in the sequel, *Crazy House*).<sup>68</sup> Another young child is even driven insane—a scene Darger would have been familiar with, having grown up in the Lincoln Home for Feeble-minded Children, a place which may be able to shed further light on the style of the narrative. The Lincoln Home was a hellhole. A number of scandals rocked the place, mostly abuse and neglect,<sup>69</sup> and though there is no proof that any of the abuse happened specifically to Darger (though we can’t be sure, and much of his work does carry signs of sexual trauma),<sup>70</sup> abuse was carried out while he was there, and he would have been almost certain to

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<sup>67</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 251

<sup>68</sup> Darger, *Crazy House*, 2450-4461

<sup>69</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 536-7

<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 10 of MacGregor’s *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* for a full-length study of the subject.

have at least witnessed some of the happenings going on there. The world Darger grew up in was no world to be a child in. He often noted how hard the world could be for children, and even kept a scrapbook of newspaper stories about lost and orphaned children.<sup>71</sup> So knowing this, we can see a very specific strategy at work in setting up *The Realms* as if it were for children. He could have just written a world in which children were treated harshly, and left it at that. But by treating *The Realms* as a children's story, the focus is on the children within it, and a world is posited—through the style of the prose and presentation of characters—which is supposed to be fun and filled with childhood adventures. And there *are* many fun adventures, buttressing the narrative expectations of the genre—but these almost always end in unspeakable horrors, which are then made all the more horrifying by the expectation that this text be one acceptable for children. By borrowing and then subverting the form of a children's story, Darger's work is made exponentially more affecting and shocking.

Having established a precedent for Darger's use of borrowing as an effective and affective strategy, I will now examine how he uses this strategy for the legitimization of his fictional world, a tactic which he uses most often by invoking a previous authoritative text, and then subjugating it to his own. The first example comes within the first pages of *The Realms*, where he does not start an entirely new world from scratch, separate from our own, but attaches our own world to his creation, saying that the story takes place on a world “with our earth [sic] as [its] moon.”<sup>72</sup> By maintaining our “real” world within his own *Realms of the Unreal*, but subjugating the Earth to a mere moon of his own planet, *The Realms* makes a case for its own legitimacy and priority over the “real” world. If the Earth is merely a moon, and Henry's imagined planet is the main celestial body (and a much larger one at that) where all the action

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<sup>71</sup> Seen in slideshow at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago

<sup>72</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, 1

takes place, the reader has to concede the priority of the Unreal over the Earth that is our home. The fiction subjugates our own reality. Though not strictly an appropriation in the literary sense, this example does provide a way of thinking about Henry's use of borrowing other sources, texts, and tropes for the purpose of legitimizing his own endeavor.

The examples of textual and literary appropriation are largely religious, or operate around religious themes. It is hard to read through Darger's 15,000 page morality play between good and evil, Christian and atheist, and to watch all the Christian children die in terrible ways without thinking of the strong martyrdom tradition of the Catholic church, of which Darger was a devout congregant. Darger's religious appropriations act in multiple ways, but one of the primary ones is as an act of making-sacred, as described by Mircea Eliade: "since religious man cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred, we must expect to find a large number of techniques for consecrating space."<sup>73</sup> Eliade goes on to say that this making-sacred urge comes from the desire "to live in a real and effective world, not in an illusion."<sup>74</sup> Applying this concept to Darger's process and *The Realms*, this technique amounts to a legitimization of Darger's religious endeavor, a way of making his work and the world he is creating "real and effective." Making this point rather strongly, Michael Moon, in his study, *Darger's Resources*, points out the rather explicit appropriation of the martyrdom of Tarsicius, who was killed by a mob rather than give over to them the Holy Sacrament that he was carrying. In Darger's text, a girl named Jennie Anges has her body "literally pulled apart by cruel Glandelinian soldiers who would wrest from her the ciborium she carries and the consecrated communion wafers it contains, and

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<sup>73</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 28

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 28

desecrate them.”<sup>75</sup> Though Jennie, a little girl, is being attacked by grown soldiers, she does not yield, for “a strength and bravery from on high was given to the delicate child.”<sup>76</sup> We can clearly pick out from this scene the elements of the martyrdom of Tarsicius—protecting the Holy Sacrament, even as a crowd tries to tear it away. By importing this martyrdom, the story of a holy saint, *The Realms* borrows not just a narrative, but a certain degree of religious authority—if this story is good enough to merit sainthood, then it should also merit our attention to this new text. This, however, is not the whole story. It's not enough to appropriate an old story and put it to your own purposes, as Deborah Parker (channeling Umberto Eco) points out in her essay on "The Literature of Appropriation": "It is not the act of appropriation itself but the attitude behind it that is important. If the past is to be successfully revisited.. it cannot be done innocently, but only with conscious irony."<sup>77</sup> I would only change the statement to say that explicit irony is not a prerequisite of meaningful appropriation, just that the appropriation is altered to a new purpose, rather than simply repeating the past. Darger makes just such an alteration. Once Jennie Anges dies (though even after her death, her dis-incorporated limbs do not let go of the Holy Sacrament),<sup>78</sup> she is buried and given a headstone marking her a “LITTLE GIRL MARTYR,”<sup>79</sup> a headstone which is visited by the Vivian sisters. “As [the Vivians] stood by the grave,” the narrator tells us, “never had poor Violet [Vivian] and her sisters looked so beautiful. They kneel and kiss the grave, weeping and murmuring ‘Anges’ over and over.”<sup>80</sup> As Moon rightly points out, “the reader may suspect that [Anges] has actually [died] in order ‘literally’ to ground yet

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<sup>75</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Michael Moon, *Darger's Resources*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 31

<sup>76</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Moon, *Resources*, 33

<sup>77</sup> Deborah Parker, "The Literature of Appropriation: Eco's Use of Borges in 'Il nome della rosa,'" *The Modern Language Review*, 1990

<sup>78</sup> Moon, *Resources*, 33

<sup>79</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Moon, *Resources*, 33

<sup>80</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, quoted in Moon, 34

another sublime photo-op for the Vivians.”<sup>81</sup> No matter how vivid the martyrdom of Jennie Anges is, the story of her martyrdom does not climax with Jennie’s death; it does so with the mourning of the Vivians. By not only adopting the story of Tarsicius, but also placing it within a larger narrative structure in which it is only a set-piece, *The Realms* both takes on, and then supersedes, the authority of the martyrdom narrative, placing it in a subordinate role to the story that Darger is telling: the story of the Vivian girls.

The next example discussed will serve as a segue between two types of borrowing in which Darger engages. The first is the type discussed above, in which Darger brings in external authoritative sources and uses them to create legitimacy in his own texts. The second type of borrowing I will discuss is the way in which Darger’s appropriations and alterations reflect and perform much of the same work that his authorship does, as discussed previously in the first chapter—namely, the formation of a personal identity, particularly in relation to God, though this formation is divided into opposing wills: one in which Darger wishes to give himself over to God, and the other in which he wants to disown God and strike out as his own man. The following example fits into both discussions—authority/legitimacy and identity formation—and though dividing the two discussions entirely is not wholly plausible, I will first address the issues of authority and legitimizing in this example most directly, and then follow up with an examination of Darger’s identity work in the example, after which I will move on to further examples of the identity work performed by his other appropriations.

What John MacGregor refers to as the “single most impressive, and necessary, act of ‘borrowing’ in *The Realms*”<sup>82</sup> is Henry’s total appropriation of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This particular appropriation lends a twofold authority: religious and literary. As much as the

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<sup>81</sup> Moon, 33-34

<sup>82</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 254

book is valued by theologians and the religious, it is valued in equal degree by the literary world. Darger's appropriation amounts to taking the text of *Pilgrim's Progress* and inserting his own character names, and changing words here and there to suit his own purpose. To help my reader envision what exactly this amounts to, an example is provided below, quoted from MacGregor's study. First, Bunyon's text reads:

As I was thus musing, as I said, there was one in very pleasant attire, but old, that presented herself unto me, and offered me three things, to wit, her body, her purse, and her bed. Now the truth is, I was both aweary, and sleepy, I am also a poor howlet, and that, perhaps, the witch knew.<sup>83</sup>

And now, Darger's appropriation of the original:

As I was thus musing, I met with one of very pleasant attire, that presented himself to me, and offered three things, to wit, a lot of money, honor and glory if I would leave the region and not say anything to anyone. Now the truth is I was very weary and sleepy, I am also very poor having lost all in the flood.<sup>84</sup>

The parallels in the text are quite obvious, and it is not difficult to ascertain the kind of legitimacy a text can claim through a reinterpretation of a previous masterwork—not to mention the legitimization of the religious themes covered therein.

The treatment of religious themes, however, is deeply complicated by the way in which Darger tries to subordinate the borrowed text to his own purposes—purposes which also play heavily into his use of appropriation as identity work. The basic structure of *Pilgrim's Progress* is that of the quest, specifically the allegorical quest of the character aptly named Christian,

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<sup>83</sup> John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, (New York: Penguin, 1987), 373, Quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 255

<sup>84</sup> Darger, *The Realms*, Vol. 8, 8-383, Quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 255

questing from the City of Destruction (mortal life) to the Celestial City (Heaven), with obstacles impeding his progress. In Darger's version, the main character, Walter Starring, is in the city of Abbieann, which has been destroyed under mysterious circumstances—not so much the City of Destruction as it is the Destroyed City, but the connection is clear. Part of the city has broken off and sunk into the sea, while the rest of it is riddled with mysterious craters, which appear to be the origin of the destruction.<sup>85</sup> In this retelling of *Pilgrim's Progress*, there is no journey to the Celestial City; Starring never leaves the destroyed city of Abbieann, and he spends his time there investigating, trying to find out what happened. What starts as an intense and lively curiosity ends in a melancholic depression—not having solved the mystery of what happened, Starring seems to stop caring, overwhelmed with the horrors he's seen, and the destruction of the 8 million lives in that city. In a straight telling of this story, Walter Starring's time in Abbieann would be a meditative reflection on the destruction wrought by a mysterious disaster, and an investigation into that mystery, but by bringing *Pilgrim's Progress* to the front of the writing, the investigation is juxtaposed against a quest, where the main character journeys *away* from the City of Destruction, rather than, as Starring does, within it. Placed in this context, Starring's continuing investigation becomes something more—it becomes almost a refusal to leave, to turn his back on this destroyed city and its innumerable tragedies. Such an interpretation is further backed up in the earlier quote we saw from this section; the only major addition that Darger makes to Bunyan's original text is to say that Starring was offered gifts "if I would leave the region and not say anything to anyone." Such a wish is not in Bunyan's original, but is added by Darger to show Starring's commitment to staying in Abbieann, even if he is bribed to leave. This refusal to leave the scene of the destruction takes on an even more defiant note, when we see

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<sup>85</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 256

Starring standing over the city, imagining that he “was viewing Sodom and Gommorrah [sic] and all the land of the plain, after God had overthrown those cities.”<sup>86</sup> Note here that the city of Abbieann was in a Christian nation, not one of the evil atheist nations. With this in mind, it is very strange that this city would be described (for an entire paragraph) as analogous to Sodom and Gomorrah, the infamously sinful cities from Genesis, which God destroyed for their evil. Further, this comparison lends a very strange tone to the melancholy mood Starring takes on while viewing the destroyed city. Something quite complex is taking place in the investigation of Abbieann, and the appropriation of *Pilgrim’s Progress* to describe the scene.

This complexity strikes a note of defiance against God in many ways—specifically, calling God to account for the sorry state of the City of Destruction, and thus, the world. What would normally have been a simple investigation into the destruction of a city becomes—through the use of *Pilgrim’s Progress* as source material—a refusal to leave the city and not look back. This flies in the face of a long-standing tenet of Christianity, best summed up in the hymn “I am but a stranger here/ Heaven is my home.” Christians are often told to renounce the world and turn their back on it, as Christian does in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, leaving the City of Destruction to find his true place in God’s Celestial City. Walter Starring’s refusal to leave Abbieann goes against this sentiment, and by continuing the investigation, calls our attention to the question of why the City of Destruction is what it is: who brought the destruction? This question is answered by the comparison of destroyed Abbieann to Sodom and Gomorrah; God is the one responsible for the destruction of these two cities, and he is being implicated in the destruction of Abbieann—and in connection with that, *Pilgrim’s Progress’s* City of Destruction, which symbolizes our own world. By invoking these allusions and appropriations, Darger has subtly

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<sup>86</sup>Darger, *The Realms*, Quoted in MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 254

and effectively raised the question of evil and destruction in a world with a supposedly all-loving God; an old question, but one that will remain for as long as religion exists. This is a move which would not be possible without the wholesale appropriation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, without which, *The Realms of the Unreal* would not have so effectively dissented against the notion of turning one's back on the world, and implicated God in the sorry state of the world, either through his negligence or his malice.

These strategies Darger enacts work in many ways, and ultimately are a touching and plangent cry of both dissent and despair, but they work mainly along two vectors. One of these is what I have discussed thus far, which is the legitimization of his own fictional world and its religious themes. By both appropriating and resisting *Pilgrim's Progress*, he first borrows its authority, and then ultimately asserts his own authority over it, by refusing to follow its path. He steals a story about travelling from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, and then dismisses this mindset, refusing to turn his back on the City of Destruction and all that it represents. The second vector along which these choices work is (and here is the segue from legitimization to identity that I promised before the discussion of *Pilgrim's Progress*) as a way of performing and reflecting Darger's identity work, particularly in relation to his God.

In dissenting against the religious ideal of turning his back on the world to give himself to God, Darger was affirming and working to create his own identity, separate from his faith. Walter Starring is an avatar for Darger within *The Realms*, a fact which becomes obvious when we compare him against Hendro Dargar, with whom he shares almost every trait—at certain points, MacGregor notes, “it does appear that Hendro Dargar and Walter Starring are overlapping characters.”<sup>87</sup> MacGregor labors this idea to the point of stretching its credibility, as

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<sup>87</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 254

he is wont to do in the more staunchly Freudian of his readings. He even uses one small example, a dead woman holding her dead daughter in her arms, amidst all the destruction and dead bodies described in Abbieann, to say that this is Darger is subconsciously mourning his mother and the sister that was adopted before he knew her, and that this is the true source of the destruction of Abbieann.<sup>88</sup> Such a reading of this section of *The Realms* stretches credibility, and reads like an easter-egg hunt for bits of Darger's psyche hidden in the text. This brings us back to the earlier quote from Tomasevskij, "Many biographers cannot be made to comprehend an artistic work as anything but a fact of the author's biography."<sup>89</sup> There is enough of Darger showing through unquestionably in this work, we do not need to hunt for more—to do so is, in many cases, to disrespect the merits that his work can hold on its own, to reduce *The Realms* to a symbolic diary rather than an often surprisingly sophisticated work of both fiction and soul searching. Over-reading aside, Walter Starring does share a number of interests and characteristics with Henry Darger, and a number of the characters named for Darger in *The Realms*—including a predilection for investigating mysteries, an interest in geology and earth science, an amazement with natural phenomena, knowledge of ancient history, etc. It is utterly reasonable, even necessary, to see him as one of Darger's avatars within *The Realms*.

As such an avatar, we should read Starring's refusal to turn his back on the City of Destruction as Darger's own—a refusal that is also necessitated by the fact that he wrote the piece, and that he, as author, used *Pilgrim's Progress* as the basis for Starring's investigation, the significance of which has already been discussed. Henry's twofold involvement in this refusal to turn his back on the City of Destruction (Abbieann), as author and as character, returns us to the issue of his identity work through *The Realms*. This appropriation and alteration of *Pilgrim's*

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 257

<sup>89</sup> Tomasevskij, "Biography," 81

*Progress* is one of the more complex and ambiguous examples. His use of this text does not appear to be entirely defiant, and certainly not as rebellious as some passages he writes, threatening God, or yelling “Let him send me to Hell, I’m my own man.”<sup>90</sup> The tone of this section is much more subdued and elegiac, and the borrowing’s from *Pilgrim’s Progress* seem quite reverent of the text. Through all the changes he makes, much of the original still shines through, and is not twisted to opposite ends. For example, in Starring’s tale, a man “presented himself to me, and offered three things, to wit, a lot of money, honor and glory if I would leave the region and not say anything to anyone.”<sup>91</sup> The same passage in Bunyan’s work, I’ll remind the reader, reads “there was one in very pleasant attire, but old, that presented herself unto me, and offered me three things, to wit, her body, her purse, and her bed.” The only major addition in Darger’s version is that the gifts are being offered to make Starring leave the area. Aside from that, both characters are being offered gifts by a person they don’t feel they should be associating with. Darger is not twisting Bunyan’s work against itself, or perverting it in any way—he is respectfully adapting it to his own purpose, a purpose which is opposite that of Bunyan’s in many ways, but Darger shows no anger or malevolence towards *Pilgrim’s Progress*, only respect. The same can be said for his attitude towards God in this section. While the overall structure and implicit messages are deeply searching and question God’s involvement in the state of the City of Destruction, there are no direct accusations. This is something separate from Henry’s fiery anger at God that would arise when he burned pictures of saints and cursed God. This is a true, deep soul-searching, and perhaps the most fully integrated moment in *The Realms*, as far as Darger’s identity work goes. This section is not the work of one part of Darger’s starkly divided identity—it is not coming from the ultra-pious Darger who only wants to please God, nor

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<sup>90</sup> Lerner *et al.*, *Darger's Room*, 83

<sup>91</sup> See note 76

from the evil atheist Darger who defies God and wants to break from him, nor is it from the cowardly Darger who wants no part in these struggles and wars. This comes from a seemingly more unified Darger, one who recognizes his anger and disappointment with God, but also registers his faith in that God—a Darger who, like all deeply religious men, is trying to reconcile these feelings, and is coming up short. Strangely enough, this unified Darger only became possible not through fighting over which Darger in *The Realms* was in control of the authorship, but through channeling his own voice through a completely separate author, and a completely separate text. Only by appropriating and altering *Pilgrim's Progress* could Henry Darger's most unified and searching message come through.

Now we, unlike Darger and Starring, can leave the City of Destruction behind, and move on to further examples of Darger's appropriation and alteration program, and the ways it contributed to the reflection and creation of his identity within *The Realms*, primarily in the example of Jeff, who represents a failed experiment in Darger's identity work. Mutt & Jeff were characters in a newspaper comic strip while Darger was alive, a strip named after the pair. In the comic strip, Mutt is the dominant character, a grifter and fast-talker; Jeff is the subordinate character, shorter than Mutt, and originally rescued from an insane asylum by Mutt.<sup>92</sup> Darger was a rather short man, and had also spent time in a mental institution, so it's unsurprising that when he borrowed the characters for his own purposes, he made Jeff the dominant character, the one who always had the plans and something to say. The tall character, short character dynamic duo was not an uncommon trope for Darger to have used, but by using one specifically in which the short character was subordinate, Darger was able to upset the expectations of a potential reader, and more forcefully assert his own role as an important and forceful person. More so, the

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<sup>92</sup> Moon, *Resources*, 96

characters, as Darger uses them, are spies for the evil Glandelinian army—and yet they are both Catholics.<sup>93</sup> We see here the tensions once again that are endemic to Darger’s work. Jeff is clearly a Darger surrogate in certain important ways, being a short character with a tall friend (Darger’s one friend was a tall man by the name of William Schloeder),<sup>94</sup> and having, like Jeff, escaped from a mental institution. This character is made the dynamic and dominant figure, and is both a Catholic (good) and a Glandelinian spy (bad). The appropriation of this character seems to be a rather unique way for Henry to try to resolve his inner tensions. First, he asserts his desire to be “his own man” by breaking free of the expectations set up by his borrowing of Mutt & Jeff, making Jeff the more dominant. He reinforces this by placing this character on the side of the Atheist Glandelinians, and yet still keeping his Catholic faith. This character is a man who can be his own man and do as he wishes, but without giving up his faith in God—a prospect Darger would have been very excited about. Ultimately though, this strategy proved untenable; no one can give themselves fully to two warring ideals.<sup>95</sup> Darger’s versions of Jeff and Mutt do not take on much significance in *The Realms*. It appears that this character was an experiment in Darger’s struggle to find a balance between being true to himself and true to his God; maybe an important experiment, but one doomed to fail.

One final example of an appropriation that shows up in Henry Darger’s artwork as well as his writing is that of mortarboard hats, or as Darger called them, “college professor hats.”<sup>96</sup> This name shows exactly what Darger was trying to say by using these hats as part of the uniform for the Evil atheist army. There is a definite touch of bitterness there, as is often felt by intelligent people who resent the pomposity and arrogance of those academics who think

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<sup>93</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 251

<sup>94</sup> Bonesteel, "Henry Darger's Great Crusade," 273

<sup>95</sup> Campbell, *Creative Mythology*, 298-402

<sup>96</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 191

themselves more intelligent than those who did not attend college, but more than just that bitterness is happening here. Knowledge qua evil is a very old tradition in Christianity, and one that every Sunday school student who has studied Genesis is familiar with. In Christian mythology, eating the fruit of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil caused the fall of mankind from perfection into sin. By putting these hats, symbols of knowledge, onto the enemy, Darger is placing himself once more into the Christian tradition, but in his own new way, avoiding the old clichés.

But more than that, he is also engaging in a complicated battle with his own ideas of self. Part of Henry's mission in writing was to prove himself to be an intelligent man<sup>97</sup>—something he felt he needed to prove, since this had been challenged in his childhood by his incarceration in the Home for Feeble-minded Children. His desire to prove his intelligence is showcased in his use of detail in his work. His battles and various scenes are almost obsessively detailed, telling the path of every bullet, the clothes of every soldier, the movements of every regiment; it can become a boring chore to read. But Darger's own ideas about the detail are shown explicitly in his later writing, in a "sequel" to *The Realms* that he called *Crazy House: Further Adventures in Chicago*. At one point in this book, Penrod returns from investigating a series of fires in New York City, and he tells the Vivian Sisters about his investigation "with an accuracy of detail that astonished his hearers and drove secret fear into him who... had never supposed Penrod's power of observation and deduction."<sup>98</sup> Here, detailed observation is obviously very closely aligned with intelligence, and an intimidating intelligence at that—a connection which holds true in all of his work. So Darger's close alignment of knowledge with evil is not as simple as it first appears. He is placing himself in this long Christian tradition, but he is also engaging in the struggle with

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid 105

<sup>98</sup> Darger, *Crazy House*, 2564

his own divided ideas of self. He wants to think of himself as knowledgeable, but his tradition declares knowledge as the beginning of evil. He assigns “professor hats” to the evil army, and yet Hendro Darger, one of his own representatives in *The Realms*, is described as a professor. If we add to this the fact that the Evil General Darger was part of the “professor hat”-wearing army, we can see the full extent of the tension between Henry’s ideas of who and what he is; how does one deal with the contradictions in his own ideas of self? Darger sees himself as a Christian, but he also wants to value knowledge highly, and he wants to be his own man, as well as God’s man. By borrowing this evil-knowledge trope of the Christian tradition and importing it into his own world to treat in his own way, Darger makes clear the contradictions and struggles that arise for anyone who wishes to identify themselves in multiple ways. He cannot be everything he wishes to be, and this is the core struggle of *The Realms*, displayed in everything from the epic battles to the struggle over authorship to the wearing of a mortarboard cap.

The study of Darger's appropriations in this chapter is one not so entirely different from the same study applied to any other writer. Darger's life and experiences influenced what he thought about, what he paid attention to, what he mulled over and wrote about, and all of this affects his art, and how he performs it. This is much the same as with any artist. So why then do so many who study Darger (and almost any other marginal artist) insist that everything in his work was just "reflections of an internal climate fluctuating from day to day within one man," as John MacGregor voices the idea?<sup>99</sup> Michael Bonesteel may be correct, in some ways, when he says that "it may be necessary to evaluate the literary merit or worth of the *Realms* by

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<sup>99</sup> MacGregor, *Henry Darger*, 110

different literary criteria than those normally applied to the field of professional literature,"<sup>100</sup> but he is wrong in other, fundamental ways. The implicit thought process behind comments like these is that Henry Darger and other marginal voices are too naïve or ignorant to produce a worthwhile piece of literature, at least intentionally; the only way to study Darger, then, is to assume that anything of merit in his work is there innocently, unconsciously, a mere reflection of something he was not aware of. This view disrespects the author and his text, and risks missing out on many beautifully well-crafted moments within the text, as I have demonstrated in the use of Darger's appropriation. True, *The Realms* was a deeply personal project for Darger, but many writers have great personal investment in their work; this has never stopped people from treating these works as artistic rather than purely psychological documents.

Henry Darger's method of appropriating and altering pre-existing texts, tropes, and characters creates a rich and deeply resonant strategy in which he could explore his own identity and religious questions, and in which his readers can explore these same issues, questioning what is gained by borrowing from a certain source and by changing it in the way he does. Such readings of Darger can be deeply rewarding. One of the richest sites of such a study is in his use of *Pilgrim's Progress*, as examined above; yet the lead scholar in Darger studies instead treats Darger's appropriation of this text as a way of getting an affect that Darger couldn't get on his own. MacGregor says that Darger used *Pilgrim's Progress* "in attempting to embody these dark and frightening events in a form surpassing cold naturalism or scientific objectivity," and that he modified the book to "suit his own purposes, his own deepest needs." In other words, Henry Darger couldn't get across "dark and frightening" events on his own, so he plagiarized someone

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<sup>100</sup>Michael Bonesteel, "Henry Darger's Search for the Grail in the Guise of the Celestial Child," in *Third Person: Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 255

who could. And in collapsing Henry's "purposes" with his "deepest needs," MacGregor reveals this idea that rests behind his study: Henry didn't know what he was doing; he was only following deep psychological imperatives beyond his control. In taking this view, MacGregor blocks himself from a far deeper study of Darger's work, and especially a study of his numerous borrowings. Darger could be a masterful writer, and his work in borrowing and changing other cultural elements to suit his own intentional purposes deserves to be studied with respect—it is the place where he performs some of his most moving and effective identity work, and the place where we can most fully see his messages.

## CONCLUSION

Even leaving aside its extraordinary length, *In the Realms of the Unreal* can be very difficult to read, given its bad spellings, twisted syntax, often-stiff characters, and scenes that can be both gruesome and repetitive. Despite all this *The Realms* can also be a very rewarding read, especially if undertaken properly. There is an overwhelming tendency to read Darger's work as a poorly written story, worthwhile only because of the psychological implications it reveals about its author, as if he were a completely unwitting naïf, doing little more than puttering the time away and leaving an unintentional Freudian trail of breadcrumbs behind him. While his work is deeply personal, and deeply rooted in his struggle with his sense of self, it is also, in many ways, a finely crafted piece of writing, deserving to be studied in its own right, as I hope I've given some demonstration of in the preceding two chapters. It seems that various methods of study either try to cut out how personal a text is, or how it can operate on its own as a text. In the case of Darger and other marginal writers, studies of their work tend to lack in a view of the work that treats it as anything other than a personal document, to be mined for psychological details. In modern studies of more mainstream writers, academics often shy away from admitting that the text ever came from a human mind at all, treating it merely as a text without source or origin.<sup>101</sup> There seems almost an unspoken consensus that mixing these two methods is bad practice, and "listening" to the text to see which treatment is merited at a given moment is something of a sell-out, a betrayal of the academic imperative for inflexible frameworks. But when it comes to literature, we do not have a science. We have to run on feeling and instinct as much as anything else. I hope that in approaching the study of Henry Darger's work in a way that admits and explores the personal nature of the text, but uses this personal origin to examine the art of the

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<sup>101</sup> See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

work—rather than sticking stubbornly to a view of the work that is only personal and psychological—I have managed to show even a small piece of the authorial talent of Henry Darger. The examples I chose here were his use of authorial claims and his strategic program of appropriation and alteration, but I am sure many other examples of his artfulness lie in his work, waiting for an eye that will respect them as artfully crafted, and be sensitive to their deeply personal points of origin.

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