

**“Deep in Mines of Old Belief”:
Gnosticism in Modern Canadian Literature**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers an original contribution to Canadian literary studies by examining how – following the historical exegesis of Gnosticism in a series of publications in the late 1970s – Canadian writers began to incorporate the Gnostic heresies of antiquity into their writing as a subversive, imagistic framework or “language” with which to explore wisdom, salvation, spirituality, sexuality, and gender outside of conventional Christian thought.

Using Robertson Davies’s *The Rebel Angels* (1981), Morley Callaghan’s *A Time for Judas* (1983), and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) as the project’s focus, I demonstrate how these literary works use the heresy of Gnosticism as a conceit to confront both the reader and the novels’ characters with the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in knowing the self and the attainment of wisdom. Curiously, as I show, all three novels stand as exceptions within the authors’ respective *oeuvres*, using meta-fictional techniques such as multiple narrators, *mise en abyme*, and the blending of the present with an invented biblical or historical past to unsettle the possibility of achieving self-knowledge in a personal or, at times, a national sense. For each novel, the multiple narratives recapitulate the notion of multiple perspectives as found in the historical gospels. Likewise, the incorporation of Gnosticism highlights what the characters (and occasionally the authors themselves) identify as deficits in

orthodox religion's ability to account for the spiritual and moral lives of women and the individual's role in salvation.

That Gnosticism found its way into Canadian literature can be attributed, in part, to the sudden availability of Gnostic materials in translation, New Age thinking and spirituality, and – in some cases – a broader (and border) anxiety concerning Canada's understanding of religion in terms of its own national character, and particularly in relation to its southern neighbour. To this end, a close examination of these three particular novels suggests that these are not separate, unrelated efforts; but rather, that they gesture collectively to alternative interpretations of a constructed past.

Keywords: Twentieth Century Canadian Fiction; Gnosticism; Robertson Davies; Morley Callaghan; Margaret Atwood

DEDICATION

For my brother Adrian and my grandmother Wilhelmina, both of whom passed away during the final months of this project.

And for my loving parents, whose sacrifice and hard work made it possible for me to get an education.

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INTRODUCTION:

I ... do not remember, if I ever knew, who the Gnostics are, perhaps shouldn't even try to read [Borges] – but he says a great deal to me. His parables deal w[ith] what one can refer to as “artistic creation” – or creations or discovery. His labyrinths are tunnels for seekers – and writers are par excellence seekers (if I can't find it, I'll invent it) as are, of course, also explorers, artists, inventors, scientists, etc.

- Marian Engel, on reading Jorge Luis Borges, 1970-71

This study aims to make an original contribution to literary studies by exploring a little-addressed aspect of the Canadian religious imagination. The specific focus of the dissertation is to map the extent to which three major Canadian writers – Robertson Davies, Morley Callaghan, and Margaret Atwood – have in recent decades acquainted themselves with the Gnostic heresies of antiquity, and adapted some of those ideas into their writing. This incorporation of Gnostic thought, I will show, is employed as a “language” of sorts, by which these literary works variously seek to restore the role of the feminine in religion, to explore versions of a constructed past, and to emphasize – through the Gnostics' unique conception of *gnosis* – the importance of self-knowledge in relation to wisdom. This project thus casts its authors as theologically creative and intellectually adventurous agents, whose conflation of the ordinary and the revelatory has produced in their fiction an uncommon and as-yet-unexamined

interpretive framework for exploring gender, wisdom, and salvation outside of conventional orthodox thinking.¹

Although not exclusively limited to Christianity, “Gnosticism” is a modern scholarly term for a set of religious beliefs and spiritual practices found among some of the early Christian groups called “Gnostic” (“learned”) by Irenaeus, an early church father and apologist, and other early Christian heresiologists. The term also refers to parallels and possible pre-Christian influences of the Christian Gnostics, as well as to people who similarly believed they possessed insight into the divine mysteries.² Broadly put, the Gnostic of antiquity displayed a contempt for the material world and its authorities in favour of a higher, spiritual plane, as well as a mythological structure that involves the fall of the spirit or *pneuma* (divine spark) into the world, its entrapment there, and its eventual liberation to return to its original home in the *pleroma* (divine Fullness) that exists beyond our cosmos.³ Gnostics generally believed that humanity is alienated in the universe from God, and that the world we inhabit, which serves as our prison, was created by an evil demiurge. Thus, for the Gnostic, human beings consist of the flesh (an

¹ By “orthodox,” I mean conforming to the Christian faith as represented in the creeds of the early church.

² There has long been debate over the precise meanings of “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism,” especially since most of the people in antiquity whom we may call “Gnostics” do not appear to have described themselves that way. *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (1996) by Michael Williams, and the more recent *What is Gnosticism?* (2005) by Karen King – have been instrumental in dismantling the notion of a monolithic movement called “Gnosticism.”

³ Notably, Carl Jung uses the word “pleroma” in his mystical 1916 unpublished work, “Seven Sermons to the Dead,” which was finally published in *Answer to Job* (1952), and later in an appendix to the second edition of Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962). According to Jung, the pleroma is both “nothing and everything. It is quite fruitless to think about pleroma. Therein both thinking and being cease, since the eternal and infinite possess no qualities” (87).

extension of the fallen, material world), the soul, and the spirit (*pneuma*). The spirit is the divine self, the part that is unified with the Father. The body is the base or bestial self, influenced by earthly desires. The soul is the rational and psychological self that we most often identify as “ourselves,” and it is this part that connects the other two. It is the soul that sins by choosing the flesh over the Father, and it is the soul that can be saved by looking inward and finding that spirit which is the remnant of God within him. For this reason the Gnostics held that those persons who rely on faith alone cannot be saved; rather, only those who possess self-knowledge (*gnosis*), or knowingly maintain the divine spark within them – an awareness of their divine origin – can attain salvation.

Unsurprisingly, the Gnostic of antiquity – whether of Jewish, Christian, or Sufi origin – was deeply at odds with orthodox religion. Most of the original Gnostic writings were lost, or destroyed by church authorities, and so for many years, knowledge of Gnosticism was filtered through the writings of Christian opponents such as Irenaeus.⁴ However, in December 1945, a cache of twelve papyrus codices and the remains of a thirteenth, buried in a sealed jar, were discovered in Upper Egypt near the town of Nag Hammadi by a local peasant

⁴ See Kaler. Around 180 AD, Irenaeus wrote a scathing refutation of Gnostic belief and practice called *Against Heresies*. He summarized Gnostic views before refuting them, and his accounts have proved to be fairly accurate when compared to the actual Gnostic sources. The original *Against Heresies* was written in Greek; our earliest surviving manuscript is in Latin and may date to 400 AD or as early as 200 AD. Another early anti-Gnostic writer was St. Hippolytus (d. c.236), a presbyter of Rome and probably a disciple of St. Irenaeus. Hippolytus is thought to be the author of at least part of *Refutation of all Heresies*, also known as the *Philosophumena*. Discovered in 1842, *Refutation* aims to show that heresies were derived from pagan philosophies, and it quotes some Gnostic sources in doing so. Similarly, Tertullian, who lived in Carthage from about 145 to 220 AD, was a propagandist who penned numerous attacks against Gnostic heresy. Among his anti-heretical treatises, written in Latin, are *The Prescription Against Heretics*, *Against Marcion*, *Against the Valentinians*, and *Against Praxeas*.

named Muhammad 'Alí al-Sammán.⁵ These codices had most likely been buried since the late fourth century; they contained about fifty-two writings – roughly twelve hundred pages – translated into Coptic, the language used by Egyptian Christians roughly 1500 years ago, from even more ancient original manuscripts. The find represents the most comprehensive collection of Gnostic writing ever retrieved.⁶ As Elaine Pagels points out, included were a collection of early, previously unknown Christian gospels. Aside from the widely-reported *The Gospel of Thomas*, which contains sayings and parables of Jesus not found in other gospels, along with more original and esoteric versions of Jesus's well-known sayings, the Nag Hammadi discovery included *The Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Truth* and the *Gospel to the Egyptians* (*The Gnostic Gospels* xvi). Another group of texts from Nag Hammadi consists of writings that have been

⁵ For thirty years, the circumstances surrounding the find were long-shrouded in mystery, perhaps because the discovery was accidental, and its sale on the black market illegal. Indeed, as the story goes, the peasant Muhammad 'Alí and his brothers had saddled their camels and gone out to dig for *sabakh*, a soft soil used to fertilize crops. Around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar almost a meter in height. Inside the jar were thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Later sold on the black market through antiquities dealers in Cairo, the manuscripts attracted the attention of the Egyptian government, who bought one and confiscated the rest, depositing them in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. But a large part of the thirteenth codex, containing five extraordinary texts, was smuggled out of Egypt and offered for sale in America. Professor Gilles Quispel, a historian of religion at Utrecht in the Netherlands, eventually urged the Jung Foundation in Zurich to buy the codex (later known as the Jung Codex) in 1955.

⁶ It is important to note that other documents – generally classed by scholars as Gnostic were known *prior* to the Nag Hammadi Library discovery. These include, for instance, the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Gospel According to Mary*, and early fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas*. For decades, modern understanding of Gnosticism was dependent upon these documents (many of which became available only in the last century) and upon the comments of the early Christian heresiologists until the discovery at Nag Hammadi in 1945. The Nag Hammadi Library has since been valuable for helping to put all of these previously known documents into a more complete context. For a comprehensive list and history of pre-1945 Gnostic discoveries, see Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900), which remains a striking piece of scholarship on the subject.

attributed to Jesus's followers, such as the *Secret Book of James*, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.⁷

Notably, scholars investigating the Nag Hammadi materials found that some of the texts retell the origin of the human race in terms that are incongruous with the traditional Christian reading of Genesis. *The Testimony of Truth*, for example, *inverts* the popular story of the Garden of Eden, recounting it instead from the viewpoint of the serpent. In that alternative account, the serpent – a figure that recurs in Gnostic literature as a saviour, or at times as an emblem of divine wisdom – convinces Adam and Eve to partake of the knowledge of Good and Evil. “The Lord,” in turn, in an act of jealousy, tries to prevent them from attaining that knowledge, and subsequently expels them from Paradise once they achieve it. Still another Nag Hammadi text, a short work entitled *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, is a poem or incantation spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am and the daughter.
I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one
 and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great,
 and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am the solace of my labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom,
 and it is my husband who begot me.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, any naming of individual Gnostic texts in the dissertation refers to those that can be found in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English*. See Robinson.

I am the mother of my father
and the sister of my husband
and he is my offspring.
I am the slave of him who prepared me.
I am the ruler of my offspring ...
I am the silence that is incomprehensible
and the idea whose remembrance is frequent.
I am the voice whose sound is manifold
and the word whose appearance is multiple.
I am the utterance of my name. (Robinson 432)

The diversity of the Nag Hammadi texts cannot be overstated. Of special interest to most commentators are those materials deemed “gospels”: namely, the aforementioned *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*. Another category of documents, however, concerns the work and circumstances of the apostles: *The Apocalypse of Paul* relates the heavenly journey of Paul; *The Revelation of Peter* describes knowledge Jesus gave to Peter prior to Peter’s imprisonment; and *The Revelation of James* describes the death of James. Still other materials, largely mythological in nature, reflect upon such broad topics as creation, redemption, and human beings’ ultimate destiny. Included in this category are: *On the Origin of the World*, *Secret Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, *Revelation of Adam*, *The Thought of our Great Power*, *The Paraphrase of Shem*, *The Second Logos of the Great Seth*, and *The Trimorphic Protennoia*.

Today, nearly seventy years later, the Nag Hammadi discovery continues to reshape our understanding of early Christian history. Unlike the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Qumran caves near the Dead Sea in 1947, which raised further doubts about the historicity – even the identity – of Jesus, the Nag

Hammadi texts have forced a re-examination of early Christian communities by underscoring the diversity of beliefs and practices among early followers of Jesus. As Princeton religion professor and Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels explained shortly after the announcement of another Gnostic tract, *The Gospel of Judas*, in 2006:

For nearly 2,000 years, most people assumed that the only sources of tradition about Jesus and his disciples were the four gospels in the New Testament. But the unexpected discovery at Nag Hammadi ... proved what church fathers said long ago: that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are only a small selection of gospels from among the dozens that circulated among early Christian groups. But now *The Gospel of Judas* – like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and many others – opens up new perspectives on familiar gospel stories. (“*The Gospel of Truth*”)

The Gospel of Judas aptly illustrates Pagels’s point. In contrast to the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that paint Judas as Christ’s betrayer who delivered him to the authorities for crucifixion, the anonymous author of *The Gospel of Judas* subverts the authority of the other gospels by instead casting Judas as a willing *collaborator* in Jesus’s death. Judas betrays Jesus not out of self-interest, we learn, but rather as an obedient disciple following Christ’s instructions. In *The Gospel of Judas*, Jesus informs Judas, “you will exceed all of [my disciples]. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me” (Robinson 32) – suggesting that by aiding Jesus in getting rid of his physical flesh, Judas will be acting to liberate the true spiritual self or divine being who exists *within* Jesus (King and Pagels 32). Thus, for the modern reader, accounts such as these are tempting for the manner in which they invite questioning,

reflection, and speculation – of Judas, but more broadly of what is understood as biblical “canon.”

Doubts about the historicity of Jesus did not first emerge with Nag Hammadi, but instead were seriously proposed by the 19th century Protestant “higher criticism” of the Bible. Yet even critics of Gnosticism have recognized the importance of what was uncovered in Egypt. Although religious scholar David Harris laments that many people are too easily seduced by the unusual, even heretical, ideas that circulated in the early church – as well as by translated lost gospel accounts that tell different stories about Jesus’s life – he claims that such documents nonetheless have their purpose.⁸ “Far from being a threat to orthodox faith,” he insists, the newly-discovered Gnostic texts “give a glimmer of the breadth of theological debate in the church’s early years ... [T]hey help us avoid the trap of thinking that the way we articulate our central beliefs is the way it always was in the church.” Indeed, Harris notes, these texts have led a new generation of Christians to re-examine the roots of their religion. Those who are willing to dismiss the Bible as entirely the literal word of God instead begin to regard “the canon” as a product of historical and political forces. It is those same forces that determined which writings should be included in the canon, and which edited out.

⁸ Harris cites Dan Brown’s best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), as an example of a work that has attracted a vast numbers of readers by advancing the Gnostic idea that Mary Magdalene was of high standing in the early church; or, more specifically, that she was Jesus’s wife, partner, confidante, beloved disciple, and the “apostle to the apostles” (Harris 14). Brown’s use of Gnosticism – as well as his depiction of the church’s early history – has since come under criticism for its inaccuracies and omissions.

Yet, for several decades after the Nag Hammadi find, knowledge of the Gnostics and their beliefs remained largely confined to academics. The reasons are many: in brief, however, publication of those works was delayed by numerous unforeseen obstacles – partly owing to endless scholarly intrigues and manipulations, but also on account of access to the texts being deliberately suppressed because, as was generally suspected, orthodox Christians feared revelations which might upset the faith (Harris). By 1977, however, all of the materials had finally appeared in translation for the first time as *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, and critical editions began to follow – including those prepared by the ongoing *Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi* project at Laval University in Quebec City. A handful of key publications, particularly Elaine Pagels’s book-length exegesis, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), also disseminated and popularized the Nag Hammadi accounts. Today these works are often credited with generating scholarly interest and awakening public curiosity about the Gnostic religion. Unsurprisingly, then, although a number of writers had been exposed to Gnosticism previously through other sources, it was through many of these late 1970s explications that Gnosticism found expression in contemporary literature. The attraction for writers was the Gnostics’ unorthodox and subversive ideas about salvation as well as the symbolically charged accounts of the creation and function of the universe we inhabit. For many writers, the Gnostic vision seemed to better account for God’s perceived indifference and the

presence of suffering in the world by positing that the world itself is an illusion, an error.⁹

To this end, although some work has been done to expound a Canadian connection to Gnosticism in modernity, much of this has been achieved only tangentially. In *Catching the Wind in a Net: The Religious Vision of Robertson Davies* (1996), for instance, Dave Little briefly probes the Gnostic ideas in Davies's fiction – echoing a similar study performed by Rev. Brian Thorpe in his doctoral dissertation at McGill University a decade earlier. Other explications of writers' interest in the Gnostics have been similarly scattered: Rosemary Sullivan's *Shadow Maker* (1995), a biography of Gwendolyn MacEwen, refers briefly to MacEwen's interest in Gnostic texts as one of the poet's many arcane interests; George Woodcock, commenting on Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) in 1986, argues for that novel's function as a "Gnostic

⁹ In addition to descriptions and quotations by ancient authors hostile to Gnosticism, a few original Gnostic texts had been discovered prior to 1945. In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels briefly catalogues these texts. She notes, "The first [text] emerged in 1769, when a Scottish tourist named James Bruce bought a Coptic manuscript near Thebes (modern Luxor) in Upper Egypt. Published only in 1892, it claims to record conversations of Jesus with his disciples - a group that here includes both men and women. In 1773 a collector found in a London bookshop an ancient text, also in Coptic, that contained a dialogue on 'mysteries' between Jesus and his disciples. In 1896 a German Egyptologist, alerted by the previous publications, bought in Cairo a manuscript that, to his amazement, contained *The Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene) and three other texts. Three copies of one of them, the *Apocryphon* (Secret Book) of John were also included among the gnostic library discovered at Nag Hammadi fifty years later" (xxiv).

parable”¹⁰; and finally, Donald Theall’s *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (1999) includes a chapter (“McLuhan and the Cults: Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Modernism”) that addresses McLuhan’s occult interests, of which Gnosticism was a part. Yet, despite these rather brief treatments, no comprehensive study has been undertaken to examine Canadian writers and religiosity within the context of either ancient or so-called modern Gnosticism. This deficit therefore invites an accounting of modern Canadian writers’ roles and interests with respect to the transmission and appropriation of Gnostic ideas in their own literary works – particularly at a time when interest in ancient and so-called “modern” Gnosticism remains strong in academia, and whose study is being driven in increasingly nuanced and precise directions.¹¹ The historical and cultural context of the advent of Gnosticism in Canadian intellectual history from the 1970s onward thus provides a locus for inquiry. To this end, although the dissertation uses three modern Canadian “Gnostic” novels as the centre of its inquiry – Robertson Davies’s *The Rebel Angels* (1981), Morley Callaghan’s *A Time For Judas* (1983), and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) – it also includes brief mention of further threads of Gnosticism as they pertain to other

¹⁰ See Woodcock, *Canadian Literature* 111 (Winter 1986): 232-36. See also Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1992). Despite the unorthodox, Blakean theological inversions in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Ketterer believes Woodcock to be a “little heavy-handed” in labelling Findley’s novel a “Gnostic parable.” “True, Findley’s Lucifer is the good guy,” Ketterer writes, “and his God Yahweh (like the Gnostic demiurge) is the bad guy, the creator (via the Flood) of a fallen material world, and at one point Noah’s daughter-in-law Hannah does ‘read aloud to him from the works of various Gnostic magicians,’ but in no consistent fashion is Findlay advocating a gnostic philosophy” (114). Findley’s partner, Bill Whitehead, has confirmed to me separately that Findley did not maintain a personal interest in the Gnostics, nor did his library contain titles on the subject.

¹¹ I am referring to the recent debates surrounding the definition of “Gnostic,” as well as interest in Nag Hammadi codex organization and the overlaps that can be observed between Gnosticism and ancient philosophy. See Kaler.

prominent modern Canadian writers and thinkers, so as to illustrate the breadth of this phenomenon at the time.

Through the use of archival sources, an historical and cultural reappraisal of the revival of Gnosticism in modernity (Williams, 1999; Davis, 1999; Rossbach, 1999; Wilson, 2006; Bloom, 2006), as well as a close reading of three “Gnostic” novels of late twentieth-century Canadian literature, I will show the extent, and the particular ways in which Canadian writers have been active (if indirect) participants in the development of a modern Gnostic literary tradition. Indeed, Gnosticism, I will argue, offered these writers a strongly imagistic and subversive language of sorts with which to query religious orthodoxy, Canadian religious and intellectual traditions, and the conventions that surround history and gender. This is an aspect of the Canadian religious imagination that has not has been sufficiently explored in the past. In addressing this lacuna, this project builds upon the aforementioned brief fragments available in Canadian literary scholarship, but more closely parallels the scope and comprehensiveness of studies that have been performed similarly for European (Grimstad, 2002; Nuttal, 1998, Goodall, 1994), Asian (Klimkeit, 1993) and American literature (Eddins, 1989; Bloom, 1994, 1996; O’Leary, 2002; Howard, 2005). The significance of this project, I contend, is its inherent implications; namely, what a “modern” Gnostic phenomenon tells us about how deeply Canadian writers have explored the tensions between modernity and conservatism – particularly insofar as how religious traditions have informed daily life, including politics, education,

community values, and general behaviour. In the three cases I examine, the novels adopt similar approaches. All three literary works use metafictional techniques such as multiple narrators, *mise en abyme*, and the blending of the present with an invented biblical or historical past to unsettle the nature of truth, as well as to examine the possibility of achieving self-knowledge in a personal or, at times, a national sense.

Chapter 1, "The Modern Resurgence of Gnosticism," begins with a brief history of the means by which the tenets of ancient Gnosticism first entered public view in the 1970s, and have since lingered in certain religious, political, philosophical, and psychological discourses. This chapter elucidates the reasons for the public's interest, as well as the influence that a wide dissemination of Gnostic thought has had on contemporary writers and thinkers. It also serves as a short introduction to the expression of Gnostic thought in modern-day Western literature and culture: Gnostic transmissions have, in recent decades, become a familiar characteristic of, for instance, American science fiction and fantasy but, have also surfaced in other popular genres, including music, film, and television. In this chapter, I use selected examples of these forms as evidence of the bonds that have formed between Gnosticism and contemporary feminism, Gnosticism and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered spirituality, and Gnosticism and technology.

Chapter 2, "Gnosticism's Influence in Modern North American and Canadian Literature," aims to show how the affinities mentioned in Chapter 1

have been crucial to the establishment of a modern Gnostic literary tradition, particularly by those authors for whom the “Gnostic experience” deepens and affirms the meaning of that which is beyond traditional means of knowing. Apart from the appropriations of Gnosticism by well-known North American and South American authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Toni Morrison, and Philip K. Dick, this chapter extends these earlier lines of inquiry to a broader development of the Gnostic imagination in Canada. For a number of Canadian writers mentioned in this dissertation, their awareness and interest in the Gnostics can be discerned through both publically available and unpublished archival records, and occasionally – as in the case of Jay Macpherson and Margaret Atwood – through my own correspondence with these writers. Other writers and thinkers included in this chapter are Anne Carson, Marshall McLuhan, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Marian Engel, Jay Macpherson, and Northrop Frye, each of whom read about the ancient Gnostics and contemplated a Gnostic worldview. Much of this interest, I will show, was achieved independently through the authors’ own research into the Gnostics of antiquity. Some Canadian writers, such as Marian Engel, however, better illustrate what Peter O’Leary (2002) has termed “Gnostic contagion”; that is, an initiatic lineage by which Gnostic ideas have been passed down between authors.¹² Still others, such as Gwendolyn MacEwen and Anne

¹² In the case of the latter, I am referring to authors who read the works of other writers both within and outside of Canada who had already begun to incorporate Gnostic ideas into their writing. In his study, O’Leary’s probes the relationship between Sigmund Freud and American poets H.D. and Robert Duncan; however, I would contend that his thesis of influence can be successfully applied to a string of American and Canadian writers. Many writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko or William Gibson, have remarked in interviews that they were first introduced to Gnosticism via Jonas’s and Pagels’s bestselling studies. Other instances, such as Philip K.

Carson, can be viewed in terms of their “Gnostic sensibility,” or the ways in which the displayed attitudes toward personal knowledge and anti-patriarchal structures bear strong parallels to a Gnostic worldview, but hold little or no discernable connection to Gnosticism in antiquity. Thus, this chapter is intended to provide a broad and brief analysis of those contemporaries who took up an interest in Gnosticism in the 1970s and 80s. Subsequent chapters in the dissertation offer a close reading of the Gnostic worldview in Robertson Davies’s *The Rebel Angels*, Morley Callaghan’s *A Time for Judas*, and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, derived from archival sources as well as available correspondence and interviews.

In Chapter 3, “No Friend to Orthodoxy: Robertson Davies, Gnosticism, and *The Rebel Angels*,” I draw from Davies’s personal correspondence, as well as the author’s own comments in interview, to suggest a way of reading Davies’s relationship to the Gnostics of antiquity – one that gives new dimension to what has been previously understood concerning his attitude toward the Gnostics and the effect those ideas had on his fiction. More so than has been previously understood, I argue, Davies maintained a complex relationship with Gnostic thought, explicitly aligning himself with Gnostic attitudes toward salvation and the roles of women in spirituality and, at times, even labelling himself a Gnostic. The depth and complexity of Davies’s views in this regard have, to date, not been sufficiently explored, but once uncovered contribute greatly to our understanding

Dick’s reverence for Ursula LeGuin’s *Lathe of Heaven*, find authors openly divining Gnostic ideas from their contemporaries, and subsequently becoming influences for other authors through their own writing.

of both the man himself and the specific brand of spirituality that informed his work. It is with an eye to this affinity that the chapter goes on to propose a reading of Davies's 1981 novel *The Rebel Angels* that better accounts for the sudden and explicit appearance of Gnosticism in that work. Indeed, although a flirtation with Gnosticism in Davies's fiction can be observed in novels such as *Fifth Business* (1970) and *The Manticore* (1972), it is not until *The Rebel Angels* that the reader is confronted with a lengthy, explicit treatise on the nature of Gnosticism and the Gnostic Sophia. This anomaly, I contend, is one that can be explained by viewing *The Rebel Angels* independently of the author's canon and regarding it instead as a relative of the "Gnostic novel" – a sub-genre of fiction that had already begun to emerge in the United States around the time of the novel's genesis. To do so, I argue, finds *The Rebel Angels* eschewing traditional modes of knowledge in favour of arcane and hidden sources of wisdom. In this chapter, I begin by examining the history of Davies's known religious beliefs, and use letters from the author's collected correspondence, as well as remarks made in interview, to show his familiarity with and appreciation of Gnostic thought. The chapter then moves to a reading of *The Rebel Angels* that demonstrates how that work's inclusion of Gnosticism functions as an extension of the novel's broader comment on the value of hidden wisdom – one that mirrors the author's own attitude toward the Gnostics.

Chapter 4, "Morley Callaghan and the Gnostic Vision of *A Time For Judas*," uses the 2006 announcement of the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* as a lens

through which to revisit Morley Callaghan's 1983 novel. Apart from the (often remarkable) parallels between the depiction of Judas Iscariot unearthed in the historical gospel and the theory Callaghan advances in his novel, *A Time For Judas* finds the author working through many unorthodox ideas that signal a contemporary reworking of positions expressed earlier in his oeuvre. Like Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, I argue, *A Time For Judas* displays a familiarity and interest with Gnostic thought and materials drawn principally from the Nag Hammadi library – particularly with an eye to the Gnostic viewpoint on wisdom and salvation. *A Time For Judas*, I will show, was in many ways a bold manoeuvre on the author's part – one that, to date, has not garnered sufficient credit from the author's commentators. Using archival materials from the author's collected papers, I will show that Callaghan was deeply concerned about the novel's reception, especially in terms of how audiences would respond to his unorthodox characterization of Judas's character and the novel's theory concerning the role that the latter played in Christ's crucifixion. Moreover, Callaghan's novel can be viewed as part of a long line of literary inventions of Judas, but one that hews closely to then-recent publications involving the Gnostics of antiquity. *A Time For Judas*'s unorthodox characterization of Mary Magdalene echoes the Gnostics' *Gospel of Mary*, and was a likely inspiration for the Gnostic vision of Mary Whitney that appears in Atwood's 1996 novel *Alias Grace*. The chapter begins by first recounting the discovery of the historical *Gospel of Judas* and positioning the novel in the context of both the publication of

the Nag Hammadi library and of Davies's *The Rebel Angels*. The chapter then offers a reading of the novel itself, illustrating how the narrative framework of *A Time For Judas* deliberately obscures the truth of Judas's role in Jesus's arrest and crucifixion so as to remind us, through that tale's emergence, that stories such as Judas's (and by implication, those of the Gnostics in general) rely upon an individual's moral imperative to see the truth revealed, no matter the cost.

Chapter 5, "The Gospel According to Grace: Gnostic Heresy in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," builds upon the discussion of the previous two chapters. It does this by approaching Atwood's 1996 novel as a parodic reformulation not only of the "Gnostic romance" between Simon Darcourt and Maria Theotoky in Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, and the unorthodox Mary Magdalene who appears in Morley Callaghan's *A Time for Judas* (1983) – a novel Atwood reviewed – but also, more broadly, of feminist appropriations of Gnosticism in the 1990s. In this chapter, I argue that Atwood's *Alias Grace* brilliantly locates the potential for social commentary in the crime and incarceration of real-life Canadian "murderess" Grace Marks. By utilizing Gnostic myth and imagery – and emphasizing *gnosis* or self-knowledge – the novel locates in Grace Marks the alienation and suffering of the divine feminine. Such an approach, I argue, cleverly allows the author's version of Grace Marks to account for the suffering she has experienced and observed in the world, as well as a means to undermine the primacy given to others' accounts of her character by casting her own narrative as akin to an apocryphal gospel or a repository of hidden wisdom.

The chapter begins by examining Atwood's familiarity with Gnosticism and explains why, as part of that novel's narrative strategy, Gnosticism furthers feminist themes and ideas explored earlier by the author in her *oeuvre*. After briefly reporting the historical case on which *Alias Grace* is founded, as well as the author's early, unpublished attempts at the story, the chapter then proceeds to a reading of the novel which posits that each of the novel's invented characters serves to highlight specific Gnostic ideas or themes. In addition, I will also show how *Alias Grace* seems to playfully echo aspects of Davies's and Callaghan's novels.

In the conclusion of the dissertation, "The Lure of the Unmentionable': Gnosticism and the Canadian Writer," I return to the three primary novels in my study to offer some concluding observations on how the adoption of a Gnostic approach or narrative strategy in these works afforded the authors a powerfully subversive means of questioning modes of narrative, biblical, and historical authority.

CHAPTER 1: THE MODERN RESURGENCE OF GNOSTICISM

“Gnosticism” refers to an assortment of religious movements affiliated with Christianity – a Christian heresy that had its origins in the Roman Empire at least as early as the second century C.E.¹³ At its root is an inherently pessimistic view of life and the world, founded on the notion that the material cosmos was created by one or more lower demiurges; that is, by an entity or entities lower than, and distinct from, the most transcendent God (Williams 4).¹⁴ In Valentinus’ Gnostic cosmology (second century C.E.), the myth of Sophia (God’s Holy Wisdom) aptly illustrates some of these core tenets. In that account, Sophia somehow becomes dislodged from the *pleroma*, where the fullness of the Godhead resides.¹⁵ Hoping to regain her place through imitation, she gives birth to a demiurge, Yaldabaoth (the Hebrew God Yahweh) and instructs him to create a world. This Yaldabaoth does, but then, having gained a taste of divine power, he rebels against Sophia and contrives to keep Adam and Eve enslaved forever so that they would never obtain knowledge of their divine origin (Mabry 40). For

¹³ The following is not meant to provide a history of Gnosticism, but rather, to offer a brief description of Gnosticism and its current place in contemporary scholarship and culture insofar as it is relevant to my reading of Robertson Davies, Morley Callaghan, and Margaret Atwood, and of other modernist Canadian writers who drew upon Gnostic ideas. Also, although these movements had perhaps their greatest impact during the second and third centuries, some of them experienced some form of survival long after that.

¹⁴ The term “Gnosticism” seems to have originated in the eighteenth century, whereas “Gnosis” and “Gnostic” are Greek terms that are found in some of the ancient sources that either describe or represent examples of certain of the religious forms in question. Any study involving the rubric “Gnosticism,” “gnosis,” or “the Gnostic religion,” however, requires a caveat that these terms are relatively modern constructions used to represent the emergence of certain heretical forms of religious expression and practice in late antiquity. See Williams 7.

¹⁵ The heavenly *pleroma* was the center of the divine life, and Jesus was interpreted as an intermediary eternal being, or aeon, sent from the *pleroma* to restore the lost knowledge of humanity’s divine origin.

many Gnostics, then, Earth was a prison planet: The spirit of mankind was lost or “thrown” into a hostile world ruled by evil angels called “archons” who served as prison guards – among them Yaldabaoth – who together conspired to hold captive the spirit of humanity, thus keeping it enslaved in ignorance of its divine origin.

Within this fallen realm, however, there existed the possibility of freedom. Dismayed by Yaldabaoth’s actions, Sophia placed a spark of true divinity within Adam and Eve. Thus, she ensured that they and their kind would “feel the ache of separation from the fullness of the Godhead, and would long to return to it” (40). As religious scholar Kirsten Grimstad writes, the Gnostic believer thus faced his or her earthly predicament “with feelings of uncompromising hostility toward the body and the material universe, variously described [in Gnostic texts] as a ‘closed prison,’ an ‘abode of death,’ a ‘sea of darkness,’ and so forth” (8). Only through the cultivation of *gnosis*, an esoteric form of self-knowledge, could a person escape the world of darkness and error. *Gnosis*, in this sense, is best understood as a moment flooded with remembrance of the divine spirit within, and of its true home in the heavenly fullness or *pleroma* that lies beyond the world. However, to achieve *gnosis* is difficult: The desire to remain asleep or ignorant, unaware of the greater truth, is a constant problem for the Gnostic. The “true” God, observing these events from the *pleroma*, decided to help humankind, and sent the serpent to the garden to help Adam and Eve in their plight. Acting on the serpent’s counsel, the pair ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and

evil, and their eyes were opened to their incarceration. However, before they could eat of the other tree which would break the archons' power, Yaldabaoth interceded and succeeded in keeping them captive, though they were no longer ignorant of their plight (Grimstad 10).¹⁶ Subsequently, the Gnostics held secret formulas, which they believed would free them at death from the evil archons and restore them to their heavenly abode.¹⁷ More importantly, knowledge of this fallen condition, and of the Gnostic potential for salvation, was communicated to others in secret, but only to those persons who might recognize and accept new doctrines.

A Problem of Definition

Although widely recognized by contemporary scholars as a term that encompasses several pre-Christian and early-Christian belief systems, one of the most controversial issues in the present-day study of Gnosticism remains a *definition* of the term itself. The reason for this debate, and its relevance to subsequent chapters in this dissertation, is that it is difficult to discern the circumstances under which anything after the disappearance of classical Gnosticism can be called "Gnostic." "Was the Gnostic world-view transmitted to

¹⁶ In the fullness of time, the true God from the top of the Pleromic hierarchy sent Christ to teach humanity how to break the power of the archons once and for all, and to woo Sophia back into the Pleroma. Thus, Christ, in the Gnostics' view, was not God, but was not human, either. Being a divine, angelic being, Christ could not contaminate himself by actual contact with matter. This obscenity was avoided by merely seeming to be human. Far enough down the divine totem pole to live as a spiritual being amongst creatures of flesh, Christ nonetheless had no corporeal nature of his own, but took on the appearance of flesh in order to teach against the archons and thereby to liberate humanity.

¹⁷ See Valentinus for typical Gnostic teaching on the pleroma.

later ages through historically discernable influences and communications,” as theologian Lance S. Owens (1994) asks; “or, instead, was something similar continually and independently recreated, reborn time after time?” (125). Karen King, Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard, also sees the problem. “Gnosticism,” she points out, is today used so widely, and in such disparate contexts, that the term has effectively been rendered useless:

[N]ot only is Gnosticism used to refer to certain types of ancient Christian heresy, but it has come to have significant application in a variety of other areas, including philosophy, literary studies, politics, and psychology. It has been connected with Buddhism, nihilism, and modern movements such as progressivism, positivism, Hegelianism, and Marxism. Gnosticism was pivotal to Carl Jung’s reflection on the collective unconscious and archetypes. Gnostic themes have been detected in the novels of Herman Melville, Lawrence Durrell, and Walter Percy, among others. (5)

The problem, in part, stems from Gnosticism’s uncommon malleability. In recent decades, Gnostic thought has provided a fluid and pervasive underpinning for a broad spectrum of contemporary writers and thinkers, many of whom have drawn upon those specific aspects of Gnosticism that suit their purposes.

For instance, that Gnosticism has become popular in feminist circles has been well-established.¹⁸ As David Remnick explains, “[t]he early Christian movement showed great openness toward women – Jesus himself flouted Jewish tradition by talking freely with women; women sometimes acted as prophets, apostles, and teachers – and the Gnostics generally affirm that tradition in their texts” (Remnick 60).¹⁹ As Elaine Pagels explains in her exegesis, “The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism,” which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* on November 22, 1979, the attraction – at least on the surface – was clear:

Unlike many deities of the ancient Near East, the God of Israel shared his power with no female divinity, nor was he the divine husband or lover of any. Yet the language they use daily in worship and prayer conveys a different message: who, growing up within Jewish or Christian tradition,

¹⁸ See, for instance, Paul McKechnie, “‘Women’s Religion’ and Second-Century Christianity.” In this article, McKechnie chronicles renewed interest in the Gnostics by feminist authors and scholars, noting that while many Gnostic treatises, such as *Zostrianos* or *Dialogue of the Saviour*, do not specifically suit the needs or roles of women (and, for that matter, often speak *against* women) much attention was given to the ones which do in the 1980s and 90s. Some of these myths, such as the descent and restoration of Sophia, are now familiar. Enacted under many names and variations throughout Gnostic literature, Sophia’s is essentially an account of the sacred feminine’s divine fall and redemption. Sophia falls from the *Pleroma* or Divine Fullness and is imprisoned in the lower material realms until such time as she is redeemed. The attraction to this tale and others, McKechnie suggests, is two-fold: on one hand, he argues, “what interests recent pro-gnostic feminists is that the Deity, or rather the divine nature, is described in terms which allot crucial roles in the formation of the universe and the destiny of the believer to female deities.” On the other hand, McKechnie cites the “background” reading of Gnosticism furthered by scholars such as Elaine Pagels and Mary Daly, viewing the Gnostic perspective as a form of theological opposition to the “foreground” of traditional thought – the latter of which Daly characterizes as being “full of masculine ways of thinking, syllogisms, exclusivity, and shallowness.”

¹⁹ The association between Gnostics and feminists has, not surprisingly, drawn criticism. For scholar Peter Jones, feminist thinkers in particular “have discovered the revolutionary character of Gnosticism as it applies to gender and patriarchal civilization” (162). The result, he says, is that Gnosticism is becoming a powerful influence in “feminist research into the overthrow of the male in the divine” – part of what Jones condemns as an orchestrated attempt in Christian liberal circles to present original Gnostic writings “as a valid, alternate, even superior version of early Christianity.” Indeed, Gnosticism and anti-patriarchal feminism, Jones argues, are a match made in heaven, because divine Sophia’s mission was “the overthrow of Jahweh ... the overthrow of patriarchy” (Jones 1998, viii).

has escaped the distinct impression that God is masculine? And while Catholics revere Mary as the mother of Jesus, they never identify her as divine in her own right: she is “mother of God,” but not “God the Mother” comparable with God the Father.

Gnosticism seeks deliverance by various means -- through assumption of an absolute spirit which proceeds from alienation to consciousness of itself, and through the alienation resulting from private property and belief in God to the freedom of a fully human existence. One of the most striking differences between the so-called “heretical” sources and orthodox ones, then, is that Gnostic sources characteristically describe God with sexual imagery—often feminine imagery, elevating the role of the feminine in the divine. Moreover, the general structure of cultural feminism coincides with that of Gnosticism. In his 1968 work, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, political and religious philosopher Eric Voeglin explains that the Gnostic's soul (psyche) (the male-identified self in women) belongs to the order of the world. His [her] spirit (*pneuma*) impels him [her] toward deliverance [the female feeling alienated from herself in all her male- or husband-oriented daily routines, such as housework] (155). The task, pursued in many different ways, is the destruction of the old world – the destruction of patriarchy outside through revolution and of the male-identified self inside through consciousness-raising, as well as the passage to the new world, which requires strengthening the powers of the spirit [the true feminine self]. The instrument of salvation is knowledge (gnosis) [the liberation of the repressed feminine, hitherto inaccessible, self, by which the soul is disentangled from the patriarchal world (155)]. Thus, the motivational reason remains the “revolt against

God” after a disappointment and spiritual exhaustion with Christianity. Sophia's role in Gnosticism, often of central interest for feminists drawn to Gnostic thought, suggests that her power was rooted in her wisdom. Although she is sometimes described as a mother and a lover, Voeglin stresses these are only metaphorical depictions of Sophia (156). Her wisdom was of primary importance.²⁰

At the same time, “Gnosticism” has also come to fulfil what the late religious scholar Ioan Culianu describes as a “sick sign” – a term that “has come to mean too much, and therefore perhaps very little” (qtd. in Williams 4).²¹ Participants attending the 1966 Colloquium of Messina on “The Origins of Gnosticism” attempted to sort out the terminological difficulty by defining *gnosis* as “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite,” and Gnosticism as the idea of “a divine spark in many, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be fully reintegrated” (Grimstad 7). However, efforts to reach a consensus of definition have failed to satisfy a number of contemporary scholars, many of whom see the term “Gnostic” as inadequate or

²⁰ For similar reasons, Gnosticism has also enjoyed a growing presence in gay, lesbian, and transgendered discourse. See, for instance, Cahana.

²¹ Under common usage of the term, *everyone and everything* appears to be Gnostic. Culianu explains: “[o]nce I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity. Of course, I was ready to accept the idea of different prolongations of ancient Gnosis and even that of spontaneous generation of views of the world in which, at different times, the distinctive features of Gnosticism occur again. I was to learn soon, however, that ... not only was Gnosis gnostic, but the catholic authors were gnostic, the neoplatonists too, Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism, existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka, Rilke, Proust, Joyce, Musil, Hesse and Thomas Mann were gnostic. From very authoritative interpreters of Gnosis, I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic ... Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; Freud is gnostic and Jung is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic” (qtd. in O’Regan 6).

outmoded. Stefan Rossbach (1999), for instance, observes that at the Messina Conference the term “Gnostic” was reserved for the systems of the second and third centuries A.D. – specifically, for the systems of Basilides, Valentinus, and Mani. Consequently, Rossbach writes, “this convention which characterizes ‘Gnosticism’ in strictly historical terms, has not stood the test of time. The crucial question is whether the systems of late antiquity which are often taken as the paradigmatic manifestations of ‘Gnosticism’ are sufficiently uniform to place them in a single category” (47). Thus, Michael Allen Williams, an expert in Comparative Religion at the University of Washington, has urged scholars of Late Antiquity to jettison the “Gnostic” construct entirely:

[It] is best to avoid imagining something called “the Gnostic religion” or even “gnosticism” [T]he texts in question are better understood as sources from a variety of new religious movements. Modern treatments of “gnosticism” often do, in fact, include some similar disclaimer acknowledging the multiplicity of phenomena involved, but the discourse normally moves quickly to the enumeration of features that, it is claimed, really make all these movements one thing, ‘gnosticism.’ The result has been the premature construction of a category that needs to be not simply renamed or redefined, but rather dismantled and replaced. (5)

Rossbach’s and Williams’s observations underscore the inherent danger of investigations of Gnosticism that involve the historical relationships between authors and texts – that is, if one tries too hard, he or she will see Gnosticism everywhere. Thus, it is important to make a distinction between Gnosticism in antiquity and “prolongations” of the Gnostic heresies that can be observed in modernity. For the purposes of this dissertation, I take “Gnosticism” to refer to the philosophical and religious movement which started in pre-Christian times, one

that – in contrast to the factual, intellectual, rational knowledge, such as is involved in, for example, Mathematics and Physics – involves the relational or experiential knowledge of God and of the divine or spiritual nature within us. “Modern Gnosticism,” likewise, I use to delineate the appearance of the Gnosticism of antiquity in modernity; here, in the case of specific works of literature.

Major Players and Influence

One scholar who was integral to bringing the origins and tenets of Gnosticism into the public realm is German-born scholar Hans Jonas. In 1934, Jonas had published the first volume of *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist*, a systematic rethinking of the origin and meaning of Gnosticism (even if, as early reviewer A.D. Nock found, the work left its readers “in a terminological fog” [605]).²² But it was Jonas’s 1958 study, *The Gnostic Religion* – his first book published in English – for which he remains best known. Transcribed in New York by Canadian poet Jay Macpherson, whom the former had met during a teaching stay at Carleton University, *The Gnostic Religion* revisited his earlier

²² In 1957, Jonas explained his motivation in writing *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist*. He wrote that the generation investigating Gnosticism before him had bequeathed a “wealth of historical detail” but at the cost of an “atomization of the subject into motifs from separate traditions.” He felt that beneath the fragments he could discern an essence: “That there was such a gnostic spirit, and therefore an essence of Gnosticism as a whole, was the impression which struck me at my initial encounter with the evidence, and it deepened with increasing intimacy. To explore and interpret that essence became a matter, not only of historical interest, as it substantially adds to our understanding of a crucial period of Western mankind, but also of intrinsic philosophical interest, as it brings us face to face with one of the more radical answers of man to his predicament and with the insights which only that radical position could bring forth, and thereby adds to our human understanding in general” (*The Gnostic Religion* xvii).

material and created the framework through which Gnosticism was first understood by many twentieth century readers.²³ In its January 1959 review, *Commentary* magazine called the book “a pioneer effort, unrivaled and indispensable” (Hadas).²⁴ Indeed, Jonas’s text was significant in that, apart from being the first detailed history of ancient Gnosticism, he interpreted the religion from an existentialist philosophical viewpoint.²⁵ For the early Jonas, Gnostic texts could be viewed as anticipating existentialist philosophy; he believed they “could be positively viewed as examples – even if ultimately unsuccessful examples – of the philosophical breakthrough achieved by existentialism, best represented by Heidegger” (Waldstein 352).²⁶ Moreover, unlike his contemporaries, who were concerned chiefly with plotting the *historical* origins of Gnosticism, Jonas eschewed the genealogical mapping of symbols and motifs in antiquity, preferring instead to chart the “recurrent elements of expression” that revealed “something of the fundamental experience, the mode of feeling, and the vision of reality distinctively characteristic of the Gnostic mind” (*The Gnostic*

²³ Email from Macpherson to Ryan Edward Miller, 28 May 2006.

²⁴ It should be noted that the first edition of Jonas’s text made little use or mention of the Nag Hammadi discoveries. In a preface to the second edition, published in 1963, Jonas noted that too little was known of the Nag Hammadi contents at the time of writing the book to go beyond a few references and quotations (xxx). The second edition of Jonas’s text added a new chapter to address the Nag Hammadi material.

²⁵ It is important to note that a number of books written by both scholars and non-scholars studying the Gnostic religion before the Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945 did make some valuable and insightful contributions to an understanding of Gnosticism. They include: *The Four Zoas* (1797) by William Blake, *The Seven Sermons to the Dead* (1916) by Carl Jung, *History of Dogma* (1886-89) by Adolf von Harnack, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) by Walter Bauer, and *The Gospel of John* (1971) by Rudolf Bultmann.

²⁶ Jonas was a student of Heidegger. For the later Jonas, modern existentialism was to be rejected as a symptom of nihilism, as a modern parallel of the ancient nihilism found in the Gnostics.

Religion 48). Northrop Frye also possessed a copy of Jonas's book; his annotated version is housed at the University of Toronto as part of his private library. Like Jonas, Frye seemed to be drawn to the Gnostics' emphasis on *Geworfenheit* or "thrownness" – the abandonment of the self in the world. It was this idea that led Jonas to view the Gnostic man as thrown into an antagonistic, anti-divine, and anti-human nature. "The human constitution," the latter explains:

is comparable to an onion with many layers, on the model of the cosmos itself but with the order reversed; what is outermost and uppermost in the cosmos is innermost in man, and the innermost or nethermost stratum of the cosmic order, the earth, is the outer bodily garment of man. Only the innermost or pneumatic man is the true man, and he is not of this world, as his original in the highest order, the deity, is external to the cosmos as a whole. In its unredeemed state the spirit, so far from its source and immersed in soul and flesh, is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep, or intoxicated by the poison of the world – in brief, it is ignorant. Its awakening and liberation are effected through knowledge Its bringer is a messenger from the world of Light who penetrates the barriers of the spheres, outwits the archons, awakens the spirit from its earthly slumber, and imparts to it the saving knowledge from without. (*The Gnostic Religion* 53)

For Jonas, the notion of the alien, the beyond, the stranger's sojourn in the world below, light and darkness, fall and capture, dread, call and awakening – these and other images and symbolic language bespoke "a level of utterance more fundamental than the doctrinal differentiation into which Gnostic thought branched out in the completed systems" of Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani (*The Gnostic Religion* 48).²⁷ Indeed, another reviewer, Naomi Bliven – initially put off

²⁷ See: Levy (2002). Jonas's influential account of "Gnosticism" as the expression of a unitary "Spirit of Late Antiquity" has recently come under strong attack by those scholars who suggest that the category "Gnosticism" should be dismantled and discarded. This debate has called for a thorough critical analysis of Jonas's construct of "Gnosticism." In particular, critics claim that Jonas's construct has highly problematic roots; on the one hand, in Spengler's account of "Arabian culture" and, on the other hand, in the normative understanding of de-objectivated

by the “gloomy and difficult doctrine” of Gnosticism – was nonetheless struck by the implications of Jonas’s work. She observed in *The New Yorker* in 1959 how, “from a purely logical point of view, Gnosticism gives a better answer than Christianity to the familiar theological difficulty: if God is good and all-powerful, why did He make such an evil world? The Gnostic theory – to simplify extremely – is that He didn’t, and that He has no power over this world, or even any interest in it (Bliven 171-2)

Next to Jonas, perhaps only Elaine Pagels can be credited with instigating a contemporary interest in Gnosticism. Pagels, the Princeton professor of religion whose well-known study, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and wide praise from her colleagues, was instrumental in making the core ideas in Gnosticism accessible to a reading public. Pagels’s study of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts was the basis for *The Gnostic Gospels*. Her text invigorated studies of the historical landscape of Christianity by exploding the myth of the early church as a unified movement. The overarching assertion of Pagels’s book is that, the early Christian church labelled doctrines that would facilitate the move toward institutionalization “orthodox,” whereas beliefs that could potentially hinder this institutionalization (i.e. Gnostic teachings) were labelled “heretical.” To this end, Pagels explicates Gnosticism as an interpretation of the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus, which for many years was a powerful alternative to the

existence (*Entweltlichung*) in the existential philosophy of the early Heidegger. The principal defect of Jonas' construct is that it tends to misrepresent the actual history suggested by the Nag Hammadi texts.

interpretation set forth by the documents that became the New Testament. Moreover, in contrast to the majority of early Christians, who saw God primarily through male images and who insisted on the reality of Jesus's human body and his literal (bodily) death and resurrection, Gnostic Christians, she explains, used both male *and* female metaphors for God. In addition, she points out, they distrusted the body in favour of inner experience, and understood Jesus's death and resurrection in a symbolic (as opposed to a literal) way. Each of these doctrines, Pagels argues, had important social and political implications.

Reasons For The Revival

The post-World War II renewal of interest in Gnosticism rests on the foundation of an earlier revival that began in the nineteenth century and crested during the decades encompassing World War I and its aftermath. The unearthing of Gnostic documents in the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, such as the Berlin Codex in 1896 and the Nag Hammadi collections in Egypt in 1945, provided a substantial stimulus to scholarly knowledge related to the history of religion in late antiquity. Following these discoveries, certain German Protestant theologians – among them, Adolf von Harnack, Ferdinand Baur, and Peter Staudenmaier – made efforts to chart the history of Gnosticism and to point to fragments that have survived into modernity. These scholars ranged from neo-Hegelian theologians in the nineteenth century to twentieth-century philosophers of culture (Moran). Chief among these latter-day thinkers

was Carl Jung, who collected Gnostic texts as evidence of the existence of universal archetypes. Moreover, the sensibility of the Gnostics was also adopted as a precursor for other schools of thought, including the modern nihilism of existentialism and Gershom Scholem's treatment of Jewish mysticism. (The precise influence of Gnosticism on the later development of the Jewish kabbalah and heterodox Islamic sects such as the Ismailis, however, continues to be debated.)

More recently, the last decades of the twentieth century saw a broadening of the revival of interest in Gnosticism, a phenomenon that may be attributed in part to what Peter Jones, an expert on the New Testament, argues are “the striking parallels between the ancient heresy of Gnosticism and the spirituality of New Age thinking and the postmodern worldview” (1997, vii).²⁸ Indeed, precipitated by a renewed interest in the search for the historical Jesus, by New Age doctrines such as James Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993), as well as by a variety of titles on Gnosticism produced to satisfy what Harold Bloom describes as an “endlessly entertaining saturnalia of ill-defined yearnings” (*Omens* 18), North American readers, by the last decade of the twentieth century, were hungry for information on the Gnostics of antiquity.²⁹ The publication of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1977), together with Jonas’s *The Gnostic*

²⁸ Jones is a noted opponent of Gnosticism in all its forms, and sees both New Age spirituality and Gnosticism as a threat to the church. See also: Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (1992).

²⁹ *Publishers Weekly* – responding to this resurgence of interest – went so far as to suggest in 1994 that “booksellers can serve readers’ Gnostic needs by stocking up on numerous anthologies that include classical Gnostic texts” (Scheinn 45, 49). More recently, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), a novel whose plot involves the Gnostic gospels of antiquity, has enjoyed bestseller status.

Religion (1958) and Pagels's widely-read study, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), were crucial resources in that revival due to the influence they had on contemporary writers and thinkers. Karen King, for instance, recalls being "profoundly affected" by Jonas's passionate exposition in *The Gnostic Religion* (137). Harold Bloom too was similarly moved. In *Omens of Millennium* (1996), he describes how in 1965, at the age of thirty-five, he fell into a year-long depression. What rescued him, he says,

was a process that began as reading, and then became a kind of "religious" conversion that was also an excursion into a personal literary theory. I had purchased *The Gnostic Religion* ... when it was first published as a paperback in 1963 ... But Jonas's book had a delayed impact on me; it did not kindle until I began to read endlessly in all of [American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo] Emerson, throughout 1965-66 ... What integrating Jonas and Emerson did for me was to find the context for my nihilistic expression. Jonas gives a catalog of effects that accompany the Gnostic sense of *having been thrown* into this existence: forlornness, dread, homesickness, numbness, sleep, intoxication. (*Omens* 25-6)

Bloom's marriage of Jonas and Emerson in this section of *Omens* is significant, as it led him to articulate a theory of "literary gnosis" in the 1990s – a mode of reading founded on the idea that it is possible to view knowledge, and specifically the quest for *self-knowledge*, apart from ancient Gnostic texts and traditions.³⁰ In

³⁰ Bloom's vision of "literary gnosis" is especially noteworthy in that his discussion of readerly self-knowledge prefigured readings of Augustinian "interiority" detailed in works such as Eric Jager's *The Book of the Heart* (2000) and Philip Cary's study, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self* (2000). Moreover, it is important to note that this "literary gnosis" underscores two points: first, a confrontation in Western thought between a Gnostic exegesis of the readerly self and more orthodox analyses of Augustine's "inner person"; and secondly, the place that Bloom's brand of American Gnosticism has assumed within recent avenues of Augustinian scholarship where the Gnostic and the Christian humanist have collided at a junction of information or technological discourse. It is at this junction, I would contend, that Bloom's ideal of a modern Gnostic reader – once a vibrant and politically tense counterpoint to the reader imagined by traditional critics – inevitably became obscured in the late 1990s by larger questions of our relationship to the printed book in the electronic age.

The Western Canon (1994), Bloom's prescriptive guide for reading, the author describes this objective as not merely a renewed attention to close reading, but rather a recovery of "the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul, the reader not as a person in society but as the deep self, our ultimate inwardness" (10-11). Marrying the act of reading with self-knowledge or *gnosis* thus became for Bloom a solitary quest that was Gnostic in spirit, if not in name. This unique viewpoint has shaped much of Bloom's subsequent literary criticism.³¹

The reasons why interest in Gnosticism experienced a revival in the late twentieth century are difficult to establish conclusively, although most critics agree that the conditions for that resurgence have long been present in Western society. Stefan Rossbach, Lecturer in Politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury, for instance, has examined the Cold War in such a context. In his book *Gnostic Wars* (1999), Rossbach argues that, throughout history, breakdowns in order have led to interpretations of humanity that declare the absence of meaning and order a permanent feature of cosmic existence. Such interpretations, he says, can be understood as Gnostic spirituality – particularly the belief that beyond this world there is a pre-cosmic world of light in which

³¹ Bloom has long-remarked upon the Gnosticism inherent in America's national character. See *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (1992). In that work, Bloom argues that spiritual beliefs provide an exact portrait of America's national character and – when it comes to the American emphasis on the individual – Bloom reads this trait as evidence of a Gnostic self in American culture. However, *Omens of Millennium* (1996) goes further. Bloom closes the book with a twenty-one page Gnostic "sermon," in which he declares: "'Thrown' is the most important verb in the Gnostic vocabulary, for it describes, now as well as two thousand years ago, our condition: we have been thrown into this world, this emptiness" (320). Likewise, in his book *Genius* (2003), Bloom even refers to Gnosticism as "the religion of literature" (14).

humans are meant to exist. Rossbach's discussion moves from philosophers Plato and St. Augustine through Machiavelli and on to American diplomat (and "Father of [Cold War] Containment") George F. Kennan. It is with the latter and with then-recent experiences of the Cold War that Rossbach attempts to demonstrate how revivals of Gnosticism have paradoxically inspired concrete political attempts at restructuring throughout the ages. New York journalist and critic Chris Lehmann observes something similar, going so far as to contend that, in the case of the United States, a romance with all things Gnostic has coincided with a culture-wide posture of civic disengagement. He argues that Gnosticism

can be seen as the abiding faith of the hermetically isolated consumer, whose idea of civic participation is, at best, hooking into such pseudo-communities as talk radio, daytime tabloid TV, and the Internet. Thus disengaged, amid ever shriller prophecies of millennial doom, some must find it quite alluring – even emotionally satisfying – to think of our common world, and perhaps even our own bodies, as an unreal, easily disposable apparition. (14)

Religion scholar and "reformed dualist" Michael Horton also believes that renewed interest in Gnostic thought can be attributed to the cultural Zeitgeist. In his article, "The New Gnosticism: Is It the 'Age of the Spirit' or 'The Spirit of the Age?'" (1995), Horton carefully considers the phenomenon, and concludes that "[a]fter two world wars, Westerners have become disillusioned with the grand scheme of turning this world into Paradise Restored." According to the author,

Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Andre Malraux poured their energies into lamenting the sense of despair and alienation, and the theme of humanity being "thrown" into the world, imprisoned in evil material structures is prominent in their work. The popularity of existentialism blended with an older Transcendentalism that was always seething just beneath the surface of the American consciousness to produce a post-war

generation of "seekers" who were ripe for Gnostic spirituality. (Horton, "The New Gnosticism")

Interestingly, Horton's book, *In the Face of God: The Dangers and Delights of Spiritual Intimacy* (1996), rejects the notion that there is "an intentional, well thought-out renaissance of the ancient gnostic heresy in its pristine form"; rather, he proposes, "[s]omething larger has crept into our Western culture like a fog ... a way of thinking that pervades the broad topography of the American intellectual, religious, and social landscape" (25). For Horton, the advance of Gnosticism – even in the church – is a threat to established religious thought.

Similarly, in his article "The Gnostic Generation: Understanding and Ministering to Generation X" (1999), John R. Mabry of the Episcopal Diocese of California suggests that persons born in the early 1960s through the early 1980s possess a distrustful, precarious, and fearful worldview that resonates with the worldview held by the Gnostics – so much so, that "[Gen] Xers are intuitively drawn to this ancient heresy" (36). Modern Gnosticism, Mabry claims, is simply a reformulation of the Gnostic tenets based in antiquity. His argument comes as a response to a problem posed in William Strauss and Neil Howe's groundbreaking work, *Generations* (1992). According to Strauss and Howe, the decisive engine for social change is not the objective conditions forcing us to change – whether it is war, economic distress, technological opportunity, or something similar. Rather, it is the sociological and psychological conditions caused by the interplay of different generations. Each generation, they write – whether it be the Baby Boomers, Generation X, or the older so-called "silent"

generation -- has a unique character, and it is in the relationships between the generations that movements for change gather force and finally transform society, whether for better or worse (321). The authors, for example, write of the patriotic yet pervasive secular “religiosity” of the “Civic” generation (those persons born in the early 1900s through mid-1920s), the humanizing influence of the “Adaptive” generation (those persons born in the mid-1920s through the mid-1940s), and the creative, rebellious, and spiritual “Idealists” (commonly referred to as “Baby Boomers,” born between the mid-1940s through the late 1950s) (24). Of the “Reactive” generation, however – commonly referred to as “Generation X” (those persons born between the early 1960s through the early 1980s) – the classification is more difficult. “They have no heroes and no myth,” Mabry asserts. Instead, he writes, “Xers do have a myth: The Gnostic Myth. Xers are simply not familiar with its classic form” (Mabry 39). For Mabry, even Gen X’s interest in the World Wide Web – an unorthodox sense of belonging, or a longing for connectedness to a digital *Pleroma* – is symptomatic of both the modern condition and the Gnostic endeavour.

Pop culture commentator Erik Davis also sees the rise of Gnosticism as coincident with the rise of the information age and the “gnostic infonaut.” In his book, *TechGnosis* (1998), Davis looks at modern information technology – and a great deal of previous technology – to reveal how much of it has roots in spiritual attitudes. He shows how the religious imagination of the Gnostics, far from disappearing in our supposedly secular age, continues to feed the utopian

dreams, apocalyptic visions, digital phantasms, and alien obsessions that populate today's "technological unconscious":

In one of Gnosticism's most startling revisions, Christ (a.k.a. the Logos) secretly enters the garden disguised as the serpent, and thus manages to unload some redemptive knowledge on the hoodwinked couple. The knowledge is basically what the snake promised: knowledge that wakes us up to our own divine essence, and that liberates us from the chains of ignorance [This] urge to overcome the natural limits of the body through a divinized or omniscient mind remains one of the most characteristic "Gnostic" traits, one that plays itself out today in strongly technocultural terms. (99)

Davis goes on to reveal how the language and ideas of the information society have shaped and even transformed many aspects of contemporary spirituality. In particular, he explores how those who embrace each new technological advance often do so with designs and expectations stemming from religious sensibilities. In so doing, Davis likens the scientific attitude that we can know reality technologically to the Gnostic pursuit of developing *gnosis*, or ultimate understanding.

That a person today can be considered a Gnostic – whether he or she knows it or not – is a reading that has gathered remarkable currency. In 1996, Harold Bloom famously wrote, "We live now, more than ever, in an America where a great many people are Gnostics without knowing it, which is a peculiar irony" (*Omens* 27). Remarkably, Bloom's reading anticipated the scholarly reaction to the Heaven's Gate suicides in California a year later on March 26, 1997, when the comet Hale-Bopp was at its brightest, and behind which the Heaven's Gate members believed a spacecraft to be waiting for them after their

deaths. Responding to the tragedy, University of Calgary religious studies professor Irving Hexham observed: “There seems to be a Gnostic element in this [Heaven’s Gate] movement,” adding that the movement’s leader, a man who called himself “Do,” “may not have known much about the Gnostic tradition, but the same impulse was there” (439). For Hexham, understanding the Heaven's Gate tragedy requires the recognition that UFOs have long been linked to spirituality. The UFO, much like the Gnostic concept of the *pleroma*, he says, becomes an escape from the material aspects of creation; the deification of spiritual longing. Thus, according to Hexham, an important parallel emerges. UFOs function as a vehicle of creation, providence, and final salvation in a spiritualized universe that resembles early Gnosticism (439); and thus, he says, the Heaven’s Gate members could be viewed as Gnostics of a sort. Such labels may not sit comfortably with some – particularly self-described modern Gnostics may object to the theology of groups like the Heaven's Gate Community being labeled “Gnostic” – yet in many ways, the new theologies are strikingly similar to the descriptions of Gnosticism observed in many contemporary and classical studies of the topic.

Perhaps this is why Gnosticism can be seen in so many other aspects of contemporary North American culture. In his book, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film* (2006), for instance, Eric G. Wilson notes how, outside of literature, popular films such as *The Matrix* (1997), *Dark City* (1998) and *The Truman Show* (1998) can be viewed as “Gnostic,” as they all involve protagonists trying to

escape from an artificial reality in which they are imprisoned (18). Also, the emergence of contemporary Gnostic churches and societies, such as Ecclesia Gnostica, Dr. Stephan Hoeller's Gnostic church in Los Angeles, speaks to an enduring cultural interest in this ancient system of thought, now stretching into the twenty-first century. Hoeller, a Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion at the College of Oriental Studies, argues that we live at a precipice of reinvention that correlates with the uncertainties of the modern condition. "There will ... be great difficulties [ahead]," he says, "but I think that Gnostic traditions, along with a number of kindred ideas, are being reborn at this time, and will have a significant influence in the future" (Hoeller). This revival of (and intellectual fascination with) aspects of Gnosticism found expression in the literary works of a number of modern North American and Canadian writers, as the next chapter reveals.

CHAPTER 2: GNOSTICISM'S INFLUENCE IN MODERN NORTH AMERICAN AND CANADIAN LITERATURE

Whereas Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion* (1958) was known primarily in academic circles, Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) was remarkable for the ease with which it transformed obscure religious writings into an artifact of popular culture, influencing a generation of writers and creating an immense interest in this early, exotic strain of religious thought. In this way, although there were undoubtedly other avenues of discovery, Pagels was a "populariser" of Gnostic thought. For instance, Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko cites *The Gnostic Gospels* as an inspiration for her novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), a book which contains as one of its central plot points a female character who – the reader discovers through flashbacks – proposed to write a master's thesis on the role of the female principle in the early Christian church, as depicted in certain Coptic and Gnostic texts, only to have her committee reject her proposal outright, labeling it "heretical." In a conversation with interviewer Ellen Arnold in 1998 concerning *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko describes her connection to Pagels. Silko explains:

She [Pagels] was in the first group of MacArthur fellows with me, and they called us back to Chicago in 1982 for a reunion. Later she had her publisher send me a copy of her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*. Well, I was deep in the middle of writing [1992 novel] *Almanac of the Dead*, and that book sat on my shelf for years. So recently I wrote her a letter and thanked her for it, and I said, oh, and by the way, I wrote a whole novel partly because of your book. (Arnold 3)

In addition to Silko, American horror writer Anne Rice also acknowledges reading Pagels's text, traces of which informed the cosmology of Rice's novel, *Memnoch the Devil* (1995), the fifth book of the author's Vampire Chronicles. In that novel, Rice features angels who disobey God by providing hidden knowledge to humans. The author gives these supernatural beings special empathy for humans in distress – empathy, she suggests, that God lacks. To this end, in 1997, Rice indicated that she may actually believe in *Memnoch's* Gnosticism (Riley 287); and later, suggested that *Memnoch* be read together with her novel *Servant of the Bones* (1996), giving the Gnostic gospels of Enoch, Thomas, and Mary as sources for both (Introvigne 176).³² As well, Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize-winning author and Pagels's faculty colleague at Princeton, is also often associated with Gnosticism. Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997) also contain an epigraph that draws from "Thunder, Perfect Mind," a Gnostic poem first explicated in Pagels's work, and which Pagels counts as being among her favourite passages.³³

Commentators on *The Gnostic Gospels* were impressed by Pagels's skills as an artful, concise explainer. An early review in *The New Yorker* proclaimed *The Gnostic Gospels* "intellectually elegant," adding "[t]he economy with which [Pagels] evokes the era of early Christianity – an era of persecution and

³² In a reply to an email sent by Ryan Edward Miller in 2006, Rice vehemently denied ever subscribing to Gnostic belief. This exchange occurred shortly after Rice's well-publicized return to Christianity with the novel *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (2005), and stands in direct contradiction to several interviews she had previously given on the subject.

³³ Pagels and Morrison appeared in 2003 with Anonymous 4, a women's singing group that performed an ancient Coptic poem.

definition, of suffering and philosophy – is a marvel” (Bliven 130).³⁴ Another reviewer, David Remnick, also reflected on the uncommon success of Pagels’s work, and argues that what Pagels accomplished was to “[deliver] a complicated argument to a popular audience without cheating the demands of scholarship” (54).³⁵ Yet, the influence wielded by *The Gnostic Gospels* also owes much to Pagels herself. Remarking on Pagels’s success at explicating classical Gnostic texts, fellow Princeton religion professor John Gager notes that “one of the things that sets [her] study apart – and it has been a kind of curse for her – is that she has been able to communicate to readers some sense of what it must have felt like to *be* those people” (cited in Rogers). Pagels, Gager goes on to say, has “a certain degree of sympathy, a certain embracing of the creative contrarian spirit of these texts, and the curse is that this led many people to suppose that she was a Gnostic believer herself” (Rogers).³⁶ Unsurprisingly, members of contemporary Gnostic congregations have been known to follow Pagels from

³⁴ *The New Yorker*, 21 January 1980.

³⁵ *The New Yorker*, April 3, 1995. In addition to Bliven and Remnick, literary critic Harold Bloom credited Pagels in *The Washington Post* with “devoted and sound scholarship.” Importantly, however, there were also critics of Pagels’s study. Raymond E. Brown, a Catholic theologian, wrote in the *Times Book Review* that Pagels gives more than “about nine-tenths” of her discussion to the Gnostics, “which will leave the reader cheering for them and wishing that the narrow-minded orthodox had not won” (cited in Remnick 62). Similarly, Father Paul Mankowski of the Pontifical Biblical Institute deemed Pagels a “very naughty historian,” claiming that her work consists of “tendentious readings and instances where counter-evidence is suppressed.” Yet for the most part, critical reception was positive; as Remnick notes, “most accepted Pagels’s assurance in the book that she did not intend to proselytize for or celebrate the Gnostics but, rather, to underline the complexity of early Christianity and explain some of the social and political reasons for the rise of an orthodoxy” (62).

³⁶ Asked if she’s a modern-day Gnostic, Pagels responds: “Well, I think it’s quite possible to be, if by ‘Gnostic’ you mean a quality of awareness, which is what the word originally meant. But for many people, Gnostic means a kind of heretical, dualistic, nihilistic [thinking], and I don’t think they are that.” Because the language and the characters of the Bible are so familiar to her, Pagels adds, she identifies herself as Christian—“but I wouldn’t say I identify *only* with that” (cited in Rogers).

session to session at annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (Rogers). Moreover following the publication of Dan Brown's popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) – a work whose central mystery turns on the secrets of the Gnostics' *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* – sales of *The Gnostic Gospels* reached 100,000 copies, seven times higher than in the previous year. The suggestion is that the public had drawn a clear line between the subject of Gnosticism and Pagels's explication.³⁷ Yet, while Pagels might be credited with instigating a resurgence of Gnosticism in modernity and bridging the gulf between academic and non-academic readers, the enduring popularity of *The Gnostic Gospels* so long after its initial publication can be attributed to the allure of Gnosticism itself. That those ideas have since found expression in literature is therefore worth examining, particularly for any Canadian connections.

An Emergence of Gnostic Motifs and Themes

Unsurprisingly, whether on its own or through the influence of Jonas's or Pagels's studies, Gnosticism began to make a broad entrance into contemporary North American literature beginning most as early the 1960s, and reaching an apex in the 1970s and 80s. In addition to its influence on Silko, Rice, and Morrison, Gnostic motifs and themes have been observed, for instance, in science fiction works such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven* (1971),

³⁷ Brown's novel works through a Gnostic argument with respect to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and lists Pagels as a source for further reading.

Harold Bloom's *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* (1979), Philip K. Dick's *VALIS* (1980) and *The Divine Invasion* (1981). That Gnosticism met fertile imaginative ground in science fiction in particular says a great deal about their compatibility, according to Hope College professor James A. Herrick (2004). "Gnostic thinking and space stories have often enjoyed a natural union," he says. In fact, the two ideas have been almost inseparable in the modern period – particularly, he writes, for those stories involving "a small elite of the human race who possess the special capacities required to master the secrets and techniques that enable the next step in mental or spiritual advancement" (198).³⁸ Bloom's *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* is an appropriate example. The novel begins with the Aeon Olam (in Gnosticism, the Aeons are emanations or angels of the true God) journeying through space towards Earth. Olam arrives to bring two men, Valentinus, a reincarnation of a Gnostic prophet, and his young warrior escort Perscors, back to Lucifer on a quest to help Valentinus recover the call that motivated his previous life. Within the first few pages of the novel, Bloom presents an explicitly Gnostic outlook of the closed universe that the characters inhabit:

The solar system, ruled by the Archon called Elohim, was as much a dungeon as any wretched stone cellar Laws of nature, instituted by the Archon, enslaved earth's universe and blocked even the ascent of the souls after death. The Creator or Demiurge, Ialdabaoth, mis-called Jehovah, had fashioned his entrapments most subtly. (*The Flight to Lucifer* 5)

³⁸ See also Mackey, who describes in further detail how Gnosticism provides an excellent paradigm for the type of religious awareness that much of science fiction favours.

In addition to the characters' names deriving from names in Gnostic literature, Bloom's novel – like David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) before it – works primarily to facilitate a Gnostic quest for truth in the face of doubt or uncertainty.³⁹ The characters endure their cosmic journey, and suffer enemies both divine and semi-divine, so as to reawaken Valentinus to his “gnosis,” or knowledge of his true origin.

Similarly, in *VALIS* (1981), published the same year as Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, Philip K. Dick focuses on an effort to envision the true God beyond the material world. In the novel, Dick's semi-autobiographical protagonist, Horselover Fat, has a religious experience in which he suddenly perceives the infinite dimension of space, hears the hum of the cosmos, and feels the overpowering love of the Void beyond. Fat believes that everything, including us, is information in a cosmic brain called VALIS (Vast Active Living Information System).⁴⁰ VALIS's job, we learn, is to try and repair the damage, the malfunction. It does this by directly and indirectly communicating with the characters, but also by subtly changing their perceptions of reality on a subliminal level. In addition, Fat reads the Gnostic gospels, which confirms his awareness

³⁹ *The Flight to Lucifer* was intended to function as an extended homage to David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). In his essay, “Clinamen: Towards a Theory of Literary Fantasy,” Bloom explains that his intention was “to assimilate Lindsay's characters and narrative patterns to the actual, historical cosmology, theology and mythology of second-century Gnosticism” (*Agon* 222).

⁴⁰ In his journal, “Exegesis,” which Dick used to record his epiphany on religion and intelligence and life, the author elaborates: “We appear to be memory coils (DNA carriers capable of experience) in a computer-like thinking system which, although we have correctly recorded and stored thousands of years of experiential information, and each of us possesses somewhat different deposits from all the other life forms, there is a malfunction - a failure - of memory retrieval.” Dick's perspective anticipates some of the relationships between Gnosticism and technology later discussed by Erik Davis in *TechGnosis*.

of an “occluded,” blind creator who opposes the rational “true god” VALIS (102). When Fat eventually meets VALIS in the form of Sophia (Wisdom), she repairs his deficient psyche and instructs him that man is god, and man is holy. It is at this point in the novel that Dick draws explicitly from Gnostic myth, much as Robertson Davies does explicitly, and Atwood implicitly, as I will show later. Sophia, Dick writes, is “the name of the feminine principle involved in the manifestation of and life of the cosmos and man. She is the helper and inspirer of all Gnosis” (*VALIS* 280). Dick’s overt use of Gnosticism, then, becomes an integral part of the novel’s architecture – a thematic scaffolding on which the remaining plot and characters are left to hang.

Other examples of fiction, including Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* (1977) and *Love In the Ruins* (1971), also make reference to Gnosticism, usually in the form of characters experiencing a Gnostic initiation of sorts, or being introduced to a Gnostic cult. Also noteworthy are the Gnostic novels from outside North America, particularly Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) and *Baudolino* (2000) – the former of which includes a character who describes the Gnostic creation myth at length. In addition, authors Jorge Luis Borges and Lawrence Durrell’s (*Monsieur, or The Prince of Darkness* [1974]) and Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran all make reference to Gnosticism in their work. Borges especially was interested in Irenaeus’ account of Basilides’ Gnostic doctrine and wrote an essay on the subject, entitled “A Vindication of the False Basilides” (1932). Basilides’ Gnostic Gospel is also one

of the books mentioned in Borges's short story "The Library of Babel" (1941), and also appears in Borges' "Three Versions of Judas" (1944). The latter opens with a pointed description: "In Asia Minor or in Alexandria, in the second century of our faith, the Cosmos was a reckless or evil improvisation by deficient angels" (12).

Canadian Threads

Archival research reveals that many Canadian writers were also exposed to Gnosticism in modernity. This introduction to Gnostic thought appears to have occurred incidentally, facilitated by exposure to writers and literary works originating outside of Canada, particularly those with a strong bent in science fiction or metaphysics – writers who had already begun to incorporate Gnostic myth and imagery in their work. Canadian writers, I will show, used the situation and those influences as an opportunity to query Canadian conventions and traditions by creating new "gospels."⁴¹ And although I have read widely in the

⁴¹ A useful example of such an initiatic relationship is detailed in Peter O'Leary's *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan & the Poetry of Illness* (2003). Duncan was a San Francisco poet and a student of H.D. and the Western esoteric tradition. Through his close readings of crucial poems, O'Leary shows how Duncan's poetry locates a Gnostic insight expressed through a language of illness in the realms of religion – the product of an initiatic triangle involving Freud as great poet-mythographer as well as psychoanalytic healer, H.D. as Duncan's lineage muse, and Duncan himself (extending, O'Leary writes, to those whom Duncan himself influenced – namely, fellow poets Nathaniel Mackey and John Taggart). As Freud is to H.D., O'Leary says, so H.D. is to Duncan: O'Leary's book casts the possibility of viewing poetry, as seen by Duncan, as an illness, or a *dis-ease*. By applying a Gnostic interpretation of history, that the very creation by a demiurge is a catastrophe separating the lower, profane, world from the higher, sacred, one – a separation that must be mended toward an individual salvation – O'Leary posits if poetry might be viewed as an illness, it might also be said or thought to *heal*. Likewise, he muses, if poetry is a disease, can it be inherited naturally or culturally through a lineage among poets? Can it be transmitted by hearing or reading from another poet and/or other poets and then passed on to another poet or other poets?

literary criticism as it pertains to Davies, Callaghan, and Atwood, the criticism I draw upon pertains primarily to elucidating their respective literary texts in the context of Gnosticism.

While Davies, Callaghan, and Atwood overtly drew upon Gnosticism, other seekers – in the sense that Marian Engel expressed upon reading Borges – were intrigued by Gnosticism, but did not pursue the ideas extensively in their own work. For example, Jay Macpherson, a “mythopoeic” poet rooted in the teaching of Northrop Frye, the archetypes of C.G. Jung, and the conservative social vision of T.S. Eliot, studied Gnosticism. As a writer, Macpherson had shown herself to be primarily interested in the relationship of literature to what she calls “authentic myth,” or “the ones that have some imaginative force behind them” (qtd. in Weir 4), and throughout her career as a writer drew from both biblical and classical sources.⁴² Macpherson’s *The Boatman* (1957), for example, a cycle of lyrics unified by symbols of fall and redemption, won the Governor General's Award in 1958, and draws upon Christian typology.⁴³ Harold Bloom recognized Macpherson’s talent after reading *The Boatman*. “She was a woman of the deepest literary sensibility and really very close to a kind of genius in poetry and in deep meditative thought upon the meaning and nature of poetry,” he remarked in an interview following her death on March 21, 2012, before going on to recite

⁴² Macpherson completed her MA and PhD at Victoria College, University of Toronto, both supervised by Frye and Milton Wilson. She passed away on March 21, 2012.

⁴³ Macpherson was a deeply Christian and Protestant humanist, and as a writer she eventually found a number of kindred spirits in Toronto’s literary scene; including, Frye (to whom she dedicated *The Boatman*), Alan Crawley (who published her first poems), Margaret Atwood (whom she first taught at the University of Toronto, and with whom Macpherson briefly lived), and Daryl Hine.

several of her poems by heart (qtd. in Martin). Bloom, himself deeply interested in the Gnostics, included Macpherson as one of only two Canadians (the other being Margaret Atwood) in *American Women Poets*, and listed Macpherson's 1981 collection *Poems Twice Told* (*The Boatman* and her 1974 volume *Welcoming Disaster*) in the brief Canadian section of his book, *The Western Canon* (1994), Bloom's prescriptive guide for great reading (Martin).⁴⁴

Macpherson reports that she first became interested in the Gnostics when she was 16, having encountered H.L. Mansel's book *Gnostic Heresies* (1875) while at Queen's University. "[I] liked the mythology," she says, "[and] made a typescript of a lot of it. When Hans Jonas came to Carleton [University in 1950] at the beginning of my last [undergraduate] year there, known for his work on Gnosticism, I took all of his courses – Bacon to Kant, Philosophy of Religion, and I think also Ancient Philosophy." Macpherson recalls that, in those courses, Gnosticism was mentioned only briefly, if at all; yet, the next summer, when Jonas was scheduled to teach a course at the New School for Social Research in New York, he took Macpherson along as a babysitter. Her duties quickly expanded: "As it turned out," she writes, "he was more comfortable walking up and down dictating lectures onto the typewriter than sitting down and typing himself, so I was promoted to amanuensis." Remarkably, *The Gnostic Religion* was one of two books he dictated to her during that period.⁴⁵ However, that was as far as her interest extended. Macpherson says she stopped working for

⁴⁴ See Martin.

⁴⁵ The other book was *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (1966).

Jonas around 1957 – the time she began teaching in Toronto at Victoria College at the University of Toronto. “I didn’t from then on read or think about Gnosticism,” she writes. “I doubt I talked about it with anyone - the only time anyone ever mentioned the book to me was shortly before I retired; I doubt many copies [of *The Gnostic Religion*] got to Canada.”⁴⁶

Likewise, the late 1960s and early to mid-70s were also a period of intense intellectual exploration in philosophy and religion for Marian Engel. According to Christl Verduyn, editor of *Marian Engel’s Notebooks* (1999), Engel was “particularly interested in the work of French theorists,” and was an avid reader who absorbed many of the disparate ideas she encountered (320). Engel’s first brush with Gnosticism is recorded in these *cahiers*, a mass of personal writings she kept from the age of ten until her death at fifty-one. In one entry, written in 1970-71 in reference to Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, Engel remarks:

Borges

I ... do not remember, if I ever knew, who the gnostics are, perhaps shouldn’t even try to read him – but he says a great deal to me. His parables deal w[ith] what one can refer to as “artistic creation” – or creations or discovery. His labyrinths are tunnels for seekers – and writers are par excellence seekers (if I can’t find it, I’ll invent it) as are, of course, also explorers, artists, inventors, scientists, etc. Is there cabalistic nonsense behind this? If there is nonsense, he is aware of it. What I try to make is something beautiful, good, true etc ... the impossible, I suppose. But I try to make out of experience & imagination objects more shapely & satisfying than reality. (*Notebooks* 329-30)

⁴⁶ Email to Ryan Edward Miller, March 2005.

Engel followed up on her initial query by making brief notes on Gnosticism in a subsequent *cahier* that same year – an entry neither mentioned nor included in Verduyn’s edited collection, but available as part of Engel’s collected papers at McMaster University. In that entry, under the page heading of “Gnosticism,” Engel sketches a brief definition and history of the Gnostics of antiquity, discerning “Gnosticism” as:

the name generally applied to
that spiritual movement
existing beside genuine xtianity [Christianity]
as it gradually crystallized into the Old Catholic Ch[urch].
which may be roughly defined as
a distinct religious syncretism
with strong xtian influences.
Prominent 200 A.D.
Replaced by Manichaen movement Offshoots
 Persisted 4th-5th C.
Acts of Thomas – Gnostic fragments
Apocryphal his Acts of the Apostles.
Coptic-Gnostic – codex Brucianus.
Church fathers reveal much in their opposn [opposition].
Related to magda + the old babylonian
religions. got mixed up w. xtianity
a dualistic religion composed of
cells and sects. (Engel, Cahier XXIII)

When viewed in concert with her initial entry, Engel’s notes demonstrate that – in the months following her initial question – she was intrigued enough by Gnosticism to conduct preliminary research on the subject. Engel made additional brief notes on Gnosticism in 1976, part of her attempt to understand how concepts of perfection and imperfection were handled within Puritan, Christian, Protestant, even heretical frameworks – part of the notes she compiled in advance of writing *The Glassy Sea* (1978), although the latter contains no

mention of Gnosticism. That she did so demonstrates that she retained knowledge of – and possibly even maintained an interest in – Gnostic ideas years after first encountering them (422-23). Indeed, much like Robertson Davies, Engel was attracted to Gnosticism because of its unorthodox nature. She records: “When I pray I feel as if I’m just using God. I guess if there is a god that’s what he’s there for. But I can’t believe in sectarian religion, that any one group is saved or chosen, and that’s that. Much closer to the animistic religions, sometimes a bit to the mystical phases of Judaism or Christianity, but then the wing veers away again and I can’t believe” (Verduyn 482-83). Her wavering might account for why there is little evidence to suggest that Engel developed Gnostic ideas in her work; or, possibly, because she knew, as she expressed elsewhere in her cahier, that “it is death to try to imitate Borges.”⁴⁷

Gwendolyn MacEwen’s writing, similarly, has long been remarked for its sense of magic and mystery, much of which the author derived from her own interests in the Gnostics, Ancient Egypt and magic itself. MacEwen’s most visible and sustained use of Gnosticism can be found in *Julian the Magician* (1963), the author’s first novel, written at 18 and published at the age of 22, and for which her handwritten source list in her collected papers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto includes titles about Gnosticism. Set in a medieval past that has distinctly modern overtones, the novel is about

⁴⁷ That Engel first encountered Gnosticism by reading Borges is not surprising. Only a few years prior, in 1968, a number of his texts were made available for the first time as English translations; Engel was most likely responding to those editions. Notably, Engel was also strongly influenced by novelist Lawrence Durrell – “shamefully so,” she confesses at one point. See Gifford and Osadetz for additional information about Durrell’s likely sources for Gnosticism.

Julian, a young man who believes he is Christ. Wandering the countryside in a horse-drawn wagon, Julian learns “to suspend logic like a whale on a thread” (*Julian* 15). He becomes a master of alchemy, performing “miracles” like curing the mad and changing water into wine. Recalling the path that had led him to this point, Julian recalls early in the novel that

He had had no contemporaries; he had been delicately avoided by them, immersing himself in demonical literature from the age of ten – Boehme first, then back to Magnus in alchemy, Paracelsus and the rest. Alchemy began to bore him He abandoned this line and fell into philosophy; emerged later sobered, but still unsatisfied. The human element wasn't there as he wished it. The human element. Myth. Folklore. Bible. Kabbalah. The Gnostics. The mystical Christ. (15)

Unsurprisingly, *Julian the Magician* takes as its theme the inability of the real world to understand the authentic magician. In nineteenth-century Europe, Julian performs sleight of hand as a livelihood, but also studies “the work,” the mystical transformation of human consciousness into divinity, as taught in the traditions of the Kabbalah and Jacob Boehme, and also reflected in the Gnostic pursuit of *gnosis* or awakening. Julian is not a typical hero of the fantasy genre. His enemy is human ignorance, not evil, and his life parallels Christ's life and death. MacEwen's capacity to incorporate a vast array of sources into her writing stemmed from an overwhelming belief that poetry was a vocation that required training. That training, as biographer Rosemary Sullivan points out, was found in the historical tradition of myths (xv-xvi). As Sullivan writes, MacEwen “believed that to confine oneself to the contemporary or the personal was to exclude the vast inheritance of myths and stories that have shaped and defined human

consciousness.” In 1962, at the age of 21, MacEwen travelled alone to Israel, the heart of the Gnostic tradition that had occupied much of her reading habits to that time, to pursue her interests. In *Julian the Magician*, much of that interest is visible.

Even today, contemporary poets continue to turn to Gnosticism as a “language.” Anne Carson, for instance, explores the sublime as metaphysics of the self-as-other, locked in moments of enduring wonder. “Gnosticisms,” a cycle of six poems from the author’s collection, *Decreation* (2006), is replete with lines that suggest Carson believes poetry to be an otherly form of seeing – using language as eyes, or as a tool for personal insight. In the first of these six “Gnosticisms,” the speaker pairs the ambiguity of bird-ness, and the struggle to best describe such a thing, with an awakening of her own self-knowledge:

Heaven’s lips! I dreamed
of a page in a book containing the word bird and I
entered bird.
Bird grinds on,
grinds on, thrusting against black. Thrusting
wings, thrusting again, hard
banks slap against it either side, that bird was exhausted.
Still, beating, working its way and below dark woods
small creatures
leap. Rip
at food with scrawny lips.
Lips at night.
Nothing guiding it, bird beats on, night wetness on it.
A lion looks up.
Smell of adolescence in these creatures, this ordinary
night for them. Astonishment
inside me like a separate person,
sweat-soaked. How to grip.
For some people a bird sings, feathers shine, I just get this this. (87)

From the poet's empty imagination arrives two insights: first, a conceptualization of the bird itself; and secondly, a shudder of awareness concerning the speaker's difficulty at trying to properly grasp his/her subject. Carson's poem thus gestures toward a Gnostic moment. The speaker is confronted with a sense of "thrownness" (in the way Bloom describes it), caught between the "dark woods" and the unpleasant "wetness of night" before arriving at a tentative "*this*" – both the speaker's meditation on the bird's form, and a fleeting awareness of her own self-knowledge. Notably, it is this same sense of "thrownness" that can be seen in many of the examples of spiritual questioning that Robertson Davies displays in his personal correspondence, much of which later made its way into his fiction. For Morley Callaghan and Margaret Atwood as well, I will show how this same sense of feeling alienated or lost in the world imbues their novels in a way that suggests a similar Gnostic dilemma, and suits their characters' quest for wisdom and truth.

**CHAPTER 3:
NO FRIEND TO ORTHODOXY: ROBERTSON DAVIES, GnosticISM, AND
THE REBEL ANGELS**

Robertson Davies was raised in a Presbyterian household, but he was never conventionally Christian. In an interview with the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1974, he described finding Protestantism, even as a child, “a strikingly cold and unsympathetic faith. I couldn’t say that I was very conscious of what it was, but, at an early age, church chilled me; it seemed to be the combination of concert and lecture” (Harpur 136). Davies’s letters (published as two volumes in 1999 [*For Your Eye Alone*] and 2002 [*Discoveries*] respectively), corroborate these early experiences, and explain much about Davies’s evolved sensibilities. One letter, for instance, written on November 30, 1972, to Father Patrick Plunkett, a Catholic priest and Professor of English at the University of Manitoba, reveals the author’s distaste for Protestantism’s “cruelty and intellectual bleakness” (*Discoveries* 312). Part of the problem, as Davies saw it, was that – in their efforts to grow their congregations – modern churches made little effort to be firmly theological in a manner that might appeal to intellectuals. At the time he wrote to Plunkett, Davies had already long departed the Presbyterian Church and

converted to Anglicanism because of his objections to Calvinist theology.⁴⁸ As such, in 1972, at the age of 59, he was still unsettled. After years of “having to make do with what he found” in Anglicanism, Davies saw himself as unlikely to be satisfied. Instead, he described his spiritual path as “*a sort of solitary Protestantism*, dismayed by the Protestant churches in their extraordinary variety” (312, emphasis mine).

This underscored Davies’s lifelong and complex relationship with orthodox religion, one that routinely saw him embrace those aspects which satisfied his world-view, and discard others. In a letter to Horace Davenport on November 18, 1984, Davies put the matter succinctly, musing that religion “might be a poetic approach to some important questions,” but “[like] all poetry,” he said, “only about a third is good poetry” (126).⁴⁹ As Judith Skelton Grant notes in her biography, *Man of Myth* (1994), by the time he completed the Salterton trilogy in 1958, Davies was unafraid to modify his views. He believed in a masculine Creator, albeit one that was “indifferent to human life” (465). Prayer, likewise, was not meant as a petition for himself or for others, but as inward contemplation (465). Finally, and perhaps most telling, Grant reveals, was Davies’s rejection of Jesus Christ as a saviour and forgiver. Part of this stance, she says, can be explained

⁴⁸ In 1974, Davies explained in greater detail how his movement away from Presbyterianism occurred. He notes: “As I grew older I became much more interested in the sacramental approach of the Catholic Church and the Anglican. And I was very ill-suited by temperament to be a Roman Catholic, it was pretty obvious that I would be better off in the Church of England. I was confirmed in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, while there as a student and away from home, so it avoided disturbing my parents” (Harpur 136). See also: Ross, *A Portrait in Mosaic*, in which the author’s wife, Brenda Davies, offers her own account (78).

⁴⁹ Horace Davenport was a physiologist and educator at the University of Michigan. Davies and Davenport met at Oxford in 1935-36 and shared a life-long friendship (Ross 59). Indeed, Davies’s correspondence reveals Davenport to be among Davies’s closest confidantes.

by Davies's underlying belief "that a man does, and should, reap what he sows" (465). However, beyond Grant's assessment, a subsequent letter from Davies to Davenport dated November 22, 1986, accounts for this rejection in further detail: "For myself," he writes, "the figure of Christ was made hateful to me when I was a child; the simpleton, the patsy, the Bearded Lady, the big-eyed snoop who watched your every move – and nothing that I have learned since has made the image more attractive" (*For Your Eye Alone* 166). Indeed, for Davies, historical accounts of Jesus's life were suspect at best, leading the author to reason that specific aspects of Jesus's character – such as his immeasurable capacity for forgiveness – were carefully-constructed inventions meant to sanitize his image: "The symbolic Jesus and the historical Jesus," he observed, "are just not the same creature" (Todd 137-39). Such a viewpoint helps to account for why Davies grappled with Jesus in his fiction. Even in his later years, Davies exhibited difficulty in viewing Christ as anything more than "the Pale Galilean – the Sanctified Wimp – [that] has appealed to the inadequate everywhere" (*For Your Eye Alone* 126) – a joke perhaps best illustrated by *The Rebel Angels's* repeated use of the diminutive "Bebby Jesus."

Moreover, Davies was quick to disparage those who did not share his rigour of introspection or his critical eye when it came to spiritual matters. Davies's publisher, Douglas Gibson, for instance, recalls in *Robertson Davies: A Portrait in Mosaic* (2008) how – following a promotional stop for *The Rebel Angels* at a Christian radio station in Washington, DC, where Davies had been

attacked for questioning whether the writers of the Gospels had actually lived at the time of, or had actually known, Jesus – Davies mocked the callers' protests: "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they *walked* with Him! They *talked* with Him!!" (Ross 274-5). Likewise, Davies displayed his contempt for those who used the Bible to claim moral authority. When reprimanded in 1981 by a woman in Manitoba who – after reading an excerpt of *The Rebel Angels* in *Saturday Night* – had denounced the author's use of "Barn Yard pornography" and his reliance on "degradation, lies, sacrilegious slander and filth," Davies responded by requesting the woman's photograph so that he might "behold a countenance suffused with Christian love, and perhaps even yet repent" (*For Your Eye Alone* 69).⁵⁰ Yet Davies also resented the "brash certainties" of atheists, whom he describes in his letters as a "pompous, humourless, self-honouring lot" and "a group of marked instability" (*For Your Eye Alone* 126-27). "They're like people who've cut off both hands," he went on to tell journalist Douglas Todd in 1993; "They've lost touch with the whole universe" (Todd 133) – reinforcing Davies's long-held ideal that *some* form of higher belief was better than none at all.

Indeed, despite his misgivings about orthodoxy, Davies felt it unthinkable to reject religion outright. In a letter to the editor of *The Globe and Mail* written on or around February 1, 1990, he describes religion as "an inextricable element" in our thought and history (231); to live without it, he told interviewer Paul Soles in

⁵⁰ Amusingly, *The Rebel Angels* appears to anticipate such an objection. When an editor takes Parlabane to task for the presence of "explicit" scenes in his novel, the latter replies to Simon: "Of course there's a good deal of that in it, but unless it's taken as an integral part of the book it's likely to be mistaken for pornography. The book is frank ... but not pornographic. I mean, it wouldn't excite anybody" (243).

1972, “is out of the question” (95). Yet, the relentlessness of Davies’s religious questioning left him in an intolerable position. He could concede the importance of religious belief, acknowledging that Christianity had brought extraordinary things into the world, including compassion. Yet, in a letter to Horace Davenport dated November 22, 1986, he also recognized the church’s susceptibility to arrogance and prejudice, observing that “humble faith is too often the refuge of boobs and a stick with which they beat people who do not agree with them” (*For Your Eye Alone* 166):⁵¹

As I grow older the whole notion of belief grows more important to me, and I am grieved to find what awful company it sometimes puts me in I am a religious man, but that does not mean that I am a card-carrying Christian and certainly not a member of any sect or coven of zealots. I think that the Christian business is beginning to ravel out [A]n Oriental faith, hitched to a lot of Mediterranean hierarchical and sacerdotal organization, embraced and changed by people of all sorts and degrees of intelligence, and now face to face with the demand of women to be treated as people, cannot survive in its present form. (166)⁵²

The result is that, for much of his adult life, Davies remained uncertain of where he fit. By 1972, having already long-distilled the subject of religion in his mind, he had come to view it less as “a sort of fixed creed, or a sort of churchgoing belief” but, rather, described it more as a matter of *awareness* – of being “aware all the time, even if you haven’t got your mind directly on it, of the existence of things

⁵¹ See Todd, 136-37.

⁵² Davies comments further about his own need for religion, explaining “I suppose I am somebody who cannot live without a belief in a power beyond what man can compass, and that attempts to make God in one’s own image are folly, as are notions that God disposes the universe with an eye to one’s personal convenience. Philosophy cannot capture God, nor can Science winkle him out of his vastness, and as for humble faith, it is too often the refuge of boobs and a stick with which they beat people who do not agree with them” (166).

which are infinitely greater than yourself” (Soles 95).⁵³ Moreover, if not as a saviour, Davies showed himself willing to accept Christ as a poetic ideal – “a paradigm of the fully-realized soul” (*For Your Eye Alone* 126). In a letter to Father Plunkett dated November 30, 1972, Davies expressed the dilemma in which he found himself:

I tried, for a time, to ally myself with orthodoxy, but it simply didn't work. To have kept up a pretense would have been false to orthodoxy and false to myself, and I don't think any good can come of such falseness. You may say that I should have bent my neck to the orthodox yoke ... but you see I wasn't raised that way, and the whole tenor of my background and education was against it. (311)

Davies recognized that his own attitudes and perspectives were largely incompatible with orthodoxy, and that orthodox religion was failing to serve its members. For this reason, I will show, a Gnostic world-view would have been infinitely more appealing to the author, and helps to account for why Jungian and Gnostic ideas of salvation and the self would make their way into his fiction not long after many of these sentiments were expressed.

Davies and Jung: A Bridge to Gnosticism

Davies's interest in Gnosticism and the feminine aspect of divinity began with his study of the eminent psychiatrist, C.G. Jung, at the age of thirty-five – long before the renewed interest in Gnosticism in recent decades (Todd 132). On a fundamental level, Davies admired Jung's ideas about the unconscious. More simply, he felt that a Jungian attitude better served his role as a novelist. In an

⁵³ Davies repeats this outlook in *For Your Eye Alone*: “Philosophy cannot capture God, nor can Science winkle him out of his vastness” (166).

interview with Peter Gzowski on CBC Radio on October 23, 1972, the author admitted that such a viewpoint allowed for a wider exploration of the psyche, and – much as he had attempted with his characterization of David Staunton in *The Manticore* – afforded him the opportunity to more realistically (and economically) explore middle-aged characters without feeling obliged to delve into the “connective tissue” of their pasts (Gzowski and Rakoff 104).⁵⁴ Davies found Freud’s method of psychoanalysis reductive by comparison: “It reduces what happens in somebody’s life to things which are caused by small occurrences frequently occurring in childhood,” he explained; “[F]rom a point of view as a novelist, [Jung’s ideas] are very, very much more interesting than tracking down the mainstream of somebody’s life to some incident in childhood” (104).

Davies was attracted to Jung for other reasons as well. One, as he told interviewer Donald Cameron in 1973, “was my religious interest, because I very quickly found that for my taste, investigation of religion by orthodox theological means was unrewarding” (Cameron 81). What Jung afforded Davies was a sharp sense that all religious ideas, including statements made in scripture,

⁵⁴ Davies felt an affinity for exploring middle-age in his fiction: “Middle age, I think, is enormously interesting. As a novelist, I get very tired of the insistence on young characters in novels. They are interesting and they have interesting things to do, but one gets sick of the repetition of the cliches of youth, including their experiences with sex and love. It all has a strongly similar ring. I think life gets to be much more interesting when you get a little older. Stranger things happen to you” (Gzowski and Rakoff 106).

originate from the archetypes of the collective unconscious.⁵⁵ Jung, according to Davies, saw God as, “at the very least, a psychological fact, and at the best as a transcendent authority manifesting itself in man through the activity of the psyche” (qtd. in Grant, *Man of Myth* 467). In addition, Jung had found in the world of Gnosticism symbols and myths that contributed to his psychological investigations. Jung conceived of God not as perfection, but as *wholeness*, encompassing the dualities of good and evil, masculinity and femininity, dark and light. It is important to note that Jung diverged from the Gnostics on a number of key points. For instance, he could not accept an anti-cosmic view of the world-order. He was deeply respectful of evil. And finally, he regarded the God of the Old Testament as wicked and harsh, but could not subscribe to the Gnostic view of a Supreme God, who was unknowable, as an acceptable alternative.

To this end, Davies’s letters point to what is commonly known – namely, that he extrapolated from his reading of Jung an understanding of faith as psychological reality, for which Gnosticism was an historical antecedent. Indeed, by the time Davies came to write the Deptford novels, Jung’s unorthodox conceptions of God and religion had already taken root. In 1963, Davies began to exercise some of those unorthodox views. Writing to the then-Principal of

⁵⁵ Jung’s predilection for Gnostic thought pre-dated that of most of his contemporaries and later adherents, and from the earliest days of his scientific career until the time of his death, his dedication to the subject was relentless, famously stating that in the writings of the ancient Gnostics, “I felt as if I had at last found a circle of friends who understood me.”⁵⁵ As such, following the discovery of the Coptic-Gnostic “Library of Chenoboskion” near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945, Jung had a role in securing the acquisition of a number of Gnostic materials for the Bollinger Institute in Geneva, which were then grouped together to form the Jung Codex. Moreover, according to Stephen Hoeller, as early as August 1912, Jung intimated in a letter to Freud that he had an intuition that the essentially feminine-toned archaic wisdom of the Gnostics, symbolically called Sophia, was destined to re-enter modern Western culture by way of depth-psychology (Hoeller 54).

University College at University of Toronto, Douglas Lapan, Davies described his plan for *Fifth Business* as “an attempt to explore a region of my own life and thought which I have never put in a book before – my desire to explore regions of feeling which are commonly called religious, but are not orthodox or churchy” (*Discoveries* 179).⁵⁶ Later, on May 10, 1968, Davies made the connection to Jung more explicit. *Fifth Business*, he explained to Davenport, would be a “spiritual autobiography”:

I choose the word “spiritual” with intent, for during the past ten years the things of the spirit have become increasingly important to me. Not in a churchy sense – though as Master of [Massey] College I have to attend chapel and look serious – but in what I must call a Jungian sense ... [for] through Carl Gustav Jung’s ever-thickening veils of thought and fantasy I discern something that gives great richness to my life. (*Discoveries* 211-12)

Davies’s idea for a “spiritual autobiography” recalls Jung’s own *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961), which the former later recommended to fellow Canadian writer Dorothy Livesay as an example of a “marvellous autobiography.” Ironically, the latter is only partially autobiographical, with some chapters written by Jung, and others by associate Aniela Jaffé, who herself was later accused of censorship when she began exercising her Jung-appointed authority as editor to reword some of Jung’s thoughts on Christianity she deemed too controversial.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ During an interview with Paul Soles on January 3, 1972, Davies put it another way: “[W]hen I talk about religion, I am not referring to a sort of fixed creed, or a sort of churchgoing belief, or the desire to rush out and convert people to some other form of thought or feeling. But to be aware all the time, even if you haven’t got your mind directly on it, of the existence of things which are infinitely greater than yourself, and in the face of which you and your desires and your hopes are trivial. I think it’s very important, and that is what I mean by religion, a sense of the great things of life” (95).

⁵⁷ See Bair, Deirdre (2003) *Jung: A Biography* (633–4).

Likewise, the papal bull of 1950, by which the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed the Assumption of Mary, which gave belated official recognition to Mary's elevated place in worship and belief, had a tremendous impact on Davies's religious thinking, as it had for Jung. For Davies, bringing the feminine principle, values and insights into greater prominence in Christianity promised to be revolutionary; for "what this really means, when you boil it down," he explained, "is that finally they've got a woman into heaven. And with the Trinity, the Trinity is now a foursome, and one of the foursome is a woman I think it is of enormous psychological importance" (Lague 163). Already discouraged with the meagre place afforded to women by the church, Davies was elated. Mary's elevated place in Catholicism became for him "the most significant religious statement that's been made in recent times" (163), and he was convinced that the move left Protestantism with the appearance of being little more than a man's religion.⁵⁸ Indeed, "the trouble with Christianity," he surmised, "is that it's too Hebraically based with its single Father God and its masculine Saviour. We've got to get rid of that fearful masculine insistence if we're going to have a religion which is a workable, comforting, and dear one to humanity at large" (139).⁵⁹ For Davies, as for Jung, Gnosticism was attractive in that it mirrored his own independently-developed ideas.

⁵⁸ See also Harpur 138-39.

⁵⁹ Davies is speaking specifically to the need for the greater inclusion of women in orthodox Christianity. A year prior to his death, Davies repeated the sentiment: "I think the time has come when we've got to recognize there's a side of existence the Christian church has been shutting out for 2,000 years: half the human race" (Todd 132).

Gnosticism As An Answer

Davies's interviews and correspondence reveal that the roots of his attraction to Gnosticism extend in two directions. First, and in keeping with his recognition that Christianity must adapt to serve its female members, Davies appreciated how the Gnostics of antiquity incorporated the feminine into the divine; and in particular, was struck that Gnosticism often positioned women in roles far beyond the meagre stations afforded to them by the church.⁶⁰ When asked about the religious impulse in his fiction by friend and editor Elisabeth Sifton in the Spring 1989 issue of *The Paris Review* – and confronted with the observation that he “sometimes seem[s] a Gnostic” – Davies responded:

That is something I think about a great deal ... When I became interested in Jung, I became interested in his attitude toward Christianity – which was a very honest one [H]e was not an enemy of Christianity, though he recognized certain restrictions in Christianity that I think are becoming more and more apparent as the present century moves on. One is the rather meager place it seems to have for women and all that women imply. I don't mean women as adversaries or as people different from men, but women as people who have extraordinary things to contribute to the great mass of civilized thinking, feeling, and living. Unless Christianity can reconcile itself to women as it has not done to now, I don't see how it can continue to maintain its hold over thoughtful people.⁶¹

Davies's remarks might seem ironic to the reader, given the awkwardness with which some of his female characters are voiced in his fiction. Yet in 1991, two

⁶⁰ In an interview with Tom Harpur in 1974, Davies remarked that the Jewish and Christian religions have been hard on women, musing “People talk about the coming of Messiah; how do they know Messiah isn't going to be a woman?” (134).

⁶¹ Davies's argument, which has been put forward by feminist Christians since the 1970s, became mainstream through Dan Brown's bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, which maintained the Roman Catholic church conspired to keep "secret" that the divine is feminine - and that Jesus married and bore offspring through Mary Magdalene. Ironically, in an interview with Tom Harpur for the *Toronto Star* in 1974, Davies remarked: “I think that the bringing of the feminine principle, feminine values and insights into greater prominence in Christianity will be the greatest revolution in faith in the last 1,000 years” (Harpur 138-39).

years after the Sifton interview, he protested: “I have the reputation in some circles – God only knows why – for being harsh about women. But I’m not. I have very high regard for them. And I think that the way they are treated in conventional Christianity is against their best interests” (“Cinematic”).⁶²

Addressing the second part of Sifton’s question, Davies notes that he was drawn to the Gnostic view of salvation. “[T]he church,” as Davies would explain to Douglas Todd in 1994, “worked on the theory that salvation is free; as long as you believed, you were saved” (Todd 131). The Gnostics, on the other hand, “thought you had to have some brains: “[they] taught that salvation, or enlightenment, could only be achieved through an inner journey” (131). This idea of solitary, psychological hard work appealed to Davies. Although he recognized the notion was inherently elitist, he did not seem to mind that it also excluded vast numbers of people who lacked the spiritual or intellectual apparatus required for salvation (132). Part of being a Gnostic, Davies explained to Sifton:

was using your head if you wanted to achieve salvation or even a tolerable life. That is something that the Christian church tends rather to discourage. Salvation is free for everyone. The greatest idiot and yahoo can be saved, the doctrine goes, because Christ loves him as much as he loves Albert Einstein. I don’t think that is true. I think that civilization – life – has a different place for the intelligent people who try to pull us a little further out of the primal ooze than it has for the boobs who just trot along behind, dragging on the wheels. That sort of opinion has won me the reputation of being an elitist. Behold an elitist.⁶³

⁶² The comment mirrors another that Davies made in interview with Renee Heatherington and Gabriel Kampf in 1973: “A lot of people think that I am hostile to women. I am not hostile to women. I am fascinated by women and enormously appreciative of them, but I don’t think that they are men and I don’t think that the finest thing you can say about a woman is that she is just exactly like a man” (123).

⁶³ In a letter to Horace Davenport in 1984, Davies added: “the notion that salvation is free and may be attained by the idlest, the dullest, the stupidest is understandably very popular with persons who may be so described” (*For Your Eye Alone* 126).

Davies was adamant that intelligence and introspection must play an integral role in salvation. To believe otherwise, he maintained, “would make it the only thing in a complex world not achieved by a serious struggle” (*For Your Eye Alone* 126). Indeed, even in his early reading of Jung, Davies was enchanted by the notion that salvation had to be achieved through an active process of seeking *gnosis* or self-knowledge. In an instalment of his column, “A Writer’s Diary,” in the *Toronto Star* on May 2, 1959, Davies saw Jung’s work as infinitely useful for those seeking spiritual enlightenment. Describing Jung’s “The Undivided Self,” which had appeared two years earlier, Davies remarked, “I wish it could be read by everyone ... for its theme is that only by inner development, undertaken alone, can any truly satisfactory life be achieved.” Twenty years later, Elaine Pagels echoed Davies’s reading, and in a manner that brings Davies in alignment with the Gnostic world-view; “The Gnostic,” she says, “understands Christ’s message not as offering a set of answers, but as encouragement to engage in a process of searching” (*The Gnostic Gospels* 135).

Davies’s apparent alliance with Gnostic thought was discerned by a handful of his readers and, at times, forced him to defend his views. That the religious vision of *Fifth Business* exhibited Gnostic overtones, for instance, drew the attention of Father Patrick Plunkett. Plunkett had written to Davies on November 4, 1971, presumably to express concern about the unorthodox ideas found in that novel. His original letter to Davies has not survived, although we

can infer the specifics of his criticism from the uncommon defensiveness visible in Davies's reply:

I truly think I am a gnostic, if that means somebody who thinks that completion, or integration, or salvation of the spirit may be achieved by study and hard intellectual work. After all, as I have written in another novel, Christ's birth was made known to three types of mankind in three appropriate ways: to the shepherds by portents and wonders, because they would not have known or heeded anything less; to the Magi by their studies and subtleties; to Simeon in the Temple by virtue of the vision given him by his great goodness. If I am going to achieve salvation, it will have to be as a Magus, because I am not simple, nor would I ever have the presumption to think I was particularly good – though I do my best. *So, if that is a gnostic, I must bear the label. (Discoveries 251-2, emphasis mine)*

Years later, on November 22, 1986, Davies recounted for Horace Davenport a similar (if not the same) incident:

I once had a blazing row with the chaplain of Massey College, in which he accused me of being a Gnostic, which he thought was a horrible accusation. But so far as I can discover the Gnostics were people who thought that being intelligent and acting accordingly had something to do with salvation – so of course they were heretics, because the notion that intelligence makes any difference in religion has always been hateful to the church.⁶⁴ (*For Your Eye Alone* 166)

From the 1970s until his death in 1995, Davies staunchly defended the Gnostics of antiquity, explaining to interviewer Douglas Todd in 1994 that the Gnostics valued intelligence and enlightenment in ways that orthodox Christianity did not. Yet, these exchanges also reveal that Davies aligned himself more closely with Gnosticism than previously thought. That Davies defended the Gnostics of antiquity, for instance and, at times, *identified himself* as a Gnostic is particularly telling, in that it forces a rethinking of the author's spiritual leanings.

⁶⁴ Davies repeated a similar version of this anecdote in 1989. See Sifton.

Gnosticism and the Soul of Canada

For Davies, salvation in Gnosticism came as the product of an “inner journey” that required intellectual and spiritual muscle – equipment that the majority of the population lacked. He notes, for instance, that “Christianity was very harsh toward the Gnostics, who suggested that maybe salvation called for some intelligence and the rigorous exercise thereof” (126). In “The Deptford Trilogy in Retrospect” (1980), an essay Davies wrote as the introduction to a book of criticism, the author extends this belief to criticize Canada’s lack of self-awareness:

I am often asked ... whether the books [in the Deptford trilogy] are meant to present an interpretation of life in Canada. Of course they are, for all the three principal characters are Canadians, one of whom has been shaped by Canada’s unquestioned virtues, but also by its want of spiritual self-recognition; the second, exposed to the same virtues, yields to Canada’s allurements of glossy success; the third feels the lash of Canada’s cruelty, which is the shadow side of its virtues, *and arises from Canada’s lack of self-knowledge*. (11, emphasis mine)

By the late 1980s Davies had begun to explicitly connect Gnosticism and psychology in his editorials. Gnosticism afforded him a language with which to criticize Canada’s lack of self-knowledge – a spiritual laziness he saw shrouding the country’s true “soul” or psychological direction. This notion that Canada lacks self-knowledge became a familiar theme for Davies in the 1980s, and is perhaps nowhere expressed more explicitly than in a 1987 article he wrote for *Saturday Night*. In that article, entitled “Keeping Faith,” Davies interrogates the matter of

Canada's "soul," and also uses the opportunity to expound upon "the intellectual and spiritual laziness that is the greatest plague and detriment of our country."⁶⁵

A Canadian will work, or fight, or give money to philanthropic causes readily enough, but he will not think if he can possibly, at whatever cost, get someone else to do it for him. The Canadian is, in intellectual matters, a slob. There is a reason for this surrender. Good works are cheap in comparison with solitary psychological hard work. (192)

Davies goes on to claim that Canada "is in a psychological mess from which it can extract itself only by taking thought" (192). He connects this perception of Canada's spiritual crisis with the suggestion that orthodox Christianity is somehow incompatible with the country itself. In an interview with Peter Newman, Davies speaks of the Canadian nation in terms of the paradoxical nature of human personality. Davies describes the nation as "torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary mystical spirit which it fears and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scottish banker." The "mystical spirit" feared and therefore suppressed by the "Scottish banker" in Canada's persona can be identified in those other worlds to which the major protagonists of Davies's writings are drawn: chiefly, the world of magicians, saints, and artists, but also to unorthodox religious impulses.

Elsewhere, the notion of the Scottish banker suppressing Canadians' "mystical spirit" recalls Davies's belief that Christianity "is an oriental faith which we have attempted to impose upon, for instance in our own country, an exceedingly northern people. And it won't fit" ("Cinematic"). The solution, as

⁶⁵ Typewritten drafts of the article at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa reveal that it originally held the titles of "Canada In Search of a Soul" or "Canada In Search of a Soul: Canada as a Religious or Spiritual Nation."

Davies saw it, was for Canadians to accept that the solution to our ills as a country lay in the roots of depth psychology and interior self-examination. Davies is adamant in "Keeping Faith" that because "we have Freud and especially Jung saying in effect what the Gnostics said nineteen centuries ago," the Gnostics are not to be feared. "Gnostics," he points out, "accepted cheerfully the conclusion that [those without intellectual fortitude] were best suited to the bondage of a church which would keep them out of mischief, but could not enlighten them" (192). As such, Davies proposed that Canada need only look inward to find a hidden level of being, unknown to conscious being – an interior life that would represent the country's true character. "If Canada is to find herself," he explained, "she must find her own psychological direction, and radical changes in her religious orientation will follow" (192).

The Rebel Angels

Robertson Davies was the first writer of stature in Canada to employ Gnosticism overtly in his fiction. For Davies, Gnosticism was spiritually vital and befitted the intellectually curious. It better suited the spiritual lives of women, in that it put the responsibility for salvation in the hands of the individual rather than the church. Both are tenets of ancient Gnosticism that – more so than has been acknowledged – prove integral to Davies's handling of Canadian spirituality. Often, commentators have dismissed that admiration as one of Davies's many arcane interests – an eccentricity to be laid at the feet of Jung. Yet,

understanding Davies's investment in Gnostic thought, I will show, not only benefits our reception of Davies the man and the religiosity of his fiction, but also helps to reveal the intertextual play between Davies's novel *The Rebel Angels* (1981), Morley Callaghan's *A Time For Judas* (1983), and Margaret Atwood's nineteenth-century murder mystery, *Alias Grace* (1996).⁶⁶

Earlier Studies on Davies and Gnosticism

Nowhere else in Davies's *oeuvre* is the role of Gnosticism and anti-orthodoxy more explicitly seated than in *The Rebel Angels*. An example of this frankness can be seen in the novel when, while contemplating his future with graduate student Maria Theotoky – with whom he has become obsessed – Simon Darcourt, an Anglican priest and professor, cites his interest in Gnosticism to account for why he left his parish work: “I wanted to dig deep in mines of old belief that were related ... to those texts which the compilers of the Bible had not thought suitable for inclusion in the reputed Word of God” (235). Darcourt goes on to explain that his interest in non-canonical texts arose from the marked lack of a feminine presence in Christianity, a fact which had “long troubled” him (235). He points out, for example, that even though women were counted among Christ's followers, that Christ conversed with women, and that those who remained with him at the foot of the Cross were chiefly women, the church

⁶⁶ By “intertextual play,” I refer to Kristeva's notion of “intertextuality,” founded on the premise that no text - much as it might like to appear so - is original and unique-in-itself; rather, Kristeva argues, it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts.

offered them no place of spiritual authority (235). “The Gnostics did better than that,” he says; “they offered their followers Sophia ... the feminine personification of God’s wisdom ... through whom God became conscious of himself” (235-36). Darcourt subsequently applies this notion of the Gnostic Sophia to Maria Theotoky, believing she may be for him “a messenger of special grace and redemption” (235-36). In so doing, Davies establishes a key structure for their relationship, one that exalts Maria – and, by extension, Gnostic thought in general – as an emblem of uncommon intellectual pursuit – an alternative, yet equally-viable path by which the spiritually adventurous might divine a form of *gnosis* or self-knowledge. Indeed, the loaded surname “Theotoky” – “theo” relating to God or deities, and “toky” implying birth, or that which is brought forth – cannot be overlooked in the novel, as it plays directly on themes of spiritual inquiry and self-discovery for both Maria and Simon.

If we accept, as Dave Little (1996) argues, that “Darcourt is the Davies character who most resembles his creator” (31-2), Simon Darcourt’s interest in biblical Apocrypha in *The Rebel Angels* suggests a great deal about the author’s engagement with Gnosticism from the 1970s onward. Simon concedes that “without any intention of becoming a Gnostic I found myself greatly taken up with the Gnostics because of the appeal of so much that they had to say” (*The Rebel Angels* 235). Interviews with the author, as well as Davies’s correspondence, show that by the time he completed *World of Wonders* (1975), the author had also developed a strong affinity to Gnostic views. That he had done so was not

unusual: Davies's intellectual curiosity often led him to question his own religious thinking – so much so that, in an interview with *The Toronto Star* in 1974, he remarked: “If I were asked to nail down what I believed and why, I would be in a pickle like a lot of people” (Harpur 136). However, a study of archival materials reveals that the Gnostic world-view was more than a curiosity for Davies. In many respects, it answered what he saw as key shortcomings in orthodox Christianity; in particular, the lack of spiritual roles afforded to women, and the emphasis on faith alone as the means to salvation. Moreover, Gnosticism mirrored Davies's lifelong interest in depth psychology, espousing a form of enlightenment through introspection that paralleled the psychological hard work advocated by Freud and Jung.⁶⁷ Such self-examination, Davies felt, is crucial for spiritual fulfilment, in that it “gives a new complexion to all religious thinking” (“Keeping Faith” 166). To this end, although Davies did not identify himself as a Gnostic, his admiration of Gnosticism coloured his religious views for much of his adult life.

To date, however, surprisingly little criticism has been undertaken to untangle Davies's personal relationship with the Gnostics of antiquity. Indeed, without access to some of the more recently-revealed documents, the majority of Davies's commentators have, to date, struggled to fully explicate the presence of Gnosticism in the author's fiction. In his doctoral dissertation, “Discerning the

⁶⁷ “Depth psychology” is a broad term that refers to any psychological approach examining the depth (the subtle or unconscious parts) of human experience. It includes the study and interpretation of dreams, complexes, and archetypes, and it encompasses any psychology that works with the concept of an unconscious mind. See Robert Aziz, *C.G. Jung's Psychology of Religion and Synchronicity* (1990).

Contemporary Gnostic Spirit in the Novels of Robertson Davies” (1989), for instance, Brian Thorpe argues that Davies’s use of Gnostic thought can be viewed theologically as a resistance against a culture perceived to be dominated by orthodox Protestantism.⁶⁸ According to Thorpe, the appearance of Gnosticism in Davies’s *oeuvre* can be read primarily as a rejection of the material world and a means of escape from a repressive orthodox environment to one of spiritual freedom:

This resistance is seen in an attraction to a contemporary Gnostic spirit marked by an interest in the individual (as opposed to the institution) as the recipient of revealed knowledge, cosmological constructs (archetypes) as purveyors of truth regarding the human condition and the possibility of escape, through knowledge, from a negative human destiny. (4-5)

Thorpe’s study is significant in that it advances a parallel between the Gnostics’ pursuit of self-knowledge and Davies’s own view that the individual’s reflection on experience is a more effective route to self-understanding than what can be achieved via orthodox religion or liberal education systems (57).⁶⁹ He argues that Davies’s fiction shares with the Gnostics the belief that *gnosis* is central to one’s movement from a place of repressed self-awareness to a position of

⁶⁸ See Todd, *Brave Souls*. Davies was aware of Thorpe’s dissertation and – according to journalist Douglas Todd, who interviewed Davies a year before his death – thought the project well written. But Davies still suggested that Thorpe’s analysis had gone too far in crediting his expertise in Gnosticism, and implied that Thorpe had tried to draw connections where none existed (Todd 131).

⁶⁹ *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) also comments adversely on the nature of formal education. Davies writes: “If formal education has any bearing on the arts at all, its purpose is to make critics, not artists. Its usual effect is to cage the spirit in other people’s ideas – the ideas of poets and philosophers, which were once splendid insights into the nature of life, but which people who have no insights of their own have hardened into dogmas.” Bonnycastle’s “Robertson Davies and the Ethics of Monologue” observes that Davies’s novels “set themselves against social institutions, and individuals find the answers to their problems by escaping from society The religion of these novels proposes a new ideal ... in which society and its institutions are insignificant, and dialogue and the reasoning powers of the mind are eliminated” (23).

realized self-knowledge or understanding (133). Indeed, following Thorpe's line of thought, it becomes apparent that, by pursuing themes of individuation and self-discovery in his fiction, Davies had – consciously or unconsciously – taken up a problem Elaine Pagels identifies in *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979); namely, “How – or where – is one to seek self-knowledge?” (171).⁷⁰ Yet, at the time he completed his dissertation, Thorpe lacked access to many of Davies's personal thoughts on the subject. As such, he rightly cautions against drawing *too close* a parallel between Davies and Gnosticism – pointing out, for instance, that although the two shared beliefs that often overlapped, the author gave no indication of adhering to the Gnostics' radically negative view of Creation (152). The resulting analysis thus avoids a closer connection; and instead, discusses the author's fiction in terms of what Thorpe calls the *spirit* of Gnosticism and the novels' shared challenge to orthodoxy.

In *Catching the Wind in a Net: the Religious Vision of Robertson Davies* (1996), Dave Little also includes as part of a larger analysis the myriad references to Gnosticism in Davies's fiction. Unlike Thorpe, however, Little goes further to attribute the elitism and subjectivism of Davies's Gnostic doctrine of salvation to the author's recognition of a “Gnostic element” in Jung's thinking, as well as to Davies's regard for the feminine element missing in orthodox Christianity. Importantly, Little notes that between *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) and *Fifth Business* (1970), Davies's exploration of the feminine in religion

⁷⁰ To this end, “many Gnostics,” Pagels observes, “share with psychotherapy a major premise: both agree – against orthodox Christianity – that the psyche bears within itself the potential for liberation or destruction.”

experienced a “quantitative shift” (103). Whereas Davies had once promoted the notion that a female presence needs to be infused into, or reemphasized by, Christianity to meet the requirements of its women members, the author’s position evolved. By the time he wrote *Fifth Business*, Little writes, “Davies’s reasoning had become more complex: since he had by then been immersed in Jungian thought for over a decade, he shows that for men also the presence of female attributes is essential in the doctrine and symbolism of religion” (103). For instance, in *Fifth Business* (1970), Little points out that the unorthodox Mary Dempster functions as an embodiment of the *eros* principle or anti-*logos* conduct – “the kind of woman,” Davies says, “who would have been considered a saint in an earlier period” (*Fifth Business* 46). Likewise, in *The Manticore* (1972), Little sees in Davies’s handling of David Staunton’s Jungian *anamnesis* the suggestion that because all men have an *anima* – a feminine part of their nature – the feminine aspect must be nurtured (Little 98-103).⁷¹

Neither Thorpe nor Little, however, is able to speak to Davies’s personal feelings about the ancient Gnostics, nor do their studies adequately account for Gnosticism’s sudden and overt appearance in *The Rebel Angels*. Indeed, since the two studies first emerged, additional interviews and correspondence have come to light that provide a surprising picture of Davies’s affinity for Gnostic

⁷¹ Little goes on to provide the example of David Staunton’s Jungian *anamnesis* in *The Manticore*. For Little, the episode illustrates that because all men have an *anima* – “the feminine part of your nature” (165) – they are to some extent psychologically androgynous, and that accordingly their feminine component has to be recognized and nurtured. “Any religion that fails to do this,” he writes, “is by implication, then, deficient in meeting the fundamental psychological needs of its male as well as its female adherents” (103).

belief. While earlier novels such as *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) and *Fifth Business* (1970) also advance Davies's suspicion of orthodox Christian values and employ Gnostic thought somewhat furtively as a tool to subvert orthodoxy and facilitate themes of self-discovery, it is the uncommonly *robust* appearance of Gnosticism in *The Rebel Angels* – and the timing of its publication – that gives that novel a unique position in the author's canon. For just as Gypsy lore, Jungian psychology, Hermetic alchemy, and scatology are all presented in the text as locations of hidden wisdom, Davies introduces Gnosticism as an unorthodox means by which Simon Darcourt might bring about “the completion of [his] soul” (235). To accomplish this, *The Rebel Angels* utilizes both the apocryphal tale of the Rebel Angels and Simon's nocturnal fantasies of the Gnostic Sophia as fully-developed metaphors for individuation and spiritual development. At stake for Simon is “advancement of the spirit” – an escape from terminal bachelorhood (235); for Maria Theotoky, it is her ability to recognize and embrace her psychological “root” – or as she puts it, the “possibilities that lurk in the background of modern life, but which so much of modern life denies utterly” (279).

Through Simon's and Maria's relationship, as well as the actions of the other characters – mostly academics – Davies delivers a novel that is, on the surface, largely satirical. Set against a backdrop of Davies's retirement, however, *The Rebel Angels* can be read as a parting shot at the trajectory of post-secondary learning. Davies suggests it is not sufficient for the university to

be merely a “city of youth,” as the novel’s Mrs. Skeldergate describes; instead, it must strive to be a “city of wisdom” (186). The point is made explicit in the novel by the Warden of Ploughwright College, who points out: “At the heart of the university is its body of learned men; it can be no better than they, and it is at their fire the young come to warm themselves” (186). It is here, I argue, that Gnosticism finds its place in *The Rebel Angels*. Davies draws on the importance of the characters’ willingness to achieve *gnosis* or self-knowledge through hidden wisdom in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment and, turn, facilitate the purpose and good health of the university.

Timing and Context

According to Davies’s biographer, Judith Skelton Grant (1994), Davies’s decision to have Simon Darcourt interest himself in Gnosticism in *The Rebel Angels* came late in the author’s planning for the novel (534). In addition to threads of Gnosticism Davies had encountered years earlier in his study of Jung, she writes, Davies had also located elements of Gnostic thought in E.J. Holmyard’s *Alchemy* and Lynn Thorndike’s *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (531). She reasons that because of Davies’s exposure to these texts and, similarly, as a by-product of reading he had done for a speech on Ben Jonson and alchemy in 1969, “a link between Darcourt and Maria and Gnosticism and Sophia was almost bound to occur to Davies as he gathered ideas for the novel” (535).

Yet, Grant's explanation overlooks an obvious historical connection; namely, that – unlike the novels that preceded or followed it in the author's *oeuvre* – *The Rebel Angels* was wholly conceived and written during an historical period in which sources of information on Gnosticism had suddenly become both popular and widely available.⁷² Between 1976 and 1981, the period Grant identifies as the genesis of the novel, a number of key publications detailing the origins and tenets of ancient Gnosticism had made their way into the public realm.⁷³ Among them was *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1977), a book that contained for the first time in translation *The Gospel of Thomas*, which Arthur Cornish improbably describes for Simon in *The Rebel Angels* as “very juicy stuff” (312), and which Davies himself wished had been part of the orthodox Gospels (Harpur 137). Two years later, Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), a best-selling introduction to the Nag Hammadi scrolls, popularized their ideas; for the first time, making them accessible to a deeply curious reading public.

Pagels's book appeared as Davies was mid-way through his first draft of *The Rebel Angels*. It had been preceded in the months prior by a high-profile series of editorials Pagels wrote for *The New York Review of Books*, under such provocative titles as “The Discovery of the Gnostic Gospels,” “The Threat of the

⁷² I am deferring to Judith Skelton Grant's timeline for the genesis of *The Rebel Angels*, based upon the author's extensive analysis of Davies's notebooks, reading habits, and other commentary related to the novel.

⁷³ According to Judith Skelton Grant, the first draft of *The Rebel Angels* occupied Davies from April 13, 1979 to June 30, 1980. Davies, according to Grant, began collecting materials and making notes in 1976, and indeed the author's papers at Library and Archives Canada confirm that he was actively drafting the novel as of 1979.

Gnostics,” and “The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism.”⁷⁴ The latter in particular contains a discussion of Divine Wisdom and the Gnostic Sophia, which Davies was unlikely to have missed, particularly in light of Simon Darcourt’s unorthodox vision of Maria Theotoky as the mystical Sophia, not to mention Maria’s expression of wonderment over that comparison (235-36).⁷⁵ Indeed, Davies’s archival material reveals that something during this period had inspired him to make a connection back to Gnosticism. In a pocket notebook dated “1978-81,” he describes a work that would be “Gnostic or dualist at [its] root. No friend to orthodoxy.” The note is one of many scribbles that Davies recorded during the long gestation for *The Rebel Angels*. However, its proximity to other notes he made for his “University Novel” cannot be overlooked.⁷⁶ It is for this reason that the evolution of Davies’s religious thinking and the circumstances surrounding the novel’s genesis are important, as together they help to account for the shift in Davies’s handling of Gnosticism following his completion of the Deptford trilogy.

A Departure of Sorts

As if to anticipate some of Davies’s later complaints about Canadians’ unwillingness to think introspectively, *The Rebel Angels* focuses specifically on matters of education, wisdom, and self-knowledge as they pertain to both society

⁷⁴ The three articles mentioned were published on October 25, November 8, and November 22, 1979, respectively. A fourth article entitled “The Defeat of the Gnostics” appeared subsequently on December 7 that year.

⁷⁵ Pagels notes how, by the year 200, virtually all of the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition. Davies was likely aware of Pagels’s work, as both had given lectures at the C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology.

⁷⁶ “University Novel” appears underlined in Davies’s pocket notebook whenever he wanted to remember a specific idea for what would later become *The Rebel Angels*.

in general and the function of the university. The novel follows the actions and behaviours of several faculty and staff of the fictional College of St. John and Holy Ghost (or “Spook” as it is called). Moreover, as Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* would do much later with the characters of Simon Jordan and Grace Marks, *The Rebel Angels* alternates between the (in Davies’s case, nearly indistinguishable) first-person perspectives of Professor Simon Darcourt and the suggestively-named doctoral student Maria Magdalena Theotoky (obviously Mary Magdalene; also *Theo-*, from the Greek word *Theos* or “God”), both of whom are employed in the novel as representatives of key principles in Gnostic thought. Indeed, like Atwood’s novel, and Morley Callaghan’s *A Time for Judas*, Davies’s *The Rebel Angels* depends on a plurality of voices and perspectives that serve as competing theories or gospels on the nature of wisdom. Joining the narrators is a handful of symbolically important characters who also populate Spook and assist in conveying key themes. Among them are the defrocked monk, Parlabane, who plays a central role as mentor or guide for Maria Theotoky; Ozias (“Ozy”) Froats, a scientist deeply invested in the revelations to be found in human excrement; Clement Hollier, an obsessive Rabelaisian scholar; and finally, Urquhart (“Urky”) McVarish, a self-interested and manipulative counterpoint to Hollier.

The plot of *The Rebel Angels* is set in motion by the death of eccentric art patron and collector Francis Cornish, leading to Davies’s establishment of Hollier, McVarish, and Darcourt as the executors of Cornish's will which drives the story

and further entangles the characters' lives.⁷⁷ In addition, the novel contains a suicide, a lost Paracelsus manuscript, gypsies, romantic entanglements, and numerous examples of unsavoury academic research. The climax of the novel involves the gruesome murder of Professor McVarish at the hands of Parlabane, with whom the latter has endured a masochistic affair. Finally (and in a seemingly sudden development), there is the marriage of Maria Theotoky to Arthur Cornish, the deceased's nephew, who stands to inherit his uncle's fortune.

Importantly, there is significant overlap between Davies the man and the setting and characters he invented for the novel, lending credence to the idea that *The Rebel Angels* is, at least in part, autobiographical. According to Judith Skelton Grant, Davies intended the action in *The Rebel Angels* to take place at colleges similar to Massey and its neighbour, Trinity, at the University of Toronto; and to this end, it is commonly accepted that Davies based the College of St. John and the Holy Ghost on Trinity College in particular. Evidence for this connection includes numerous similarities between the fictional and the real life college (including architectural style, layout of rooms, age, and religious affiliation); the fact that Davies taught at Trinity College for 20 years and lived across the street from Trinity while master of Massey College; and most convincingly that a photograph of Trinity's central tower is featured on the cover

⁷⁷ Cornish reappears in the remainder of the trilogy, occupying a role in both *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988). Simon Darcourt also returns in the latter, as he, Arthur Cornish, and Maria Cornish (nee Theotoky) find themselves at the head of the "Cornish Foundation."

of the novel's first edition (Grant 520), which was photographed at night and later inverted.

Compounding the thinly veiled biographical references is the connection between *The Rebel Angels* and Parlabane's own fictional endeavour, *Be Not Another*, which serves as a playful *mise en abyme* of Davies's novel. Parlabane describes *Be Not Another* as his attempt to write a "justice novel" (as opposed to a "revenge novel") – an opportunity to take shots at old nemeses. Amusingly, many of Davies's commentators saw the author as doing just that, noting that a number of the characters in *The Rebel Angels* appear to be based on Davies's college connections. Grant, for instance, observes that many of the details of Parlabane's history were taken from that of John Pearson, a schoolboy friend of Davies who embarked on a disastrous academic career. Disfigured by accidental burns, requiring thick glasses on account of his weak eyes, scorned by girls he admired, seduced at the University of Toronto by a faculty wife and then at Princeton by a male professor, she writes, Pearson's story "continued with academic appointments that ended amid rumours of homosexual misdoings with students, overeating, drinking, and drug abuse."⁷⁸ Likewise, in *Robertson Davies: A Portrait in Mosaic* (2008), Val Ross offers another possibility. She points out, for instance, that some Toronto journalists, including a Southam Fellow at Massey, were convinced that Davies had based the character of Parlabane on Toronto writer Scott Symons, who had left his wife after being caught up in a homosexual scandal. When journalist and broadcaster Michael

⁷⁸ Davies discusses Pearson in greater detail in *For Your Eye Alone* 227.

Enright confronted Davies about the similarity to Symons, she writes, Davies's oblique answer was characteristically mischievous: "Scott Symons sucks cocks, you know" (Ross 274).⁷⁹ Davies, like Parlabane, understood all too well how the game is played; and indeed, the novel already contains a response. Of the suggestive characterizations in *Be Not Another*, Parlabane remarks to Simon: "People won't be in a hurry to claim that they are the originals of most of the characters," he says. "Other people will do that for them. And of course I'm not such a fool as to record and transcribe doings and conversations that are too easily identified. But they'll know, don't you worry. And in time everyone else will know, as well" (*The Rebel Angels* 238-39).⁸⁰

That Davies intended the novel to strike out in new directions is clear. In March 1979, when writing to colleague Gordon Roper, he described his intention to challenge himself, explaining to Roper that the novel would be "more complex than what I have been doing [until now] and I may fall on my rump from a vast height. But the risk is the thrill" (*For Your Eye Alone* 37). Indeed, as Judith

⁷⁹ Likewise, Grant sees the fictional Urquhart McVarish as embodying many of the habits and characteristics of W.A.C.H. Dobson of the University of Toronto's department of East Asian Studies. Dobson, Grant says, had been Davies's nemesis at Massey College. Initially popular with students, Dobson turned out to be arrogant and exploitative: "Instead of guiding his graduate students through the doctoral program and thesis," she writes, "he had used them as assistants." When they protested that they needed doctorates if they were to get jobs elsewhere, he had asserted that "anybody who had studied with him could go anywhere in the world and get an academic appointment on that qualification alone" (274).

⁸⁰ As a further source of humour, Davies extends the connection between Parlabane's novel and his own by poking fun at the challenge that the scope and density of knowledge displayed in *The Rebel Angels* might pose for his own readers. Amusingly, Simon remarks of Parlabane's book: "It was simply unreadable. Ennui swept over me like the effect of a stupefying drug every time I tried to read some of it. It was a very intellectual novel, very complex in structure, with what seemed like armies of characters, all of whom were personifications of something Parlabane knew, or had heard about, and they said their say in chapter after chapter of leaden prose" (239).

Skelton Grant observes, *The Rebel Angels* represents a literary form different from anything Davies had attempted previously, with events and characterizations in the novel displaying what Northrop Frye might term “anatomy” or “Menippean satire”; that is, prose satires that are rhapsodic in nature, combining many different targets of ridicule (*Man of Myth* 544). Moreover, there is tenderness, a humanistic endeavour or message at the heart of the novel that is quite uncharacteristic of Davies. Unlike the Deptford trilogy which preceded it, theoretical interests or themes in *The Rebel Angels* are no longer attached to a single character but become dominant concerns in the book as a whole (544).

As part of this willingness to take risks, Davies had decided early on that the novel would be built around the formative experiences of university life – a kind of “summing up,” Grant says, of everything Davies had come to feel about the time one spends at a modern university (*Man of Myth* 524).⁸¹ “At its best,” she writes, Davies felt that

the life of scholarship demands a selfless commitment, an intensity, *a kind of idealism that is truly religious*; [Moreover,] the university is genuinely an Alma Mater, dispensing the milk of knowledge *and of salvation*; that in its search for wisdom, it makes a second paradise of learning. (525, emphasis mine)

Grant’s summation echoes a moment in *The Rebel Angels* when Arthur Cornish describes the university as a “Bounteous Mother” (albeit one who, to Arthur’s amusement, “charm[s] so much dough out of the pockets of her children who

⁸¹ Indeed, Davies’s describes *The Rebel Angels* in his private notes as “a sort of love letter to universities” (Davies).

have long left her”) (143). Yet, Davies’s portrayal of academia is remarkably complex, vacillating from moments of outright dismissal, such as when Arthur, a “heavily disguised illiterate,” explains to Maria his preference for the “University of Hard Knocks” (“What could a university give me that would be of any practical use?”) to Maria’s early, hyper-idealized notion of the university as a noble enterprise, one that embodies “the world of research; the selfless pursuit of knowledge, and sometimes of truth” (142). Only Simon Darcourt appears to offer a realistic, sobering assessment. For instance, when he and Clement Hollier contemplate the phenomenon of promising young scholars who disappear into mediocrity, Simon is not surprised. The modern university, he points out, neither encourages nor fosters the pursuit of self-knowledge: instead, “We put too much value on a certain kind of examination-passing brain and a ready tongue” (101).

To this end, *The Rebel Angels* strives to upset the characters’ understanding of the true nature and source of wisdom by forcing them to re-evaluate what knowledge is. In part, this goal is achieved by dismantling some of the foibles of academic life, and revealing to the characters sources of wisdom *other* than those which might be classified as academic or scholarly, so as to facilitate the development of *gnosis* or self-knowledge. Indeed, the novel’s success hinges on the irony that it is possible for “intelligent” human beings to know so little about their own natures and desires. Even Spook’s medieval expert, Professor Stromwell, hints as much in a passing remark on the general lack of insight in Creation. “Animals know themselves but dimly,” he says, “even

more dimly than we, the masters of the world. When Man ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge he became aware of himself as something other than a portion of his surroundings ... [and] with wandering steps and slow, from Eden took his solitary way” (177). Fittingly, Davies casts his characters’ ignorance as a symptom of academic life – an institutionally fostered blindness that he suggests too often encourages scholars to “pursue knowledge at the expense of wisdom” (Grant 525). To this end, *The Rebel Angels* can be read as allegory, as the novel theorizes – and subsequently tests – the journey of the modern academic-as-Everyman.

Be Not Another: Mise En Abyme

The Rebel Angels’ aim to promote a greater degree of introspection is chiefly facilitated by the fictional Parlabane’s novel, *Be Not Another*. Early in the novel, Parlabane cites the mantra, “*Gnosce tepipsum ... know thyself, and I do*” (67), a statement that reveals both understanding of his own nature and, in time, the paths travelled by Simon and Maria as they strive toward their own respective self-discoveries. In a scene that is particularly revealing of Davies’s playfulness, Parlabane describes this journey to Simon by sharing the structure of his own work of fiction:

The life of the principal character, a young academic, is the journey of a modern Everyman, on a Pilgrim’s Progress. The reader follows the movement of his soul from its infantile fantasies, through its adolescent preoccupation with the mechanical and physical aspects of experience, until he discovers logical principles, metaphysics, and particularly scepticism, until he is landed in the dilemmas of middle age – early middle

age – and maturity, *and finally to his recovery, through imagination, of a unified view of life, of a synthesis of unconscious fantasy, scientific knowledge, moral mythology, and wisdom that meets in a religious reconciliation of the soul with reality through the acceptance of revealed truth.* (241, emphasis mine)

Parlabane's vision of a "religious reconciliation of the soul" and a "unified view of life" strongly evokes the specific Gnostic concept of *gnosis* (self-knowledge) or wholeness, similar to Jung's model of individuation. Importantly, Parlabane continues by expounding on the *moral* dimension of his novel, which the astute readers will recognize as Simon's own predicament. *Be Not Another*, Parlabane explains, is

a treatise on folly, error, frustration, and exploration of *the blind alleys and false theories of life as currently propagated and ineffectually practised.* The hero – a not-too-bright adventurer – is looking for the good life in which intellect is at harmony with emotion, intelligence integrated through recollected experience, sentiment tempered by fact, desire directed toward worldly objects and controlled by a sense of humour and proportion. (241, emphasis mine)

The quest that Parlabane describes recalls Simon's musings on his own life – specifically, the question of whether he could change; that is, if he would ever marry (234). As readers, we can derive a certain amount of humour from the parallels between Davies's novel and the one Parlabane is writing. In *The Rebel Angels*, Davies juxtaposes the few such as Parlabane, who possess *gnosis*, with the hypocrisy and foolishness of those who merely *think* themselves "wise" or "learned."

Self-Knowledge, The Abject, and Arcane Wisdom

Nearly two years after the novel's publication, Davies replied to a letter sent from Janet Frankland, then a Grade 13 student, who had written to Davies on behalf of her class at R.H. King Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, Ontario. In his letter, Davies reports seeing as a dominant theme in the text "the discovery of great value in what is rejected and despised" (*For Your Eye Alone* 103). To this end, the novel cleverly juxtaposes modern university learning with the wisdom that can be found in forgotten or non-traditional sources of wisdom, even in materials that – to the modern sensibility of many of his characters – seem outdated, disgusting or ridiculous. In so doing, *The Rebel Angels* evokes Kristeva's notion of *the abject*, in that characters are routinely confronted with that which, to them, is intolerable, or even threatening. Yet Davies does so to inspire reverence rather than horror. Clement Hollier, for instance, is quick to defend the academic pursuits of Ozy Froats, the latter of whom searches for wisdom (supposedly *profound* insights into the human condition) by digging in human excrement. For Hollier, it is benevolent inquiry that motivates his colleague: "I am inclined to think of Ozy as a latter-day alchemist," he tells Maria, adding that Froats "seeks the all-conquering Stone of the Philosophers exactly where they said it must be sought, in the commonest, most neglected, most despised" (157).

Davies's interest in arcane sources of wisdom is signalled early in the novel during a wide-ranging discussion among faculty members concerning the

function of the university. Involved in the discussion are Professor Hollier (History), Professor Boys (Physics), and Professor Mukadassi (Sanskrit). Responding to Professor Hitzig's observation that "Universities may produce fine critics, but not artists Scientists are what universities produce best and oftenest" (176-77), Professor Mukadassi adds that it is the trend of emphasizing science over the arts – of modernity over antiquity – that has contributed to the illusion that knowledge is progressive: "In India," he explains, "we know that men every bit as good as we believed things that the advanced members of society [today] look on as absurdities ... Science encourages us to this terrible folly and darkness of scorning the past" (179). Mukadassi elaborates this idea by using the analogy of a garden gnome:

Do people want them simply for cuteness? I don't believe it. The gnomes provide some of that sugar in the drink of belief that Western religion no longer offers, and which the watered-down humanitarianism that passes with so many people for religion offers less. The gnomes speak of a longing, unrecognized but all the stronger for its invisibility, for the garden-god, the image of the earth-spirit, the kobold, the *kabir*, the guardian of the household. Dreadful as they are, they have a truth you won't find [elsewhere]. (179)

Mukadassi's analogy finds its way into the relationship between Hollier and Maria Theotoky most visibly concerning the secrets of the bomari, of which only Mamusia, Maria's Gypsy mother, is able to instruct. The bomari are copper vessels designed to rehabilitate the wood and finish of old violins through the application of slow warmth – part of a long, involved process handed down from the Middle Ages by Gypsy artificers. The technique involves encasing the defective instrument within a bed of decomposing horse dung after the

instrument itself has been wrapped in woollen cloth. Hollier initially characterizes the method as “Filth Therapy at its highest,” although, like Mukadassi, he quickly clarifies by saying that “to call that wonderful substance in which she buries the fiddles filth is to be victim to the stupidest modern prejudice” (157).

Indeed, as Maria attempts to distance herself from her Gypsy heritage in favour of pursuing a life as a modern educated woman, it is Hollier who attempts to bridge the gulf between the old world and the new by quoting Paracelsus to Maria: “Never hope to find wisdom at the high colleges alone - consult old women, Gypsies, magicians, wanderers and all manner of peasant folk and random folk, and learn from them, for these have more knowledge about such things than all the high colleges” (157). As a further illustration of this message, we learn the bomari is of interest to Hollier not because “the old ways are necessarily better than the new ways,” he says, but rather, for the sake of preservation: “there may be some of the old ways that we would be wise to took into before all knowledge of them disappears” (149). Later, when discussing Gypsy riddles with Mamusia, Hollier goes further: “[F]or me such things are like a wonderful long look into the far past,” he says; “and everything that can be recovered from the past throws light on our time, and guides us toward the future” (221).

Davies is careful to here to make explicit the motivation behind Hollier’s efforts. We discover, for instance, that Hollier “wants to write about [the bomari] for a few very learned men like himself who are interested in the persistence of

old wisdom and old belief in this modern world” (21). Moreover, Hollier himself views learning the secrets of the bomari as an intrinsically valuable: “the recognition of oneself as a part of nature” (22). Such recognition and the reliance on natural things, he laments, “are disappearing for hundreds of millions of people who do not know that anything is being lost” (22). As with the novel’s play with Gypsy lore, astrology, and scatology, ideas pertaining to Gnosticism and apocrypha function as part of the novel’s additional, “outmoded” models of wisdom which, for both Simon and Maria, yield a form of salvation or *gnosis* that has eluded them thus far in the text.

Professors as Rebel Angels

On July 2, 1980, following the completion of *The Rebel Angels*, Davies wrote to Elisabeth Sifton, his editor at Viking Press (U.S.), at which point he explained the origin of the novel’s title: “In one of the Gospels that did not quite make it into the Bible,” he writes, “there is an account of a War in Heaven other than Lucifer’s, in which some angels defied God and descended to earth and taught some of God’s knowledge to men – but especially to women, with whom they are great favourites” (*For Your Eye Alone* 52). The account in question is *The Book of Enoch*, one of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha – a composition attributed to a personage from the Hebrew Bible, but not included in either the Jewish or the Christian Bible. Maria Theotoky instructs Darcourt of the tale:

They were real angels, Samahazai and Azazel, and they betrayed the secrets of Heaven to King Solomon, and God threw them out of Heaven.

And did they mope and plot vengeance? Not they! They weren't sore-headed egotists like Lucifer. Instead, they gave mankind another push up the ladder, they came to earth and taught tongues, and healing and laws and hygiene – taught everything – and they were often special successes with “the daughters of men.” It's a marvelous piece of apocrypha [T]he Rebel Angels showed [the cruel God] that hiding all knowledge and wisdom and keeping it for Himself was dog-in-the-manger behaviour. (257)

Leaving aside for a moment the improbability that Maria would need to teach the story to her professor (himself the author of two “pretty good books on New Testament Apocrypha” [87]), the scene exalts the role of professors at places of higher learning (as Maria notes, “surely it is the explanation of the origin of universities!”). It also, importantly, establishes the plane on which the primary relationship between Simon Darcourt and Maria will conduct itself.⁸² Maria, who in lieu of mere expertise wants “nothing less than Wisdom” (38) from her education (echoing Paracelsus's statement, “*The striving for wisdom is the second paradise of the world*” [39]), initially decides that both Darcourt and Clement Hollier, a professor with whom she is infatuated, are *her* two “Rebel Angels” (although she later concludes that Parlabane “was a Rebel Angel too”) (320). What follows is a relationship between Darcourt, Maria, and Parlabane – one that functions as a carefully weighted comment upon the need for meaningful self-examination. To accomplish this task, Davies utilizes a diverse range of situations to bring the persons involved to some resolution about the personal and spiritual conflicts that plague them, as well as the potential for enlightenment.

⁸² See Wilfred Cude, who has written about the college as a “Rabelaisian feast” of learning, and of the dark side of academe in *The Rebel Angels*.

"The Nocturnal Man": Davies's Simon

At the heart of *The Rebel Angels* is Simon Darcourt's pursuit of what he vaguely terms the "advancement of the spirit" (235). Contemplating the nine years he spent in parish work, Simon describes the spiritual path that brought him to Spook as the "toil ... which has for so long been [his] chief joy" (234). He muses:

Perhaps what was imitable about Christ was his firm acceptance of his destiny, and his adherence to it even when it led to shameful death. It was the wholeness of Christ that had illuminated so many millions of lives, and *it was my job to seek and make manifest the wholeness of Simon Darcourt* Indeed some measure of what might be called cynicism, but which could also be *clarity of vision*, tempered with charity, is an element in the Simon Darcourt I am trying to discover and set free. (58, emphasis mine)

Simon recognizes that his pursuit of spiritual and emotional fulfillment has been thwarted by his lack of a wife, a situation compounded by a powerful infatuation with Maria (234-35). At forty-five, he is haunted by the image of his love as a Janus head, believing that "one face, the youthful face, looked backward toward all the pleasures of my earlier days [while] the other face, the elder face, looked forward toward the farce of the old bachelor who marries a young wife" (234). Unable to accept the hard realities presented by this, his "diurnal man," Simon thus attempts to engage with Maria Theotoky on the metaphysical plane while at the same time proclaiming himself "unworthy" of the revelation she represents (235).

Prior to giving shape to his infatuation, Simon is drawn to Maria on account of the fact that "she appeared to want knowledge for herself, and not

because it could lead to career” (46). That she may assist in his own quest for self-knowledge only becomes apparent when, following a joke in class about the theory of the “endless screw,” Simon begins to suspect that Maria is a kindred spirit:

This [screw joke] brought a laugh from my two ultra-modern students who had been nurtured in our permissive age, and who probably thought that the endless screw, in their own interpretation of the words, might be a path to enlightenment. But Maria knew what I was really talking about, which is that universities cannot be more universal than the people who teach, and the people who learn, within their walls. Those who can get beyond the fashionable learning of their day are few, and it looked as if she might be one of them. I believed myself to be a teacher who could guide her. (46-47)

It is here, in the early stages of a relationship between Simon Darcourt and Maria Theotoky, that Davies uses Gnosticism most explicitly in *The Rebel Angels*. Describing the fantasy of a Gnostic union with Maria as one that “seized upon [his] mind because it suited some ideas that [he] had tentatively and fearfully developed of [his] own accord,” Simon embraces the Gnostic tale as a means of giving shape to his “scholarly madness.” As Simon contemplates the image, Davies is forced to momentarily break the narrative to instruct the reader of the Gnostic tale.

[A]nybody who concerns himself with the many legends of Sophia knows about the “fallen Sophia” who put on mortal flesh and sank at last to being a whore in a brothel in Tyre, from which she was rescued by the Gnostic Simon Magus. I myself think of that as the Passion of Sophia, for did she not assume flesh and suffer a shameful fate for the redemption of mankind? It was this that led the Gnostics to hail her both as Wisdom and also as the *anima mundi*, the World Soul, who demands redemption and, in order to achieve it, arouses desire. (236)

The moment functions doubly in the text as both an erotic reverie and a means to Simon's salvation – one that casts him in the role of rescuer among what the novel suggests are less virtuous men. “*For me,*” Simon explains, “*Maria was wholeness, the glory and gift of God and also the dark earth as well, so foreign to the conventional Christian mind*” (236, emphasis mine). Importantly, however, Simon's use of Maria as a manifestation of the feminine element missing in orthodox Christianity also brings his views of the Holy Trinity in line with Davies's own. Simon remarks: “Whatever Christ may have thought, the elaborate edifice of doctrine we call his church offers no woman in authority – only a Trinity made up, to put it profanely, of two men and a bird – and even the belated amends offered to Mary by the Church of Rome does not undo the mischief” (235). Indeed, upon first perceiving Maria as the Gnostic Sophia, Simon – just as Davies himself remarked – is quick to point out that Maria would enjoy an elevated spiritual role: under Gnosticism, Maria would become a redeemer, “a partner in Creation ... through whom the chill glory of a patriarchal God becomes the embracing splendour of a completed World Soul” (236). Simon quickly dismisses such thoughts as the fantasies of his “nocturnal man,” yet he believes a relationship with Maria is intrinsically connected to his own self-development: “To go backward,” he acknowledges, “[would be] base: to go forward an adventure into splendour and terror [It] was forward I [had to] go.”

However, the complications inherent in *The Rebel Angels'* Gnostic romance soon present themselves. When Darcourt later professes his love to

Maria and first articulates his notion of Sophia to her (254), Maria is initially “[shaken] out of [her] self-possession.” She reciprocates his feelings of love, but forecloses the prospect of Sophia:

I agree that I am Sophia to you, and I can be that for as long as you wish, but I must be my own human Maria-self as well, and if we go to bed it may be Sophia who lies down but it will certainly be Maria – and not the best of her – who gets up, and Sophia will be gone forever. And you, Simon dear, would come into bed as my Rebel Angel, but very soon you would be a stoutish Anglican parson, and a Rebel Angel no more. (257)

Aside from the practical reasons she describes, Maria recognizes that the very notion of embodying Sophia (“Sophia! What a label to hang on Maria Magdalena Theotoky!”) is overwhelming, for “no living woman,” she remarks to herself, “could be her except in tiny measure” (279). Her rejection is nonetheless a crucial moment for Simon: after some time, upon leaving, he notes, the fantasy was broken: “I did indeed kiss Maria,” he explains, “not as an ordinary lover or one who had been promised a marriage, but in a spirit I had never known before” (258).

Simon’s resulting disappointment, and the extent to which he is startled by the orthodoxy insisted on by Maria and Arthur Cornish at their wedding, bring him to some conclusions regarding what the events of his relationship with her have signified. The resignation that he feels toward Maria’s marriage, knowing that her union with Arthur Cornish forecloses any future they might have together, fulfills the imitation of Christ that Simon introduces earlier in the novel. “I was losing a woman whom I had regarded, for a time, as the earthly embodiment of Sophia,” he says, before remarking to himself: “*What ails you, Father Darcourt, is that you*

want to eat your cake and have it too; you want to be first with Maria, without paying the price for that position. All right, I understand. But it still hurts” (313-4).

The marriage is notable, as Maria’s dealings with Hollier have taught her that she must look to human capacities other than intellect if she is to flourish, and it is through the union of Maria and Arthur that Simon Darcourt also achieves a resolution of sorts.

Amusingly, that *The Rebel Angels* functions as Simon Darcourt’s own journey toward *gnosis* is signaled late in the novel via Parlabane’s lengthy description of his novel-in-progress. While Parlabane claims the novel’s tale originates from his own youth, we can see that it doubles as a thinly-disguised poke at the successes and failures of Darcourt’s journey thus far. According to Parlabane, the novel he envisioned would be a simple narrative (at which Darcourt muses: “I was never sure precisely how near [it] was to completion ... because I was never shown the full text” [238]). On the surface it would “seem to be the biography of a rather foolish and peculiarly perverse young man, born to live in the Spirit, but determined to escape that fate or postpone it as long as possible because he wants to explore the ways of the world and its creatures” (240). Yet beyond its initial simplicity, Parlabane clearly signals the pursuit of *gnosis*. The crown of the book, he says,

is the *anagogical* level of meaning, suggesting the final revelation of experience as the language of God and of life as the preliminary to a quest that cannot be described but only guessed at, because all things point beyond themselves to a glory which is greater than any of them The quest is never completed but ... gradually gives way to the conviction of

the reality of the Reality which lies behind the shadows which constitute the actual moment as it rushes by. (242)

Darcourt dismisses the tale's contents as being merely "quite a substantial chunk" that Parlabane has bitten off, and yet the crown of the tale perfectly encapsulates Darcourt's thoughts at the end of the novel. If the conclusion of Parlabane's text "is reached by the pressure of successive renunciations, discoveries of error, and what the careful reader discerns to be partial truths" (240), so too is Simon Darcourt's ending a product of experience and hard lessons.

"Let Your Root Feed Your Crown": Davies's Mary (Maria)

Ironically, although she credits him with showing her the "generosity and pleasure of scholarship" (309), Simon Darcourt contributes the least to Maria's growth. It is Parlabane, Hollier, Maria's mother Mamusia, and Arthur Cornish who awaken Maria to self-knowledge of the avenues available to her; that which allows her to make decisions true to her own character. In Hollier, Maria describes finding "some recognition of what wisdom and scholarship are" (309). Earlier, thinking of her mother, Maria describes how, "As Mamusia played a *friska* it was . . . *something old and enduring*, something that banished the University and the Ph.D. to a stuffy indoors, something of a time when people lived out of doors more than indoors, and took the calls of birds for auguries, and felt God about and all around them" (78, emphasis mine). Indeed, there is a moment late

in *The Rebel Angels* when Simon Darcourt ponders what his role has been in Maria's life, both as her professor and as her metaphorical "Rebel Angel":

[A]s Maria had said, a Rebel Angel takes something of a woman's innocence *as he leads her toward a larger world and an ampler life*, and it is not surprising if the man who has done that is jealous of the man who reaps the benefit. I could understand and value Maria as he never could, I was sure of that; but I was equally sure that Maria could never be mine except on the mythological plane she had herself explained. (313-14, emphasis mine)

Maria Theotoky is one of a number of women in the author's canon who perform the role of agents of spiritual transformation. These include Mary Dempster of *Fifth Business*, Jo van Haller in *The Manticore*, Milady in *World of Wonders*, as well as Maria's mother, Mamusia in *The Rebel Angels*. In the latter, however, the transformation is as much Maria's as it is Simon Darcourt's. Early in the novel, while recounting her upbringing, she locates her own quest in the memory of her father, noting how since his death when she was sixteen years old,

I had been looking for him, or something like him, among all the men I met. I believe that psychiatrists explains such a search as mine to troubled girls as though it were a deep secret the girls could never have uncovered for themselves, but I had always known it; I wanted my Father, I wanted to find a man who was his equal in bravery and wisdom and warmth of love. (124)

The qualities that Maria seeks are what lead her to the competing interests of her Rebel Angels. In Clement Hollier, Maria is confident that she will find wisdom (38, 124); in Darcourt, she finds that learning has made him "a special sort of man," eventually professing to him: "You are like a fire: you warm me" (255).

Much of Maria's role in *The Rebel Angels* evidences the tension that Davies builds in the pull between an orthodox and unorthodox life. Maria

struggles to balance the expectation she has of herself to be a modern, learned woman with the equally-insistent intrusion of the more traditional yearnings originating from her Gypsy past and heritage:

I must be modern: I live now. But like everyone else, as Hollier says, I live in a muddle of eras, and some of my ideas belong to today, and some to an ancient past If I could sort them and control them I might know better where I stand, but when I want to be contemporary the Past keeps pushing in When I hear girls I know longing to be what they call liberated, and when I hear others rejoicing in what they think of as liberation, I feel a fool, because I simply do not know where I stand. (124)

Indeed, like Simon Darcourt, who left the comforts of parish work for the study of apocrypha, Maria Theotoky's Gypsy heritage and role as a doctoral student serves as an obvious bridge between modern learning and older, esoteric forms of knowledge. Maria is inextricably tied to the western rational tradition of the modern university, yet feels a very strong pull to the magic, occult and strongly motivating passions of her roots. It is Parlabane who elucidates this struggle when putting forth his theories on self-actualization to Maria, who – at this point in the novel - has been attempting to distance herself from her part-Gypsy heritage by immersing herself in intellectual pursuits. His concluding comment to Maria aptly summarizes her dilemma: "I think you are trying to suppress [your Gypsy blood] because it is the opposite of what you are trying to be – the modern woman, the learned woman, the creature wholly of this age and this somewhat thin and sour civilization ... You are trying to tear it out. But you can't, you know" (124).

Thus enters the novel's recurring image of a tree's "root and crown" – an analogy Parlabane uses to explain to Maria the dependence of the tree's crown on its inversion, the buried shadow reflection that sustains all growth and flourish – Davies records in his notes that the "root [is] not something [the] univ[ersity] takes into account – [instead, it values the] crown only" (Davies). Parlabane, on the other hand, knows that the root is essential:

[T]he crown of my tree is a skepticism that leaves nothing untouched but the wonder of God. But I have a root, to nourish my crown, and as usual the root is the contrary of the crown – the crown upside down, in the dark instead of the light, working toward the depths instead of straining upward to the heights I am not writing [a novel] to justify myself, but to put down the evidence of a remarkable spiritual adventure (204)

Maria, who thus far has attempted to distance herself from her Gypsy heritage, is encouraged by Parlabane to embrace those hidden aspects of her life, and "let your root feed your crown" (205). Indeed, by the novel's conclusion, Maria decides: "I am much more serious, much more real, for having accepted my Gypsy root" (310).

Maria's desire in the novel to "root out" an aspect of herself epitomizes her journey toward self-knowledge and acceptance. In Parlabane, she sees Davies's enigmatic genius-figure who typifies "the over-developed mind and the under-developed heart" (71). Parlabane is himself rejected as a human impurity even by the university on account of his appearance and behaviour, as symbolized by the appearance of his book, *Be Not Another*: it "was a limp, dog-eared mess, unpleasing to the touch, ringed by glasses and cups, and smelly from too much handling by a man whose whole way of life was smelly" (*The Rebel Angels* 273).

But Parlabane asserts the value of the abject; his own worth lies in what he teaches Maria. In citing for her "*Gnosce teipsum* ... know thyself, and I do" (67), Parlabane becomes an unlikely hero: he who can see himself most clearly. One on hand, he explains, "I'm just a gross old bugger and I like it rough – I like the mess and I like the stink," he confides in Maria, acknowledging both his homosexuality and sexual appetite (67). On the other, he recognizes that this aspect gives him strength; for the root "does not go back to those old stuffed shirts with white wigs whose portraits people display so proudly," he says, "but to our unseen depths -- which means the messy stuff of life from which the real creation and achievement takes its nourishment" (*The Rebel Angels* 205).

The frankness of Parlabane's confessions places the emphasis of the novel squarely on those whose daily life *precludes* such introspection. The author recognizes that intellectual inquiry is a rewarding endeavour, and that the university itself fosters a particular type of learning. At the same time, Grant notes, Davies lamented that in academic life "the balancing search for self-knowledge is often neglected" (525). Too many fail to know themselves in the same manner as Parlabane does. It is a conclusion that Maria reaches as well, as she tells Simon at the conclusion of the novel, By the novel's conclusion she admits to Simon "I think I learned most from Parlabane" (320). When questioned as to her meaning, she recites: "Be not another if thou canst be thyself." "I *read* it in Paracelsus," she explains; "But I *learned* it from Parlabane" (320).

According to Grant, Davies believed that true folly would be to pursue knowledge without regard for the measure of one's interior life. It is a deficit seen most clearly in the characters of Simon Darcourt and Maria Theotoky, who for much of *The Rebel Angels* lack a clear sense of self-knowledge – the “root” which has fed their crown. In drawing attention to the concerns and evolution of these two characters, Davies relies on building a Gnostic romance between them, as Darcourt increasingly leans to Gnostic myth to facilitate a spiritual relationship with Maria, and Maria too requires the image of Sophia and of her gypsy root as one more means to negotiate a role for herself.

However expeditiously and improbably it occurs in the novel, Maria's subsequent marriage to Arthur Cornish, a man similar to her father and who possesses a combination of practical and aesthetic sensibilities, symbolizes the completion of her soul. This, according to the novel, is metaphorical alchemy of the sort

when the individual man, by a natural and appropriate process, devoid of haste or violence, is brought into unity with himself by the harmonious action of intelligence and will, he is on the threshold of comprehending that transcendent Unity which is the perfection of the totality of Nature. (79)

Davies uses this device to represent one example of burgeoning *gnosis* or self-awareness; in this case, Maria's union of emotion and intellect. Earlier in the novel, she articulates that which she hopes to achieve in marriage: “I would hope to keep something of myself for myself In love I do not want to play the old, submissive game, nor have I any use for the ultra-modern maybe-I-will-and-

maybe-I-won't-and-anyhow-you-watch-your-step game" (201). What she finds, as conservative a vision as it may be when compared to the role she had just enjoyed, is nonetheless hers. Both she and Simon Darcourt are thus at peace with that decision, knowing that both of them have arrived at their own "roots," so to speak.

CHAPTER 4: THE Gnostic VISION OF MORLEY CALLAGHAN'S *A TIME FOR JUDAS*

In early 2006, a translation of a non-canonical gospel known as *The Gospel of Judas* was made public by the National Geographic Society – a gospel that purportedly documents conversations between the Apostle Judas Iscariot and Jesus Christ.⁸³ Scholars believe *The Gospel of Judas* to have been written by a Gnostic sect called Cainites, rather than by Judas himself. Moreover, it is thought to date from no earlier than the second century since it contains late second century theology.⁸⁴ The text is significant, in that it not only offers an alternative view of the relationship between Jesus and Judas but also – like the Nag Hammadi materials before it – illustrates the diversity of opinion in the early

⁸³ Rodolphe Kasser, who is regarded as one of the world's preeminent Coptic scholars, led the effort to piece together and translate *The Gospel of Judas*. The National Geographic Society and the Waitt Institute for Historical Discovery funded the project, and it was profiled in the May 2006 issue of *National Geographic* magazine. A complete English translation by Karen King, along with attendant commentary, is featured in *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (2007) by Elaine Pagels and Karen King.

⁸⁴ The only copy of *The Gospel of Judas* known to exist is a Coptic language text that has been carbon dated to AD 280, give or take 60 years. It has been suggested that the text derives from an earlier Greek version. Knowledge of this secret gospel's existence had been around since 180 A.D. when Irenaeus had railed against this gospel in *Against Heresies*. The content of the gospel itself had been unknown until a Coptic *Gospel of Judas* turned up on the antiquities grey market in Geneva in May 1983, when it was found among a mixed group of Greek and Coptic manuscripts offered to Stephen Emmel, a Yale Ph.D. candidate commissioned by Southern Methodist University to inspect the manuscripts. How this manuscript was found, possibly in the late 1970s, has not been clearly documented. However, it is believed that a now-deceased Egyptian "treasure-hunter" or prospector discovered the codex near El Minya, Egypt, and sold it to Hanna, a dealer in antiquities in Cairo. In the 1970s, the manuscript and most of the dealer's other artifacts were stolen by a Greek trader named Nikolas Koutoulakis, and smuggled into Geneva. Hanna, along with Swiss antiquity traders, paid Koutoulakis a sum rumoured to be between \$3 million to \$10 million, recovered the manuscript and introduced it to experts who recognized its significance (Wikipedia).

Christian church. At the time of its announcement, Stephen Emmel, a Coptic studies professor and one of the first three known scholars permitted to view *The Gospel of Judas* in 1983 (its existence then still unknown to the public) expected that the gospel would be important “mainly for the deeper insight it will give scholars into the thoughts and beliefs of certain Christians in the second century of the Christian era, namely the Gnostics” (qtd. in Lovgren).⁸⁵ Indeed, like many of the Gnostic works, *The Gospel of Judas* claims to be a secret account; specifically, “the hidden word of the pronouncement, containing the account about wh[en Je]sus spoke with Judas [I]scari[ot] for eight days, three days before he observed Passover” (Pagels and King 109).⁸⁶ Unsurprisingly, and just as similarities exist between the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there is a measure of overlap between *The Gospel of Judas* and more orthodox versions of Judas’s role in Christ’s arrest and subsequent crucifixion. As in the canonical gospels, *The Gospel of Judas* portrays the Temple guards as approaching Judas with the intention of arresting him, and Judas receiving money from them after handing Jesus over to them. However, unlike those accounts – in which Judas is portrayed as a villain, and excoriated by Jesus – *The Gospel of Judas* portrays Judas as a divinely appointed instrument of a grand and predetermined purpose. In so doing, the *Gospel of Judas* elaborates

⁸⁵ It is important to point out, however, that to call *The Gospel of Judas* “Gnostic” is a classification that is a matter of convenience; it applies modern constructions of the term “Gnostic” to a text that – although it resembles other early Christian works that have been labelled “Gnostic,” particularly those from the Nag Hammadi find in Egypt in 1945 – more aptly reflects the heretical nature of the ideas therein. See Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*: xiv-xv.

⁸⁶ For this chapter, I am using the English translation of *The Gospel of Judas* by Karen King, as included in *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (2007), co-authored with Elaine Pagels.

upon what, for many commentators, the canonical gospels had already suggested; namely, that by recruiting Judas's assistance in "betraying" him, Jesus *planned* the course of events that led to his death.⁸⁷

"A Bizarre Literary Production": Callaghan and Judas

Remarkably, the account detailed in the historical *The Gospel of Judas* bears a strong resemblance to a theory about Christ's crucifixion advanced by Morley Callaghan in his 1983 novel, *A Time For Judas*. Unlike the more sophisticated offerings of Davies and Atwood, which employ a figurative rather than a literal investigation of Gnostic thought, Callaghan's novel functions as a transparent "Gnostic" gospel, using as its central conceit the discovery of an ancient manuscript written by a Greek scribe named Philo which details the lost gospel of Judas. At the time of publication in 1983, the novel sounded, as Margaret Atwood remarked upon first hearing of the project, "like one of the more bizarre literary productions of recent times" (Campbell). Atwood's comment, which appears in her October 1983 review of the novel in *Saturday Night*, was aimed specifically at the biblical reference in the novel's title that, unlike previous Callaghan's efforts, was not metaphorical: "[T]he book really was about Judas!"

⁸⁷ *The Gospel of Judas*, for instance, records Jesus saying that it is necessary for someone to free him finally from his human body, and he prefers that this liberation be done by a friend rather than by an enemy (Pagels and King 121). Thus, Jesus asks Judas, who is his friend, to betray him, explaining: "As for you, you will surpass them all. For you will sacrifice the human being who bears [clothes] me" (121). Pagels and King also point out that the idea of Jesus being in control of events is not new: In the *Gospel of Mark*, for instance, Jesus instructed specific disciples to set up the Passover meal and his entry into Jerusalem; likewise, the *Gospel of John* says that Jesus himself told Judas to go out and "do what you have to do" (26-7). That said, *The Gospel of Judas*, goes one step further. Jesus explicitly tells Judas to hand him over, so that what had to happen could happen.

she exclaims (“The Gospel According to Morley” 74). Yet, importantly, in that same review, she praises Callaghan for broaching the subject, proclaiming *A Time For Judas* “daring, ingenious, and even convincing” – a sort of “ritualized reality” (74).

Structurally, *A Time For Judas* is divided between a brief forward set in contemporary times, and the Philo account originating from antiquity that comprises the bulk of the text. Both the Forward and the novel proper are founded on a careful striation of narrative layers that – as in Davies’s and Atwood’s novels – emphasizes the use of multiple narrators and competing perspectives to create distance from and at times even obscure truth. Judas’s tale, the reader discovers, represents only a small portion of the novel: In order to reach it, the reader must first sift through the foreword in which the unnamed narrator claims to have received the manuscript of Philo’s account from a dying TV producer and former monk by the name of Owen Spencer Davies.⁸⁸ Davies, the unnamed narrator explains, had compiled his manuscript from notes he originally took while studying the original Greek text composed by Philo. Davies’s reconstruction of this lost “Gospel of Judas” is thus based upon a marriage of the two stories – Judas’s confession to Philo concerning Judas’s role in the crucifixion and, subsequently, upon Philo’s struggle over whether to record and bury that version of events; to wait, as the latter puts it, for an appropriate “end to the unbearable loneliness of Judas in the minds of men” (247). That

⁸⁸ The latter is curiously and perhaps pointedly named, given Robertson Davies’s similar dalliance with apocryphal tales and Gnosticism only a couple of years earlier.

Owen's perspective is coloured by the loss of the original Philo manuscript, forcing him to reconstruct that narrative from memory, heightens the illusory nature of the secret gospel, and further distances the reader from Judas's original confession. It is a deliberate obfuscation on Callaghan's part. The resulting narrative effect is not unlike the difficulty one faces when attempting to discern historical truth from the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, a reminder that truth (or Truth) is inevitably subjective, shaped – as in this case – by the ecstasies and agonies of the individual storyteller as he or she decides what (if any) details of an event will be revealed and, conversely, what details concealed. Also, archival drafts of the novel's manuscript reveal that between his initial ideas for the foreword and the version that appears in the novel, the author greatly condensed and simplified the foreword to eliminate a more involved and complicated storyline, presumably to quicken the path by which the reader arrives at Philo's account.

What the reader discerns from Owen's reconstruction is that while working in Jerusalem for the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Philo of Crete was befriended by Judas, observed Jesus from a distance, and attended the crucifixion along with Judas and Mary Magdalene. Philo, in some disgrace back in Rome because of a dalliance with someone else's wife, encounters all of the major players in the story except Jesus himself. He comes to know the harlot Mary of Samaria, the bandit Simon of Idumea (one of the two bandits crucified with Jesus), and Judas Iscariot himself. It is through Philo's unearthed account

that the reader discovers the true nature of Judas's "betrayal"; in particular, how no one knew that both Judas and Christ himself predetermined Judas's actions. As Philo describes it, Judas had not truly betrayed Christ, but in effect "was really the loving servant, serving faithfully in the terrible role he had accepted" (242). As in canonical accounts, Callaghan's Judas later kills himself; however, in the novel Judas does not do this in response to his role in Jesus's death, but rather for having *confessed* the truth to Philo when, previously, Jesus had demanded silence. "I did my part and I did it with love," Judas explains; "but God help me, there was to be silence and mystery, and I broke the silence ... I failed my own love" (185). Compounding the agony the pair endures as they struggle over the implications of Jesus's and Judas's actions, both Judas and Philo have encounters with Mary Magdalene, who is subtly refashioned in *A Time For Judas* into a wise companion of Christ, and one who appears to confirm Jesus's hand in arranging those events. As Judas searches for understanding following the crucifixion, she remarks, "[I]t must be that he knew you [Judas] were the only one capable of betraying him" (130) – a possibility that upsets him. Judas sees the idea that he had been selected *because* of his weakness as "a knife thrust at my throat," forcing him to question Jesus's intentions as well as his own moral fortitude.

Much as Robertson Davies looked to apocrypha in *The Rebel Angels* to unearth the story of the angels Samahazai and Azazel, as well as to cast Maria Theotoky in the role of the Gnostic Sophia, so too is *A Time For Judas* quick to

connect its secret account of Judas with similar works produced by the Gnostics of antiquity. As the novel opens, Callaghan's fictional spokesman is informed of the church's decision that, despite being authenticated, the original document containing Judas's confession is "to be regarded as the work of the Gnostics, those early heretics who had come up with such things as the Gospel According to Thomas, and a Gospel According to Mary" (Callaghan 5) – works that were published together in the English translation of *The Nag Hammadi Library* in 1977. The reason for the Vatican's dismissal, a reaction Philo also foresaw, is that

the Galilean could not possibly want it to be known that Judas was the loving servant who only did his bidding, loving the Galilean to the end. *Both in on it – complicity!* Nor could the Galilean want it to be revealed that Judas, talking to me, had cleared himself. Oh what a new light that would put them both in. But it was the truth. And I had it. (243-4, emphasis mine)

Philo's heresy in the novel is thus his claim that only Judas, among the dozen apostles, had the courage and intelligence to understand Jesus's need to be betrayed. That the manuscript's detractors deem that account "Gnostic," so as to silence it, is important to Callaghan's narrative in that it creates an analogue between Philo's account and the historical Gnostic gospels that had been revealed to the public in the years immediately prior to *A Time For Judas's* publication. Indeed, much as the mysterious contents of the Rabelais manuscript drive the characters' actions in Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981), the Gnostic "gospel" of the truth behind Judas's actions becomes a powerful determinant in the lives of Judas, Philo, and the foreword's unnamed narrator. In

Callaghan's version of the events leading up to the crucifixion, Judas's agony over confessing the truth compels him to take his own life; for Philo, the contents of that confession, and its implications, convince him to bury the manuscript where it might lie undisturbed for centuries. Later, in modernity, following the description of the manuscript's initial discovery, the momentary excitement of the unnamed narrator and Owen is thwarted by the knowledge that Philo's manuscript is to be secreted away by the church. As such, and just as Judas and Philo struggled with their decisions, the foreword ends with the unnamed narrator deciding to share that account (the novel proper), ultimately fulfilling the wishes of those who had shared in that story's provencance.

Connections and Coincidences

Callaghan could not have known of the similarity of his novel to the historical *Gospel of Judas*. Although discovered in the 1970s, the codex that includes the self-titled *Gospel of Judas* remained in the hands of private collectors and was neither identified nor translated into English until the early 2000s. (Indeed, it did not appear in public until a conference of Coptic specialists in Paris in July 2004.)⁸⁹ Historians had long known that a *Gospel of Judas* existed, owing to the fact that second-century church father Irenaeus mentions it

⁸⁹ A thorough and fascinating history of how *The Gospel of Judas* came to light, as well as the difficulties in identifying and translating the codex, can be found in Chapter 4 of Coptic scholar James M. Robinson's *The Secrets of Judas* (2006).

in *Against Heresies* (c.180 C.E.) when discussing a group of Christians.⁹⁰ Still unknown until the modern discovery, however, is what the gospel actually *said* beyond mysteriously promoting Judas as the one “who knew the truth as no others did” (Pagels and King xii). Yet, even without that knowledge, Callaghan remained convinced of his interpretation of the events surrounding Judas’s betrayal. In an Associated Press interview in 1983, he remarked:

This [account] must sound to you a little mad, [but] I believe that this is – I don’t know whether you want to call it the fifth gospel as some people around here have called it – but I honestly believe this [reading of Judas’s actions] is this truth. I don’t think there’s any other explanation than what I’ve given here. (Campbell)

Indeed, the mysteries that Callaghan grappled with have long-occupied the minds of religious scholars. For instance, why did Jesus have to be betrayed at all? He’d taught openly in the Temple, and had just paraded through Jerusalem; many must have known what he looked like, and even where he was. Likewise, if Jesus was so wise, why did he pick Judas to be an Apostle in the first place?⁹¹ For his part, Callaghan was convinced: “[W]hat Judas did,” the author reasons, “he [must have done] out of love” (Campbell).

⁹⁰ Irenaeus writes: “They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produced a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas” (qtd. in Pagels and King xii).

⁹¹ A discussion between Ezekiel and Philo is used in the novel to explicitly point out some of these same questions, as well as their somewhat implausible answers. See *A Time For Judas*, 70-1.

A History of Inventing Judas

In pursuing this subject, *A Time For Judas* capitalized (intentionally or not) on scholarly and popular interest in biblical studies in the early 1980s, as well as existing theories concerning the historical (and the *human*) nature of Judas Iscariot. Preceding *A Time For Judas*, for example, was Frank Yerby's *Judas, My Brother: The Story of the Thirteenth Disciple* (1969) which tells the gospel story through the eyes of Nathan, Jesus's brother-in law and double, and brother of Judas. The Judas of Yerby's text is depicted as a villain and cowardly cheat. Nathan's opinion of the gospel writers is similarly uncompromising and often expressed. A typical outburst, for instance, follows Nathan's description of how Judas did not stay around to kiss Jesus: "Your gospel writers were lunatics, surely, men who couldn't even manage to tell convincing lies, because their addled pates held no seat of memory" (384).⁹² Another, much different speculation on Judas's motives can be observed in the novel *I, Judas* (1977) by Taylor Caldwell and Jess Stearn – a connection that was later pointed out to Callaghan by Mary Dowd, a reader from Saint John, New Brunswick.⁹³ Caldwell and Stearn's work is more sympathetic: The authors depict Judas not as a poor thief, but as the educated son of a wealthy aristocrat who becomes disillusioned with Jesus. In the novel, Judas sincerely accepts Jesus as the future King of Israel, a destiny that he is expected to fulfill through political and revolutionary

⁹² Moreover, as biblical studies professor Hugh S. Pypers points out, Yerby's own views of the evangelists as expressed in the notes section are less intemperate but hardly less scathing (*The Unsuitable Book* 77).

⁹³ Letter to the author dated October 21, 1984. From the authors collected papers at Library and Archives Canada.

action. However, as Jesus fails to take action to depose the Romans, Judas grows disappointed and ultimately betrays the man he thought would lead the Israelites to victory.⁹⁴ Finally, Callaghan's novel was in step with the controversial bestseller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982), a successful (if critically maligned) book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. The hypothesis of the latter, published only a year before *A Time For Judas*, neatly set a trail for Callaghan's narrative. In their book, Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln argue that the historical Jesus married Mary Magdalene, had one or more children with her and, more shocking yet, that those children or their descendants emigrated to what is today southern France. However, various commentators subsequently dismissed the authors' book for its reliance on questionable historical documents.⁹⁵ The ideas themselves were also blasphemous enough for *Holy Blood and Holy Grail* to be quickly banned in a number of Roman Catholic-dominated countries such as the Philippines.

Thus, at the time of its publication in 1983, Callaghan's *A Time For Judas* was already seated within a tradition of works whose authors had elected to pick up the mantle of Judas's purported gospel. As religious scholar Hugh S. Pypers points out, many such books that promote a specific variation of Judas follow a familiar narrative. They are often founded on the rediscovery of the manuscript

⁹⁴ Although their account hews closely to orthodox depictions of Judas the betrayer, Caldwell and Stearn's version is nonetheless a passionate, even sympathetic attempt to humanize Christ's favoured disciple. In this way their version of Judas is similar to Callaghan's.

⁹⁵ For instance, the pseudohistorical *Dossiers Secrets* at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France which, though alleging to portray hundreds of years of medieval history, were actually all written by Pierre Plantard and Philippe de Chérisey under the pseudonym of "Philippe Toscan du Plantier." Unaware that the documents had been forged, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln used them as a major source for their book.

of Judas's gospel, and are involved – at least in part – with the reaction of the Church to this potential bombshell (*The Unsuitable Book* 81).⁹⁶ Indeed, like its counterparts, *A Time For Judas* makes use of Vatican conspiracy, archaeological adventure, and even a hint of international intrigue as a general frame for the Philo account. (One need only look, for instance, at the unnamed “tall elegant girl in a leather jacket” who leaves a manila envelope with the Philo manuscript at the hotel lobby desk in the novel's foreword to find an example of the adventurism Callaghan bestows his subject [6].) The attraction to theorizing Judas's actions is clear; for as Pyper notes,

What these very different texts share is a reading of Judas as at least as much the betrayed as the betrayer. He is betrayed by a Jesus who does not conform to his expectations and betrayed by the authorities who use him to further their own devious assault on Jesus. These betrayals are compounded by the malice or ignorance of the canonical gospel writers who misrepresent Judas's motives and actions in the interests of their particular theology. The gospel writers become villains of the piece, confirmed in their partisan reading by the verdict of the Church. Such readings appeal to, and feed on, the modern public appetite for rumours of conspiracy particularly in ecclesiastical circles. The scope of this can be seen in the publicity given to the accusations of concealment and dissembling that have grown up around the genuine discoveries of Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents. The present-day Church authorities are seen as allied with their predecessors, such as Irenaeus, in the preservation of an ideological structure by the suppression of truth. (80)

In the face of possible persecution, Callaghan's Philo knows the importance of remaining loyal to the truth represented by Judas's sacrifice, as well as staying faithful to his own conscience. Contemplating his completed manuscript at the

⁹⁶ Chapter 6 of Hugh S. Pyper's *The Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text* (2005) focuses exclusively on modern constructions of Judas in literature. He includes many more examples and details of individual works beyond what I've presented here.

novel's end – wondering whether or not he should destroy what he has written –
he decides:

How could I [destroy it] when I knew this story had a wonder and mystery of its own? And yet it was the truth. With all my heart I believed that the truth had a grandeur of its own and could be even more mysterious than the acceptable fables. And I owed something to myself and my own inner domain. I knew I must not betray myself, for if I did my own inner domain was lost to me; all other betrayals would become easy. (246)

Through the succession of narrative layers, Callaghan directs the reader toward the collective responsibility of storytellers to report the truth. The ethical dilemma faced principally by both Judas and Philo (and later, by Owen Spencer Davies and the foreword's unnamed narrator) – as well as the literal (and seemingly inevitable) unearthing of the gospel itself – grants a circuitous lineage to Judas's secrets, one whose continuance is made possible only by the introspection and moral fortitude of others.

The decisions made by Judas, Philo, and subsequent parties stand in contrast in the novel with that of the professor from whom Owen Spencer Davies obtained the original manuscript. In the foreword, the narrator expresses his disbelief at that professor's willingness to accept the judgment of the church:

Word had gone out [to interested parties] that [the Philo manuscripts] were to be pronounced forgeries, and that in any event their age could not be authenticated. That was the word. So they were to be destroyed. And that great old man accepted this judgment. My God, he accepted it! What do you do with a great and fine old man who permits a thing to be done as the good right thing in the service of an institution which has been his whole life, when he knows that in acquiescing he'll be haunted and ashamed the rest of his life? Ashamed of doing the right thing. (5)

Thematically, then, *A Time for Judas* fits into the broader context of Callaghan's *oeuvre*; its Christian exploration of love and free will, evidenced by the selflessness displayed by Callaghan's characters over multiple narrative layers, expands on ground developed much earlier in novels such as *Such Is My Beloved* (1934) and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937). Yet, unlike Callaghan's earliest work which, as religious expert William Closson James points out, could be seen as displaying people at the mercy of forces larger than themselves ("Ambiguities" 36), by the time *Such Is My Beloved* was published, commentator Desmond Pacey argues that Callaghan had "[given] up the negative futility that marked the early novels ... and concentrated upon the spiritual lives of his characters rather than upon their physical appetites" (qtd in "Ambiguities" 36).⁹⁷ Indeed, similar to Robertson Davies's fiction from the early Salterton novels to the Cornish trilogy, which collectively probe the moral and spiritual condition of Canadians, Callaghan's earlier works represent a similar site of social and theological inquiry. *A Time For Judas* turns once more to his recurring theme or concern – the conflict of selfish versus selfless love, using a reimagining of the historical Judas and the invented scribe Philo as a model for persons who, through circumstance, are required to think beyond the immediacy of their own wishes and needs.⁹⁸

"When the time came, as surely it would," Philo decides, "if I was right about the

⁹⁷ James's "The Ambiguities of Love in Morley Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*" offers a useful discussion and reconsideration of Callaghan's theological and humanistic approaches in his fiction.

⁹⁸ Davies's Salterton novels are *Tempest Tost* (1951), *Leaven of Malice* (1954) and *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958); the Deptford trilogy is *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975); the Cornish trilogy includes *The Rebel Angels* (1981), *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988).

grandeur of truth ... the story would be found and read" (247). Judas's moral dilemma thus becomes Philo's, as the latter must decide whether to betray Judas's secrets for the greater good – just as Judas had to betray Christ.⁹⁹

Callaghan had certainly explored this territory before. Father Dowling, the protagonist of *Such Is My Beloved*, for instance, is characterized as a sort of twentieth-century Christ, an advocate for prostitutes and a healer of lepers, working solely for the benefit of others while avoiding any personal gain. In this way, Callaghan's Judas is a familiar character, facing dilemmas expressed in the author's earlier works. He is, as Judas recounts for Philo, "the victim" (131) of Jesus's designs ("You will be one of my disciples" [118]), conscious of the necessity of his role ("Someone must betray me" [125]), and beholden to the unspoken certainty that he "would do anything he [Jesus] asked" (118). During the Last Supper, for instance, Callaghan uses the (albeit clumsy) idea of a "trance" to account for the long-standing mystery of why Judas was left alone to proceed with the betrayal:

... [D]ipping the bread in the wine, he [Jesus] said he would hand the sop to the one who would betray him.

Aghast, they looked at each other. No one believed him. Then as he looked at me and our eyes met, my whole soul went out to him in secret acceptance of what was in that look, and he handed me the sop.

After taking the sop I waited, tense and trembling, for the others to cry out and rush at me, cursing, and drag me away some place where I could do no harm. No one lifted a hand against me. It was amazing They had all fallen into a trance

⁹⁹ In the 1940s, Callaghan ceased writing short fiction, concentrating instead on long, complex novels that generally met with slight critical favor. Callaghan's publications of the 1970s and 1980s renewed interest in his career, and likely helped to cement his status as an important figure in twentieth-century Canadian literature. See, for instance, Hale (2005).

“It is time, Judas,” Jesus said, gently, and I left, trembling and wondering. (126-7)

In the end, Callaghan’s Judas has little choice: He must sacrifice himself, knowing full well that he has been “Used by the son of God, picked out to be the victim” (131). Yet, importantly, he accepts his fate: “I’m serving him willingly,” Philo remembers him saying (131). In so doing, Callaghan makes explicit that Judas, as he sees it, was *not* a betrayer; but rather, he has been falsely wronged by the multitudes who blame him for Christ’s crucifixion, when his actions were born of his own selflessness – perhaps the greatest act of love he could commit.

The Genesis of the Novel

A key difference that separates *A Time For Judas* from other works in Callaghan’s *oeuvre* is that the latter is grounded in the historical and biblical insights of the 1980s, themselves informed by newly available English translations of the Gnostic texts of antiquity. Letters between Callaghan and University of Ottawa professor David Staines reveal that the former began thinking about a novel concerning Judas in 1979, two years after the Nag Hammadi library was made available in translation and the same year Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels* was published. Staines had introduced himself to Callaghan in a letter dated November 4, 1978, concerning a symposium he was planning on Callaghan’s work for 1980.¹⁰⁰ (“No Canadian writer is more deserving of reappraisal than Morley Callaghan,” Staines later wrote in the

¹⁰⁰ This symposium took place at the University of Ottawa on April 24-25, 1980. The proceedings were published the following year by University of Ottawa Press, with David Staines as editor.

foreword to the published proceedings [2]). Callaghan's papers at the Library of National Archives in Ottawa contain periodic correspondence between the two men spanning roughly 1978-1983.¹⁰¹ Upon first hearing of Callaghan's plan for a novel about Judas in 1979, Staines conducted (apparently unsolicited) research for Callaghan while at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California – looking specifically at characterizations of Judas throughout history and literature. He noted to Callaghan that in medieval art, depictions of Judas concentrate on four episodes in his life: Judas kissing Christ in the garden, Judas seated at the Last Supper, Judas and the forty pieces of silver, and Judas hanging himself. In that same letter, dated June 12, 1979, Staines also directs Callaghan to a 1938 novel (written in French) by J.J. Lanza del Vasto entitled simply *Judas*. In that work, now rare and long out-of-print, del Vasto similarly attempts to explain the more puzzling aspects of Judas's actions. The resulting portrait by del Vasto shows Judas to be deeply conflicted: He feels left out and suffers from not being honored by Jesus. Another grievance, invented by the author, is the perfume that Mary Magdalene spreads on the feet of Jesus – perfume that Judas had earlier offered him. However, at the last moment, del Vasto's Judas hesitates: Obligated to accompany Malchus to the Garden of Olives, he runs toward the cross. Mingled with the crowd calling for the death of Jesus, he grows upset, screaming that his master is innocent before paradoxically crying out: "Oh Lord, as you betrayed me!" – before adding "*I love you because you are not a God*"

¹⁰¹ The two maintained a friendship, with Staines at one point watching a hockey game together with Callaghan and his wife at their home.

(del Vasto 232). Later, after Jesus is dead, del Vasto's Judas expresses his nihilism: "I believe in you, in you alone, Nothing," and in despair hangs himself from the tree that Christ cursed (240).¹⁰²

While Staines's letters do not mention the Gnostic gospels published only a couple of years earlier, the fictional possibilities of a "lost account" could not have been far from Callaghan's mind. This would explain why Callaghan's novel ties the Philo manuscript explicitly to a "Gnostic" tradition, and why the foreword of *A Time For Judas*, which details the discovery of Philo's account, is a thinly veiled retelling of the Nag Hammadi discovery in Egypt in 1945 – a tale recounted in detail in the introductions of both the Nag Hammadi Library and

¹⁰² Interestingly, Staines's recommendation of del Vasto's novel rested in large part on the fact that the 1968 edition of the novel is preceded by a letter by Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher and political thinker whom Callaghan deeply admired, and whom had earlier been the subject of Callaghan's 1951 essay, "It Was News in Paris – But Not in Toronto" ("It might make you curious," Staines writes.) In this piece for *Saturday Night*, Callaghan recounted his excitement at Maritain's presence at Toronto's Medieval Institute almost two decades earlier: "I went around saying, 'Jacques Maritain is in town,' with a beaming smile" ("It Was News" 17). But Callaghan, only recently returned from Paris, was dismayed that his enthusiasm was largely unshared in Toronto: "Maritain was a world figure everywhere but in my home town" (18). See James, 37. The terms of Callaghan's admiration for Maritain are lavish and unrestrained. He claimed that Maritain's presence had put the Medieval Institute "on the world stage intellectually," citing T. S. Eliot's comment that Maritain was "one of the great intellectual forces in Europe" ("It Was News," 17). As William Closson James points out, the dedication of *Such is My Beloved* states in simple homage: "To those times with M. in the winter of 1933." And, until the new edition of 1989 dropped it, the New Canadian Library edition supplied the clue for M's identity by printing on the back cover Maritain's comment: "I have been profoundly touched by the absolute sincerity of this very moving book." The French philosopher apparently held the Canadian writer in equal esteem. The two men, and a few others (in particular, Manny Chapman, a convert to Catholicism from Judaism), met frequently during 1933 to eat together, drink wine, and socialize at the Callaghan apartment on Avenue Road. For more information about the influence of Maritain on Callaghan's worldview, see James, *Locations of the Sacred*: 168-9.

Pagels's work.¹⁰³ Likewise, as in the Nag Hammadi find, the Philo manuscript at the heart of Callaghan's novel dates from the early Christian era (specifically, the first century), but is discovered in a Greek jar in Cyprus rather than in Egypt (a turn of events that one of the author's readers found incredulous.)¹⁰⁴ The "Forward" also leans heavily on classifying the Philo account as heresy, making plain the church's fear over what might happen should the ideas therein be exposed. "[T]he Philo manuscripts were to be regarded as the work of the Gnostics," the Forward's unnamed narrator is told, "those early heretics who had come up with such things as the Gospel according to Thomas, and a Gospel according to Mary" (5).

It is telling, however, that although Callaghan's novel ties the Philo manuscript explicitly to a "Gnostic" tradition, this is not done by Philo or by the unnamed narrator in the foreword, nor is it supposed by Owen Spencer Davies; instead, the text receives the designation from the Vatican, the manuscript's chief detractor, whose aim is to dismiss the account outright.¹⁰⁵ On the surface, this dismissal reflects an historical truth regarding the church's attitude toward the Gnostics of antiquity. Yet, Callaghan also uses it as one of several means to

¹⁰³ The foreword is missing from the 2006 Exile Edition of the novel, effectively robbing that newer version of the explicit Gnostic parallel. No reason is given for its exclusion. Interestingly, however, Diana Holmes, a reader from Hawaii, had earlier conveyed her disappointment over the foreword's inclusion ("I felt that it took away from the story") in a letter to Callaghan dated March 13, 1985. An inquiry to Callaghan's estate did not produce an explanation for the section's omission.

¹⁰⁴ In a letter dated September 29, 1983, one of Callaghan's readers asks "Wouldn't a more likely find have been among the mass of papyrus fragments found in the caves at which the Jews had taken refuge during the war against the Romans?"

¹⁰⁵ For articles that discuss Callaghan's specific relationship to Roman Catholicism, see: Kendle, Boire, and Pell.

distance himself from his subject. For instance, in the novel, Owen Spencer Davies refers four times to the Philo account as a *story*, and, to reinforce this point, the title of the manuscript that appears in the novel (and the working title of Callaghan's own manuscript) is "According to Philo of Crete."¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the novel explains Philo's reconstruction of Judas's story as the product of hurriedly scribbled notes of the disciple's "incoherent" ramblings; and later, Philo's synthesis of those notes is, by his own admission, vexed by having been "strained through my memory" (115). Initially, it makes sense for Callaghan to have done this, as it conveniently explains the absence of stiff, archaic language in the novel in favour of the vernacular. In reviewing the novel, Atwood recognized this also. She reads this act of "second remove" as the author necessarily burying the "I" of Morley Callaghan so as to "get the reader to swallow the outrageous proposition that you're telling her a new, but real, version of historical events" (73). Yet, Callaghan's personal correspondence with Staines suggests the former was also deeply concerned about how the subject matter of *A Time For Judas* would be received. In a letter to Callaghan dated October 6, Staines reports, after having read the novel for the first time:

I think of your concern in times past about anti-Semitism or anti-Christianity or whatever. As I was reading the book, I thought about this – there is nothing anti at all here. Rather there are living human beings caught in the agonies of human existence. Their religious beliefs or lack of them may be important to the plot, but not in any further dimension that might be jarring to any reader.

¹⁰⁶ As seen on two different manuscripts for the novel – one typescript and one written by hand – in the author's collected papers at Library and Archives Canada.

Callaghan's concerns may have been well founded. In an undated letter to the author, one reader could not help but read the novel biographically. Presumably upset over the manner in which *A Time For Judas* excuses – and even *exalts* – Judas's betrayal, she writes:

As I thought about you, the author, I couldn't help but wonder if you were expressing your own personal thoughts + convictions through the character of Philo You see, sir, I am a Christian. I know Him (the Galilean). Somehow I feel that you could never have written *A Time For Judas* if you also knew Him. I pray for you that as you come near to the end of your life that you will consider Him as He is Sir, you will stand before Him + give an account of all you've done, said, and written.

Thus, while Atwood may be correct that the “manuscript found in an old jar’ [and, in this case, later remembered and recreated] ploy ... covers the authorial bottom nicely, accounting for any little anachronisms, especially of diction,” Callaghan's careful framing of the Philo account covers the “authorial bottom” in another way as well.¹⁰⁷ Specifically, that the version of events Callaghan offers is not really a Gospel According to Judas but, rather, a Gospel According to *Philo*, suggests the author was attempting to distance himself from any potential controversy that might arise over the subject matter. In essence, the novel's clumsy and occasionally confusing conceits of authorship allow him to float a theory that excuses Judas's betrayal without having to bear responsibility for that theory. In so doing, Callaghan affords himself a narrative architecture suitable for exploring potentially-explosive subject matter built around ideas proffered in the Gnostic

¹⁰⁷ Like Callaghan, Atwood too was aware of the possible backlash, noting that *A Time For Judas* “contains theology that will make more than a few traditional hairs stand on end” (73).

gospels, all without trespassing on the sensitivities of a more traditional Christian readership.

The Gnostic Vision

Such intricate scaffolding is not to suggest, however, that Callaghan compromised his willingness to explore unorthodox material. Indeed, *A Time For Judas* is overtly Gnostic in much of its theology. On one hand, it foregrounds – by way of Jesus’s teachings in the novel – key Gnostic ideas concerning the structure and inherently illegitimate nature of the cosmos, as well as the divide between those capable of possessing *gnosis*, and those who are not. In his characterizations of Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene, for instance, Callaghan’s novel borrows heavily from the Gnostic works *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Mary* as it seeks to elaborate upon a vision that is sufficiently historical but outside the canonical gospels. In *The Gospel According to Thomas*, Jesus announces: “I am the Light that is over them all . . . Split wood and I am there. Raise a stone and you will find me” (Robinson 126). Likewise, Callaghan’s Judas experiences a moment of revelation in which “I saw Jesus in each bright star . . . he was in the earth under my feet, and in the cry of the night bird and each beam of moonlight on the low hills” (*A Time for Judas* 115). Later in the novel, when Philo finally chooses to bury Judas’s account in a Greek jar, he acts in accordance with another statement of Jesus’s in the *Gospel According to Thomas*: “The Scribes received the keys of knowledge and hid them away”

(Robinson 119).¹⁰⁸ Most importantly, perhaps, Callaghan follows the Gnostic tradition that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers, an angle also played up in the bestselling novel, *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* only a couple of years earlier: “The Lord loved Mary more than all the disciples,” reports the *Gospel According to Philip*, “and he kissed her on the mouth many times” (Robinson 134). Callaghan uses this idea presumably to speak to the humanity in Christ, thus putting his actions and behaviours on the same plane with those of the other characters in the novel and, as such, emphasizes that Jesus’s actions and decisions are (best) received by the others as examples of virtuous human behavior.

The novel’s Gnostic connection is fulfilled in other ways as well. For instance, *A Time for Judas* refers in passing to the brother of Christ (Christ’s brother purportedly writes the Gnostic *Apocryphon of James*, and *The Gospel of Thomas* is supposed to have been recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas, whom the Gnostics believed to be the twin brother of Christ). Similarly, and not unlike the historical *Gospel of Judas* that would be unearthed much later, the novel founds the strength of Jesus’s teaching upon the revelation that “heaven was not in the skies ... [but] within man” (*A Time For Judas* 120). The idea of placing the divine *within* man – emphasizing knowledge and an individual’s role in salvation – is an explicitly Gnostic concept and one of the much-publicized revelations of

¹⁰⁸ The novel’s Gnostic leanings are briefly remarked upon in Mark Abley’s original 1984 review of *A Time For Judas* in *Canadian Literature*. Abley makes a brief connection between the reference to Gnosticism in the novel’s foreword and Callaghan’s specific use of theology in the novel.

the *Nag Hammadi Library*. In the novel, however, Christ's other disciples are unable to grasp its significance; only Judas and Mary. Judas, in particular, contemplates the significance of Jesus's words:

How marvellous – God was within me. Again and again, listening, feeling, concentrating, I said, 'Yes, God is within me, and in everyone alive.' Deeper and deeper I went into the dark caves within me. He was there, there for all of us, and I saw what Jesus meant, telling us to go off alone to pray in the silence of a room. (120)

Judas later expresses his dismay over the misconceptions the other apostles harbour concerning Christ's promise to destroy and rebuild the temple: "This to me had a grandeur that was breathtaking," Judas remarks; 'it meant that the temple could be destroyed and it wouldn't matter, he had moved it forever – *into the heart of man. But the others, they couldn't see it. They were all so literal-minded*' (122, emphasis mine). The moment is an important one, for until now Judas did not understand that awareness of his own divinity is key to salvation, and it is that same revelation that Callaghan suggests has been suppressed along with Judas's story for centuries. Judas understands that developing *gnosis* or self-knowledge was an integral part of Jesus's message, and it is this same recognition that separates him from the other disciples, who are unable to see it.

"My Own Judas!"

The reader's knowledge of Judas as he appears in the novel is conveyed through Owen's reconstruction of Philo's account from the notes made when Owen first encountered the tale. It is through this perspective that the reader first

comes to know Judas as a broken man; he is, variously, “a man shattered by terrible disappointment in himself” (184), “inert,” and “shaken by his awful loneliness” (184-5). Yet, much as Atwood is careful to refuse easy answers in *Alias Grace* by foregrounding the possibility that Grace Marks’s account to Dr. Simon Jordan may be a fabrication to serve her own interests (“perhaps,” she says to him, “I will tell you lies”), so too does Callaghan temper more flattering descriptions of Judas with unsettling possibilities. The first of these possibilities – one that also occurs to Atwood’s Simon Jordan regarding Grace Marks – is Philo’s notion that Judas was deceiving him: “[W]hy had he bothered with me? Unless he liked manipulating people. Unless he saw himself always in a certain high light” (66). The second – and more telling idea – is that the Judas we encounter in the novel is more invention than reality. Upon recalling their moments together, for instance, Philo questions his admiration of Judas’s character:

[H]ow did it happen that I had come to look up to him, seeing him in a new mysterious light, a man from many lands who knew things others could not know? Had he built himself up? Or had he let me do it? I wondered. My own Judas! I created my own Judas out of the strong impression he had made on me. (65-6)

The irony of Philo’s epiphany is the effortless with which it – and suggestibly Callaghan as well – draws attention to Philo’s own role as a focalizer for Judas’s story, reminding the reader of the elusiveness of a singular reality or truth, and that stories are created to suit our needs. Callaghan, of course, invents his own version of Judas Iscariot. To so do, however, requires that his Philo also invents

a version of Judas (as the former rightly suspects he has done); that Owen Spencer Davies perform the same for Philo, whose account he only marginally recalls; and – by implication – that the reader does the same for all involved, including Jesus, so as to emphasize the shared processes of narrative construction utilized by both gospel and novel. The power, Callaghan suggests, rests with the storyteller, and whoever’s account is historically victorious – drawing a clear parallel between the canonical gospels whose primacy is emphasized in *A Time For Judas* by the will of the Vatican, and the heretical or “lesser” gospels represented by the Gnostics.

Nonetheless, the Judas that Callaghan invents is granted special insight, and becomes an important vehicle for Christ’s teachings, insofar as Callaghan, or the novel, has decided what those teachings, along with the impact of Jesus’s persona, should be. As Judas reflects shortly after meeting Jesus:

Following him around the countryside, I met his other disciples. I was not one of them by temperament or training. They were all rude fishermen or workmen, sharing a splendour of purpose and devotion. Peter could direct men. John had a quiet sweetness. But their relationship with Jesus was different from mine. They listened in groups and learned and wondered, but I could take Jesus aside and talk to him about the world. He encouraged me in this kind of intimacy. I loved the times when he was alone with me I gained a secret understanding of him that dazzled my intellect. It seemed to me that he was bent on overthrowing the real masters of the world – the masters of the souls of men. In all those little stories he loved to tell dealing with people in their personal relationships, someone had to make a personal decision. A choice. In making the choice they learned something about themselves. (118-9)

By exercising Judas’s special relationship with Christ, Callaghan succeeds at making Judas at once obsessively introverted and capable of uncommon self-

reflection or insight. Yet Judas is also meant to be sympathetic. He is consistently portrayed as a vulnerable, learned character, as well as an unwilling conspirator in Jesus's inevitable fate. It is Judas's love, rather than betrayal, after all, that drives the action of the narrative. "My silence told him I would take on a burden none of the others could bring himself to take," Judas remarks; "Shuddering, I told myself it wouldn't matter what story they told, making me out to be the most loathsome of treacherous men – if he needed me. What did I matter?" (125-6). Reflecting on Judas's actions, Philo sees this as well. He recognizes in Judas a human and selfless individual inclined to perform daring Christian acts where "There had been nothing in it for him" (65). Moreover, as in *The Gospel of Judas*, the non-literal nature of Christ's resurrection in Callaghan's novel helps to facilitate Judas's role as a human being capable of love, but not deceit (218).

"A Great Wild Thief Full of Grace": Callaghan's Simon

Early in the novel, Philo recounts how when travelling with merchants and armed guards he first crossed paths with a thief named Simon (or "outlaw," as Philo subsequently prefers, so as to distinguish the former from mere thievery [33]). After their party is surprised by Simon and other bandits along the road of their journey, Philo proposed a deal: To secure his own life and freedom (while others in the party were losing theirs), he would offer Simon information pertaining to easily intercepted caravan routes, promising to continuously inform Simon of such details. His offer is so believable that Simon sets him free, and

thus begins an unusual relationship between the two men – one built on trust.

Later, when Philo encounters Simon in public, the former describes how:

Sometimes [Simon] came disguised as a travelling merchant, sometimes as a wandering beggar with a tall hooked staff, but often he met me at the inn. Even if a Jew had recognized Simon, he would not have betrayed him ... The more I learned about Simon, the more I liked him and the more often I wanted to be with him – not just because he scrupulously gave me my share of the coin he got from disposing of the loot in distant towns, but because I had come to enjoy his company. (40)

Apart from the scene being strongly evocative of how Jeremiah the peddler is introduced in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (as a peddler with a walking stick, who is remarked upon as resembling a Jew), Simon's presence in the novel is significant in that the union of secrets between the two men functions as a prologue to a similar decision that Philo must later make with regard to Judas's confession.

As part of their bond, the working arrangement between Simon and Philo was to be kept secret. Yet, Philo is unsuccessful in suppressing that knowledge. He instead describes after the fact, and with some regret, how he used his deal with Simon as a chance to gain favour among the guards:

As soon as I sat down with [Roman guards] Lepidus and Marcellus I was touched by a strange secret excitement. Even though I was exhausted I felt it. I told them the truth. I told them how I had sat talking to Simon and, how gaining his confidence, had persuaded him I could serve him here in Jerusalem with information about the routes of caravans. (36)

Philo's elaboration of events is meant to disrupt Simon's plans, and clear his own name from its burgeoning association with outlaws. Later, however, upon feeling remorse, and upon confessing to Simon his desire for an end to their

arrangement, Philo is surprised at how swiftly and unconditionally Simon breaks the deal. The latter replies, “[W]hat you have done for me here in Jerusalem is hidden forever. So feel free, Philo. I would never betray you” (52). Philo, in turn, is stunned by Simon’s actions: “It had come so easily, like a grace from him – a great wild thief full of grace.” Simon remains in contact with Philo, until such time as the former is apprehended and quickly destined for execution next to Jesus. Even as Simon faces death, however, and knowing full well the criminal actions that Simon had participated in, Philo cannot help but be impressed by the irony of Simon’s moral constitution: “I was awed by the man’s sense of loyalty to me and his own sense of himself” (136). Thus, at the execution itself, and still feeling responsible for Simon predicament, Philo decides he must repay that debt: “I felt driven to have Simon recognize me, to see me there at his side and know he would remain in my heart forever” (152).

Philo’s betrayal of Simon stands in sharp contrast with Judas’s “betrayal” of Christ, an act based on love rather than self-interest. Earlier, Simon is clear on the subject of betrayal, explaining that “in the long run a man [has] only his self-respect to fall back on” – a statement that applies equally in the novel to both Judas and Philo. Judas’s confession to Philo of the truth surrounding his “betrayal” of Christ thus provides Philo with a second chance to make the morally right decision, and informs Philo’s decision not to betray Judas’s secrets, but rather to bury them. In so doing, Philo fulfils Jesus’s message, as passed on to him by Judas; namely how, sometimes in personal relationships, “someone had

to make a personal decision. A choice. In making the choice they learned something about themselves” (112).

“An Important Part of His Own Story”: Callaghan’s Mary

Just as the secrets of Callaghan’s Judas are conveyed to the reader through successive storytellers and perspectives, so too is the truth surrounding the novel’s Mary unravelled for the reader by Philo. The Mary who appears in the novel is a product of the historical and biblical depictions that Callaghan encountered during his research, as well as the author’s own imagination. In his correspondence with David Staines during the novel’s genesis, Callaghan showed himself to be as interested in historical portrayals and understandings of Mary Magdalene as he was of Judas Iscariot. A lengthy June 29, 1979, letter in particular, written from Staines to Callaghan, suggests the latter was especially intrigued with how Mary Magdalene came to be known as “a loose woman,” and indeed this aspect of Mary’s character is accounted for in *A Time For Judas* as Philo reveals how the story of Mary Magdalene becomes confused with that of the harlot Mary of Samaria, so as to give us the more widely-perceived account of Magdalene as whore.

Yet perhaps as expected, given the reference in the novel’s foreword to the Gnostic Gospel of Mary, as well as the plot of *Holy Blood Holy Grail* a year earlier, Mary Magdalene’s personal relationship with Christ and her role as favoured disciple are integral components of *A Time For Judas*. Possibly in reaction to Robertson Davies’s at-times simplistic or reductive depiction of Maria

Theotoky in *The Rebel Angels*, in which the latter – after a period of intellectual awakening – is suddenly and awkwardly relegated to a conventional married life, *A Time For Judas* is quick to dispel such a one-dimensional offering. Upon first hearing of Mary from Judas, the novel signals that a correction of the canonical gospels is at hand, and that – contrary to what those gospels suggest – Mary, like Judas, plays a significant role in the story. Philo reports:

I felt the excitement mounting in [Judas], as if he believed he was getting to an important aspect of his own story. He insisted I was wrong in thinking that Mary Magdalene had been one of his [Jesus's] women. Nor had she ever been a harlot. It was young Mary – my Mary of Samaria – who was the real harlot, the one who had wept at the feet of Jesus, washed his feet and dried them with her hair as he blessed her and told her she was beautiful now

Callaghan's Mary Magdalene is unorthodox in both her demeanour and her place among the disciples. More telling is that her portrayal as a physical companion of Christ and favoured disciple can be traced to specific Gnostic depictions of Mary. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, for example, exists the well-known revelation that "the companion of the [Saviour is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] by it and [expressed disapproval]. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (Robinson, *Nag Hammadi* 138). Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's *Holy Blood and Holy Grail* had earlier built much of their novel's revelations on that same relationship, drawing on motifs of a truly Gnostic Christianity that had emerged in the intellectual current of the age. Tellingly, Callaghan advances the implications

of a Gnostic Mary in *A Time For Judas*; the novel's Judas describes her as possessing "a charming authority that made others step aside, for they knew she shared secrets with Jesus that he never revealed to them" (119). The most transparently Gnostic moment comes as Judas recounts for Philo how, apart from himself, "No one was closer to [Jesus] – unless it was Mary Magdalene, who had become his companion":

This beautiful woman had a charming authority that made others step aside I used to see them going off some place where they could have a drink of wine and be alone together. For my part, I was never jealous of Mary. She was a woman, and he needed her in this company. But the others, who vied with each other for his attention, were upset by the secret place given to her, and they said to him bluntly, "Why do you love her more than you love us?" and he said "Why aren't you more like her?" (119)

In sharp contrast to Jesus's statement, Peter replies, "But she is female, a female among men," jesting that "When she is with us, I'll make her a male." However, when Callaghan's Mary acknowledges that she is one day promised to have a whole kingdom "within [her]," Philo, upon hearing this, initially declares her words to be fantasy (64).

Importantly, the scene mirrors a passage in *The Gospel According to Mary*, published as part of the *Nag Hammadi Library*.¹⁰⁹ As that account opens, the Saviour is engaged in dialogue with his disciples, answering their questions on the nature of matter and the nature of sin. At the end of the discussion, the

¹⁰⁹ *The Gospel of Mary* is not among the Nag Hammadi codices, but is found in a similar Gnostic codex, Papyrus Berolinensis 8502. It was made available as part of the published *Nag Hammadi Library* in 1977 because it had previously been available only in German.

Saviour departs, leaving the disciples distraught and anxious. Mary speaks up with words of comfort and encouragement. Peter then asks Mary to share with them any special teaching she received from the Saviour. Peter responds, “Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Saviour which you remember - which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them.” Mary answers Peter’s request by recounting a conversation she had with the Saviour concerning visions.

(Mary) said, ‘I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, ‘Lord, I saw you today in a vision.’ He answered and said to me: ‘Blessed are you, that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.’ I said to him, ‘So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it [through] the soul [or] through the spirit?’ (Robinson 122)

Jesus teaches Mary that the inner self is composed of soul, spirit, and mind, and visions are seen and understood *in the mind*. The subsequent four pages of the historical text are missing; however, when the narrative resumes, Mary is no longer recalling her discussion with the Saviour. She is instead recounting the revelation given to her in her vision. The revelation describes the ascent of a soul, which as it passes on its way to its final rest, engages in dialogue with four powers that try to stop it. Her vision, however, does not meet with the disciples’ approval:

But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, “Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are [strange] ideas.” Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Savior. “Did he then speak secretly with a woman, in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?” (122-23)

For his own creation of Mary Magdalene, Callaghan adapts this vision and version of Mary. His transformation of Mary Magdalene from her traditional role as prostitute to the caring, sensitive, and intelligent companion of Christ reaffirms a theme that bridges both orthodox Christianity and Gnosticism – namely, that Christ is found “where there is love” (231). Yet, as if to reinforce that only the stories that are needed survive, Callaghan is clear that Mary of Samaria will not be remembered, as the ideas she represents are incompatible with the version of the tale that is necessary: “Already someone else gets put into her story” Judas explains (112), adding later that “The way they tell the story now, Mary Magdalene takes the harlot’s place” (113). That this new version of Mary’s character has been easily overwritten is evidenced by Philo’s observation that:

[A]lready in the villages and in the countryside where Jesus had a great many followers, they were saying Mary Magdalene, whom they saw with Jesus all the time, was a repentant harlot who had fallen at his feet, weeping. (113)

Judas, in describing the effect for Philo, laments that “It’s the story they’ll go on telling now, and so our poor Mary, the real whore with all that love, is now soon to be forgotten” (113).

One of the originalities of Callaghan’s *A Time For Judas* – a point that has gone largely unnoticed – is that it creates a facsimile of an historical Gnostic gospel modeled largely on then-existing and known Gnostic sources. Thus, it deals seriously with the theological implications of those materials in a way that Davies’s novel does not. By echoing many of the more startling revelations of the Gnostics – particularly their unorthodox depiction of Mary Magdalene as a

spiritual companion, as well as an emphasis on self-knowledge or *gnosis* – Callaghan likely recognized in the revelations of Nag Hammadi a “language” befitting of his “secret account” – or alternatively, an architecture that facilitated a rigorous act of religious questioning, particularly insofar as the Gnostics possessed alternative ideas on the nature of Jesus, of women, and salvation itself.

CHAPTER 5: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GRACE: GNOSTIC HERESY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

Thus the earth arose from her confusion, water from her terror; air from the consolidation of her grief; while fire ... was inherent in all these elements ... as ignorance lay concealed in these three sufferings.

- Valentinus, on the origin of the world through Sophia

[They live] as if they were sunk in sleep, and found themselves in disturbing dreams. Either (there is) a place to which they are fleeing, or, without strength, they (come) from having chased after others, or they are involved in striking blows, or they are receiving blows themselves, or they have fallen from high places, or they take off into the air though they do not even have wings. Again, sometimes (it is as) if people were murdering them, though there is no one even pursuing them, or they themselves are killing their neighbours, for they have been stained with their blood. When those who are going through all these things wake up, they see nothing, they who were in the midst of these disturbances, for they are nothing. Such is the way of those who have cast ignorance aside as sleep, leaving [its works] behind like a dream in the night This is the way everyone has acted, as though asleep at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way he has come to knowledge, as if he was awakened.

- *The Gospel of Truth*

*Why, you who hate me, do you love me,
and hate those who love me?
You who deny me, confess me,
and you who confess me, deny me.
You who tell the truth about me, lie about me,
and you who have lied about me, tell the truth about me.
You who know me, be ignorant of me,
and those who have not known me, let them know me ...*

*I am the one who is disgraced and the great one.
Give heed to my poverty and my wealth.
Do not be arrogant to me when I am cast out upon the earth,
and you will find me in those that are to come.
And do not look upon me on the dung-heap*

*nor go and leave me cast out,
and you will find me in the kingdoms.
And do not look upon me when I am cast out among those who
are disgraced and in the least places,
nor laugh at me.
And do not cast me out among those who are slain in violence.*

-The Thunder, Perfect Mind

There is a moment in the “Outcome” chapter of Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride* (1993), the novel that immediately preceded *Alias Grace*, in which the author refers to the Cathars, a Christian religious movement with dualistic and Gnostic elements that appeared in the Languedoc region of France and other parts of Europe in the 11th century, and which flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries:

The dualist Cathars held that the world was divided between the forces of good and the forces of evil, the spiritual and the material, God and the Devil; they believed in reincarnation, and had female religious instructors. Whereas the Catholics ruled out rebirth, thought women unclean, and held by force of logic that since God was by definition all-powerful, evil was ultimately an illusion. (*The Robber Bride* 678)

The Cathars’ appearance is significant. In the context of the novel, it provides a bit of history, and illustrates how – in the second decade of the thirteenth century – France was being torn apart by religious wars (the Catholics versus the Cathars.) Yet it also demonstrates Atwood’s working knowledge of Gnostic sects, and particularly the unique attitudes they held toward women and the nature of evil. When prompted about her familiarity with Gnosticism, Atwood explains,

[i]t was not possible to study English literature written before (say) the year 1960, in the years when I was studying it, without encountering theology.

Milton, Blake, Bunyan, even Browning ... you needed to know about the main sects and arguments. The Manicheans, the Antonomians, the Cathars, the Vaudois, the Huguenots et. al. were all later offshoots of the original Gnostic heresies; we encountered them all, one way or another.¹¹⁰

As I mentioned earlier in the dissertation, Gnosticism may have been on Atwood's mind while writing both *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*. Toni Morrison's celebrated novel, *Jazz* (1992), features as one of its epigraphs the Gnostic poem, "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power. In addition, a lengthy feature on Elaine Pagels and her work on Gnosticism appeared in *The New Yorker* on April 3, 1995, around the same time Atwood was writing *Alias Grace*.¹¹¹

Alias Grace appears to continue the Gnostic thread dropped at the end of *The Robber Bride* by ingeniously locating in the fictional Grace's narrative the fall and redemption of the divine feminine, playfully evoking the Gnostic journey of Sophia or Soul, described in Nag Hammadi texts such as *Exegesis on the Soul* and *Authoritative Teaching*.¹¹² In so doing, Atwood allows her version of Grace Marks to recast her role in the murders in both the historical and biblical sense.

¹¹⁰ Letter from Margaret Atwood to Ryan Edward Miller, February 14, 2005. Atwood adds that she didn't know about the Vaudois until later.

¹¹¹ See Remnick.

¹¹² George McRae notes that in its emphasis on the evil character of the material world, on the heavenly origin of the spiritual world, on the role of revealed knowledge as salvific, *Authoritative Teaching* appears to be a Gnostic work. Although the tract contains no typical gnostic cosmogenic myth – "unless," McRae writes, "it is alluded to in the passages now lost through some of the early lacunae" – it nonetheless presupposes a gnostic, or anti-cosmic dualist, understanding of the fate of the soul in the material world (MacRae, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* 304-305). Since MacRae wrote, attempts have been made to be more precise about the group responsible for the tractate. Some have argued that they were in fact Gnostics, who only expressed as much of the gnostic myth in the tractate as was needed. A fundamental difference may be seen between Gnostics and traditional Christians, it is argued, in 33,4-34,34, where gnostic "seekers" contrast themselves with the "senseless" faith-oriented Christians, who have "found" the way, in sterile creedal religion.

The result is a tightly structured, almost mythic version of Grace's life. This novelistic strategy achieves two ends: first, it provides Atwood with a means of writing against the erasure and marginalization of women's histories under patriarchal or canonical structures by foregrounding a role for the feminine in the novel that undermines traditional Christian doctrine. Secondly, it creates an opportunity for Atwood's version of Grace Marks to refute the judgments made against her by the courts, media, and society by adopting the Gnostic myth of Sophia to emphasize the spirit as opposed to the body; or to show, as the novel's Mrs. Quennell says, that "stone walls do not a prison make" (84).

(Re)visiting Hours: Atwood and Grace Marks

Alias Grace (1996) uses as its subject the historical murders of Thomas Kinnear and his lover Nancy Montgomery in Richmond Hill, Ontario, on July 29, 1843. Accused of the crime were Kinnear's servant girl, Grace Marks, and stablehand, James McDermott, both of whom were convicted following a failed attempt to flee together to the United States.¹¹³ Of particular interest to Atwood was that Grace was just sixteen at the time, and had worked in the Kinnear household a mere three weeks when the murders occurred.¹¹⁴ As in the case of convicted serial murderer and rapist Paul Bernardo and then-girlfriend Karla

¹¹³ Both received death sentences following their convictions; however, while McDermott's execution (by hanging) was carried out, Grace's sentence was commuted because of her youth. Between the time of her incarceration in 1843 and her release in 1872, Grace spent time in both the Kingston Penitentiary and the Toronto Lunatic Asylum.

¹¹⁴ "What on Earth went on among those four people?," Atwood asks (LeClair). Early commentators claimed Grace was jealous of Nancy and had instigated the crime; others felt strongly she was only peripherally involved.

Homolka in Ontario in the 1990s – a parallel not lost on Atwood when writing the novel¹¹⁵ -- questions concerning the exact nature of Grace's involvement did not abate. In the year following the murders, news of the crime reached as far as Britain, and public opinion at home experienced a sharp divide, "with half the population thinking she was absolutely awful, a terrible Delilah," Atwood says, and "the other half thinking that she [was] a weak, simple-minded, very young, terrorized female victim."

Atwood had first written about Grace Marks in a teleplay for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1974, and again in 1979 in a stage play she completed but never produced.¹¹⁶ At the time, she intended both works to be an adaptation of English immigrant Susanna Moodie's account of the murders in *Life in the Clearings* (1853) – which, Atwood now says, "was the first version of the story I came across and, being young ... I did not question it" ("In Search of *Alias Grace*" 1513). *Alias Grace*, by comparison, eschews Moodie's account entirely, recognizing that the historical Grace was more ambiguous and Moodie herself far more influenced by the literature of the day (specifically popular fiction) than Atwood's early writings had suggested. Absent from the novel are the melodramatic flourishes that colour both Moodie's version of the crime and Atwood's earlier attempts. The Grace Marks of the novel is no longer a wicked

¹¹⁵ In her collected papers at the University of Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, Atwood's research notes for *Alias Grace* include a newspaper clipping of the Bernardo/Homolka case, showing that the parallel between the historical and present-day cases was on her mind when writing about James McDermott and Grace Marks.

¹¹⁶ Copies of both the teleplay and the stage play are part of Margaret Atwood's collected papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto.

temptress and an instigator of the murders. Even the details of the crime itself are less sensational than the scene Moodie recorded. “It always bothered me that the story Moodie told was so theatrical,” Atwood explains. “It made you wonder: could it really have been like that?” (1514).¹¹⁷ In approaching the Grace Marks case once more, then, *Alias Grace* reveals itself to be less interested with the truth behind the murders than it is with the historical forces that shape and malign the lives of the accused. The author’s revised methodology can be attributed in part to the contradictions and omissions inherent in the real Grace’s story; for “the writers-down,” Atwood explains, “... were human beings, [and like anyone they were] subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases” (1514). The Grace who appears in the novel is also made cognizant of these issues. “I think of all the things that have been written down about me,” she observes, “and I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?” (*Alias Grace* 23).

Thus, the novel does not attempt to determine Grace’s involvement in the murders conclusively; instead, it undermines the paradigms of inscription that Grace’s commentators – real and fictional – traditionally observed. The novel recognizes, for instance, that, unlike the term “murderer” which, as Grace muses, “is merely brutal ... like a hammer, or a lump of metal” (23), “murderess” possess

¹¹⁷ What Atwood learned during her research was that Susanna Moodie had been writing the case from memory; and “as it turns out,” Atwood says, “[Moodie’s] memory was no better than most. She got the location wrong, and the names of some of the participants, just for starters. Not only that, the actual story was much more problematic, though less neatly dramatic, than the one Moodie told” (“In Search of *Alias Grace*” 1514). For additional comments, see also the Afterword in *Alias Grace*, as well as the essay “Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For,” in which Atwood speculates upon the literary influences from which Moodie may have drawn while writing her account of the murders.

a far greater ambiguity.¹¹⁸ Grace herself notes that it “has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive” (22); Atwood too, notably, has remarked that murders committed by females often carried a double stigma: that of the crime itself, but also of “the received opinions of women” (“In Search of *Alias Grace*”).¹¹⁹ It is this violated ideal, and not a specific point of illegality, that underpins the author’s focus in *Alias Grace*. When discussing the novel in an interview, Atwood notes that usually, “when there’s a violent crime involving both a man and a woman ... opinion is undivided about the man ... and divided about the woman” (“Natural Born Quilter”).¹²⁰ Also, in the historical case of Grace Marks, the author reminds us:

Two things told very much against Grace ... [First,] she was found at an inn with a man – and if you’ve read ‘The Mill on the Floss,’ you know that is almost automatically a fallen woman Number two, she wore Nancy’s dress to the trial ... [a decision which] told very much against her and produced a sensation in the courtroom. (“Blood and Laundry”)

¹¹⁸ Atwood has, of course, explored such transgressions before; in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), the “Unwoman” is a term used to stigmatize barren or infertile women in the fictional Republic of Gilead; likewise, the consumption of the Marian-cake at the conclusion of Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969) also speaks to women who have upset traditional notions of femininity.

¹¹⁹ Nineteenth-century scholar Karlene Faith explains this ambiguity toward female criminality as symptomatic of a broader anxiety felt toward the “unruly woman,” a term the author uses to displace traditional notions of “deviancy” and, instead, contextualize female criminality as the transgression of social order. Chronicling in part the nineteenth century’s connections between female misconduct and the moral distinctions applied to prostitutes, adulterers, and all others who threatened the family unit, Faith’s terminology is important in terms of restating the sexual and moral ambiguity felt toward women during this period. “When apprehended for crossing the boundaries of legality,” Faith writes, the “[the unruly woman] is punished as much for her betrayal of Womanhood as for her witting or unwitting failure to submit to The Law” (2). In *Twisting in the Wind* (1998), a study of nineteenth century female criminality, fellow scholar Judith Knelman goes further: “Murder by a woman was so unthinkable in the patriarchal ideology of Victorian England,” Knelman writes, “that it had to be explained away as the action of a whore, witch, monster, or madwoman” (230).

¹²⁰ Because the “unruly woman” is judged dually, both for her actions as a criminal and for her betrayal of the culture in which she lived, it is unsurprising when the crime of the female offender assumes a lesser, even peripheral role in the procession toward justice.

The Grace Marks in the novel understands this also: “That is what really interests them – the gentlemen and the ladies both,” she observes; “They don’t care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats ... No: was I really a paramour [of James McDermott], is their chief concern, and they don’t even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes” (*Alias Grace* 27).

Alternative Gospels

Like Robertson Davies’s *The Rebel Angels*, the narrative architecture of *Alias Grace* is based on the alternating perspective of a central male and female character; in this case, Grace Marks and Dr. Simon Jordan, Atwood’s young, invented psychologist whose aim is to discern the truth of the events that led up to the murders.¹²¹ The novel opens in 1859, sixteen years after the crime, when Grace is approximately 32 years old and is incarcerated in the Kingston Penitentiary. Grace’s story of her arrival in Canada and the weeks leading up to the murders is thus told retrospectively to Simon, who early in the novel has begun to visit her in prison. As the events surrounding the murders are told exclusively from Grace’s point of view, and may or may not be reliable, Atwood uses the conversations between Grace and Simon to open a space in which Grace becomes the principal storyteller. In so doing, the author finds in the older, incarcerated Grace’s conversations with Simon a conceit by which Grace is able to cleverly recast her role in history. The effect is similar to Morley Callaghan’s reinvention of Judas Iscariot in *A Time for Judas* via the use of a “lost gospel.”

¹²¹ Simon’s thoughts are conveyed to the reader via an omniscient third-person narrator.

Much as Judas is redeemed by Philo's account of Judas's true role in Christ's betrayal and crucifixion, Grace offers an account of her life that is deeply incongruous with the public's widely accepted version. Along the way, she also subtly implicates her detractors in their own hypocrisies and wickedness. In this way, the novel's Grace Marks is able to reposition her life's circumstances as akin to the fall and redemption of the Gnostic Sophia – a tale that better reflects her situation. All of these concerns – history, narration, authority – are integral to the subtext of *Alias Grace*, and reflect Atwood's key lecture on the novel.¹²²

Apart from the novel's narrative layers, the careful framing and execution of Grace's story recalls Philo's account of Judas's confession in Morley Callaghan's *A Time For Judas* (1983), or the secrets of the Rabelais manuscript in Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1981), in that the contents of what has been withheld exhibit considerable power of the lives of those involved. The parallels suggest that Atwood may have been influenced by these models – a connection heightened by the shared importance of storytelling in both Atwood's and Callaghan's texts. Like Callaghan's Judas or Philo, Atwood acknowledges the importance of Grace being able to withhold; for "[w]hatever else she is," the author explains, "[my Grace] is a storyteller with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives" ("In Search of *Alias Grace*" 1515). The problem with investing trust in Grace's narrative, as attorney Kenneth MacKenzie warns Simon, is that she may be little more than a

¹²² See Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*."

present-day Scheherazade, “telling you what she needs to tell ... [to] keep the Sultan amused” (*Alias Grace* 377), a point made again by Dr. Samuel Bannerling who writes to Simon that Grace “is an accomplished actress and a most practiced liar” (71). Even Grace herself cautions Simon during their first meeting that she may lie to him (41), and the novel is subsequently divided between what she chooses to tell him, and what is revealed only to the reader. Consequently, as critic Aritha Van Herk points out, Grace’s is very much a story about listening, and about subtext. Grace’s version of events up to and including the murders is “pragmatic and perceptive,” Van Herk says, “aware of politics and the duplicities of manners, subtle and fascinating in its focus on tangible detail, but exercising also a silent doubleness, and intricate awareness of what she [Grace] should not and cannot say” (Van Herk 111). Intriguingly, an early draft of the novel, part of the author’s collected papers at the University of Toronto, pursued this idea further. Initially, when questioned about the role that Mary Whitney occupies in her story, the Grace Marks of the novel replies, “without her, it would have been a different story entirely.” Yet the earlier manuscript extends the scene further:

A different story entirely. He [Simon] writes this down. If she is capable of thinking that there could be a different story entirely, she is also capable of telling one. It is another thing that has been bothering him: the sense that he is not listening to the artless and spontaneous outpourings of an unlettered woman, but to a history consciously composed. Composed, rehearsed, arranged for his benefit. But surely not. (*Alias Grace* draft 232)

The finished novel’s omission of this passage obscures the extent to which Simon is aware of Grace’s actions as storyteller. Thus, the author heightens Grace’s power over Simon as something that is occurring just outside of his

perception; a “language” of sorts that he is unable to interpret or perceive.

Another possibility is that the manuscript may too overtly tip Grace’s version of events as an alternative account that she has devised specifically for Simon himself; one that might convey truth if only he is capable of discerning it.

Heroines of Nag Hammadi

Knowing that during the historical trial of Grace Marks, “people began writing about her, projecting onto her all of the received opinions of women, about criminality, about servants, about insanity, sexuality” (Atwood, “Natural Born Quilter”), Atwood may have been drawn to a Gnostic approach because it allowed her an incisive response to Grace’s detractors, positing the idea that we are *all* imprisoned, and that Grace is better off because, as the Gnostic *Authoritative Teaching* states with regard to salvation, “she knows another way, which is hidden from them.” Moreover, feminist writers have been drawn to Gnosticism in recent decades. In “Women’s Religion’ and Second-Century Christianity,” Paul McKechnie chronicles renewed interest in the Gnostics by feminist authors and scholars, noting that while many Gnostic treatises, such as *Zostrianos* or *Dialogue of the Saviour*, do not specifically suit the needs or roles of women (and, for that matter, speak *against* women), much attention was given to the ones which do in the 1980s and 90s (McKechnie 416). Compared to the limited roles afforded to them in orthodox Christianity, many schools of Gnosticism in antiquity reserved an elevated place for women. Some of their

central myths, such as the descent and restoration of Sophia, explicitly detailed by Simon Darcourt in Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, facilitate a feminist viewpoint. Enacted under many names and variations throughout Gnostic literature, Sophia's is essentially an account of the sacred feminine's divine fall and redemption: Sophia falls from the *pleroma* or Divine Fullness and is imprisoned in the lower material realms until such time as she is rescued. Writing of Sophia and other "heroines" of the Nag Hammadi library, religious scholar Madeleine Scopello argues that Gnostic texts such as *Exegesis on the Soul* and the *Authoritative Teaching* are easily ascribed to the literary genre of the novel, in that both are women's stories with a female heroine who serves as the key figure of the tale, and both treatises provide the reader with a short story containing the Gnostic history of the Soul from fall to salvation (71-2). Scopello explains, "[t]heir scope explains the Gnostic doctrine in a quite attractive manner, using images and expressions easily understood by the cultivated public as well as by philosophers and academicians" (72). In addition to *Exegesis* and *Authoritative Teachings*, the author continues, similar comparisons have been made to *Thunder*, *Perfect Mind*, *Norea*, *Trim. Prot*, and to other short Gnostic texts recounting women's stories. "Under the different names and physiognomies of all of these women," Scopello explains, "there is hidden one and only one personage: soul searching for her heavenly origin" ("*Exegesis on the Soul*" 191).

Superficially, however, *Alias Grace* suggests none of this. Its tale of two murders and the life of Grace Marks do not, historically, have any connection to

Gnosticism, nor is its presence in the novel made overt. Nonetheless, specific metaphors throughout the text, while seemingly orthodox in some instances – such as the references to the Trinity – lead to specifically Gnostic conclusions in others. For instance, Gnosticism is suggested in the novel’s use of water and dreams to imply not only a Jungian unconscious but also some form of Gnostic chaos or “thrownness” into which the Divine Spark has fallen. The novel also alludes repeatedly to the protagonist’s burgeoning self-knowledge or *gnosis*, evidenced by the distinction Grace makes between the ignorance of her youth (122; 147-49) and the subsequent awakening as recounted for Simon, a feeling Grace describes as “like being wakened suddenly in the middle of the night, by a hand over your face” (69); or, like “being torn open; not like a body of flesh ... but like a peach ... too ripe and splitting open of its own accord.” Furthermore, the novel culminates in an explicitly Gnostic view of the night sky, which Grace describes to Simon as “a cold blackness ... not Heaven or even Hell,” but the “outer darkness ... where God was not” (335).¹²³

The novel’s attention to unorthodox ideas begins with the positioning of the biblical tale “Susannah and the Elders” at the point in which Grace Marks enters the Kinnear household where the murders are to take place. In “Susannah,” the emphasis is placed on sexual sin. In the novel, Grace recalls for Simon Jordan Thomas Kinnear’s explanation of the story as one that involves “a

¹²³ Connections between nineteenth-century thought and Gnosticism have been noted elsewhere. In “*Moby Dick*: Gnostic Re-Writing of History” (1994), literary critic Etsuko Taketani identifies Herman Melville’s involvement in Gnosticism as a product of American culture’s mid-nineteenth century anxieties about the status of Biblical Scriptures, and of the relationship Melville observed between history, narration, and authority.

young lady who had been falsely accused of sinning with a young man, by some old men, because she refused to commit the very same sin with them” (223).

Atwood adroitly uses this tale to develop a parallel between “Susannah” and the novel’s protagonist in that, following the murders, the real-life Grace faced similar accusations concerning her relationship with James MacDermott. Yet the “Susannah” parallel is extended in other ways as well. For example, when told by Thomas Kinnear that “Susannah” belongs to the Apocrypha, “a book where they’d put all the stories... they’d decided should not go into the Bible,” Grace remarks: “I was most astonished to hear this ... Who decided? Because I’d always thought that the Bible was written by God, as it was called the Word of God, and everyone termed it so” (222). Grace’s reaction is significant: before she learns of “Susannah,” the Bible is the only book she claims to know “backwards and forwards.” Its revelation to her as a construction, and her subsequent mention of it to Simon, signals her awareness of a connection between the harsh treatment of Susannah and the maligning of Grace’s own character in the media and among popular opinion. Variations on this observed parallel expressed elsewhere in the novel suggest a desire on Grace’s part to highlight the same parallel for the reader as well (27, 68-9). Indeed, like the experiences of her apocryphal counterpart “Susannah,” Grace demonstrates that her past actions, whether real or merely the projections of her accusers, are ultimately no better or worse than what can be found in scripture (“It’s shocking how many crimes the Bible contains,” she observes).

It is significant then that Margaret Atwood, who borrows her protagonist from history, surrounds her with invented characters, including Jeremiah the peddler, Mary Whitney, and Dr. Simon Jordan. Each of these characters, I suggest, invokes a specific Gnostic figure or idea which, when viewed collectively, help to unlock some of the novel's larger mysteries concerning the unorthodox worldview that Grace represents in Atwood's version of the historical case. I now consider how the novel's positioning of the invented characters Jeremiah the peddler and Mary Whitney reveal a feminist version of the "gospel of Grace." Then, by examining the relationship between Atwood's Grace Marks and the invented psychologist, Dr. Simon Jordan, I show how Atwood discloses the power of Grace's views in terms of their rejection of conventional morality and judgment.

"Jeremiah, Blow the Fire"

Reflecting, perhaps, the title character in Gwendolyn MacEwen's novel, *Julian The Magician* (1963), Atwood locates in the invented character of Jeremiah the peddler a penchant for awakening controversial ideas. In MacEwen's work, Julian is a travelling magician and self-proclaimed "Unhinger of Minds." It is a task, he explains, which "hinges solely on what is already potent and existing in the minds of those I perform for ... I do not tamper with their minds, I merely open them a little" (60). In *Alias Grace*, Jeremiah the peddler functions similarly. First introduced in Grace's narrative as a traveling salesman,

“a heathenish sort of man, with all his tricks and fortune-telling” (198) who “looked like a Jew or a gypsy, as many peddler were” (154), Jeremiah’s “gypsy doings” (155) are important to understanding Grace’s unorthodox leanings, in that we learn retrospectively of the influence he has had on her uncommon worldview.

That Atwood may have been thinking of MacEwen’s Julian in particular is suggested by both writers’ fondness for magicians. Writing to Phyllis Webb in 1963, MacEwen conceded: “I’m caught on magicians. To me, they represent the final system of man’s control over himself and environment – and those lovely black wands, like fingers or phalli get to the point where they can command everything” (cited in Sullivan 94). Atwood mirrored the comment years later, telling MacEwen that she had found her collection of stories, *Noman* (1972), “enormously suggestive ... [specifically,] that Julian ends up in burlesque houses & nobody understands/appreciates his magic.”¹²⁴ At the time, Atwood’s remarks were meant to praise MacEwen’s unique treatment of the mythical and magical in Canada. Yet she concludes her letter by stating: “I think it would be great fun to write something about this [type of magician], putting it together with the only other magic/Canadian figure I know about, namely the hypnotist in Davies’ *Fifth Business*.” The hypnotist in question is Robertson Davies’s master-magician, Magnus Eisengrim (Eisengrim the Great), from the Deptford Trilogy. Like Jeremiah, who is known variously in the text as “Jeremiah the pedder,” “Dr. Jerome Du Pont,” “Gerald Bridges,” and “Signor Geraldo Ponti,” Paul Dempster

¹²⁴ Margaret Atwood, letter to Gwendolyn MacEwen, “Feb[ruary] something” 1973, Gwendolyn MacEwen Collected Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

also uses an alias: “Magnus Eisengrim.” Moreover, in *Negotiating With the Dead* (2002), a collection of lectures, Atwood places Magnus Eisengrim in the same company as Thomas Mann’s hypnotist in “Mario the Magician” and Bergman’s tormented hero in his film, *The Magician*. They are figures, she says, who “range from showmen out to make a buck to those who wish to manipulate the lives of others for fun and profit, to those who suspect their magic may in fact be real, and that the world of wonders they concoct really is a wonder, and a creator of wonder in others” (114).

At the same time, Atwood is careful to remind us that such men cannot fully be trusted, for “the question of imposture, of trickery, of manipulation for power of one kind or another,” she says, “is never very far away” (117). Perhaps for this reason, Grace recounts in *Alias Grace* how, for unspecified reasons, James McDermott and Thomas Kinnear did not trust Jeremiah the peddler when he would arrive to sell his goods. Even Simon remarks to himself upon first meeting Jeremiah how the latter (disguised as Dr. Jerome DuPont) “has the deep liquid eyes and intense gaze of a professional charlatan” (83). Jeremiah thus functions as a sort of trickster in *Alias Grace* – a master of aliases bent on the deceit and manipulation of others, yet one who becomes instrumental to Grace’s revised worldview. After cryptically assuring Grace “You are one of us” (37), he reveals to her his belief that “[l]aws are meant to be broken ... and these laws were not made by me and mine, but by the powers that be, and for their own profit” (266). In one particularly telling moment, Grace shares with Simon

Jeremiah's philosophy that "[a] man with any spirit in him likes a challenge, and to outwit others" (266), a talent that the latter demonstrates early in the novel during their first meeting. Specifically, Grace recounts for Simon how, on that day, Jeremiah came up the drive to the back door,

followed by a band of five or six raggedy urchins, like a parade, and one was banging on a pot with a spoon; and all were singing,

Jeremiah, blow the fire,
Puff, puff puff;
First you blow it gently,
Then you blow it rough! (153)

When Simon questions Grace about the circumstances surrounding the unusual procession, she reports that Jeremiah "said he would rather have them following under his command, than pelting him with clots of mud and horse dung, which was their habit with peddlers ... so he'd chosen the wiser course, and employed them, and taught them the song himself" (153-4). The suggestion of trickery, and of manipulation, is explicit.

A similarly important moment occurs later in the novel. When discussing with Simon the subject of Jeremiah's future prospects, Grace recounts how the latter once remarked:

I could become a preacher ... Below the border there is a great demand for it, more so than here, in particular during the summers, when the preaching is done outdoors, or in tents, and the people there love to fall down in fits, and talk in tongues, and be saved once a summer, or more if available ... A faithless preacher with a good manner and voice will always convert more than a limp-handed long-faced fool, no matter how Godly. (267)

This instance is one of several in the novel in which Jeremiah mocks orthodox religion and its adherents, finding in those practices a source of amusement that he might turn to his financial advantage. Yet his reaction is significant and, in part, illustrates his ridicule and contempt of orthodoxy. As I establish elsewhere, many Gnostics believed that salvation was only guaranteed for those who knowingly bore the divine spark within them. Orthodox Christians, by contrast, subscribe to a lesser salvation because theirs is based on faith alone: It is not satisfied by the same sense of *gnosis* or “knowing.” It is notable, then, that – in describing his plans to Grace – Jeremiah claims to be devoid of orthodox conviction and, moreover, informs her, “so far as I can tell, it is not required” (267). Grace, in turn, comes to mirror these views. She describes for Simon the moral failings of the community’s more pious members during a visit to church with Nancy Montgomery. Remarking upon the harsh treatment Nancy experienced from the congregation, implicitly the result of rumours surrounding her affair with Thomas Kinnear, Grace notes:

They are cold and proud people, and not good neighbours. They are hypocrites, they think the church is a cage to keep God in, so he will stay locked up there and not go wandering about the earth during the week, poking his nose into their business, and looking into the depths and darkness and doubleness of their hearts, and their lack of true charity. (254)

By contrast, Grace characterizes wanderers like Jeremiah as seekers, or adventurers of the mind: “They go on voyages because they are curious. They amble around the world and stare at things” (39). Indeed, the novel repeatedly

toys with these boundaries. Early in the novel, Grace recalls: “I remembered what Jeremiah told me about borders, and how easy it was to cross them” (154). It is a statement of transgression that refers to the physical border between nations, but also to the line between gospel and heresy, and to the hypocrisy of rules and codes of conduct.

That Jeremiah provides a contrasting viewpoint to conventional morality is important, as is the fact that he occupies a prominent place in Grace’s narrative. When Grace informs Simon about Jeremiah’s reaction to Mary Whitney’s death, she reports, “He ... said he felt sorry for her death, and would say a prayer for her, although what sort of prayer I could not imagine, as he was a heathenish sort of man” (198). To this end, Grace’s emphasis on Jeremiah’s “piercing” and “shining” black eyes (155) and – more subtly – of a trick in which “he could swallow a fork, or appear to” (the suggestion being, of course, a forked tongue) finds her casting Jeremiah in the role of the Gnostic serpent-tempter.

The emphasis on Jeremiah’s ophitic demeanour is telling. Orthodox readings of Genesis view the serpent as evil – He who led Adam and Eve to defy God by exposing them to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Indeed, such a characterization would seem to account for the suspicious attitudes felt toward Jeremiah by the novel’s more pious characters (154-5, 269-70). Not so in Gnosticism, however. The Ophite and Valentinian schools of Gnosticism in particular invert the tale so that the serpent would be held in high regard. “For more than one reason,” Hans Jonas explains, “not the least of which was the

mention of knowledge, [this] tale exerted a strong attraction upon the Gnostics”

(93). Under a Gnostic reading:

The snake ... is representative of the divine sphere, who reveals to humans the evil purposes of their creators. They want to keep Adam from eating the forbidden fruit only in order to preserve his state of ignorance. Adam, of course, eats from the forbidden fruit and thereby obtains knowledge, gnosis, of his divinity. Full of envy and anger, the archons [false rulers] expel Adam and Eve from paradise and send them to earth. Witnessing the spark of light glowing in Adam, they become fully aware of his superiority and decide to make him forever a prisoner of matter ...

Grace’s real-life incarceration thus mirrors imprisonment in a broader, spiritual sense, and the imprisonment of Adam and Eve.

That Grace believes herself to be imprisoned on Earth, including the time prior to her physical incarceration, is revealed during a scene when she recalls for Simon how she and James McDermott made their escape in the night to the United States following the murders. She describes how, at that moment, when gazing up at the night sky:

[it] began to wrinkle up, like the sun on scalding milk ... like paper, and it was being singed away. And behind it was a cold blackness; and it was not Heaven or Hell that I was looking at, but only emptiness. This was more frightening than anything I could think of, and I prayed silently to God to forgive my sins; but what if there was no God to forgive me? And then I reflected that perhaps it was the outer darkness, with the wailing and the gnashing of teeth, where God was not. (335)¹²⁵

¹²⁵ The religious questioning in this scene mirrors another in Atwood’s unpublished stage play, *Grace*. In that play, Grace tells McDermott: “Look out the window ... there’s nothing out there ... nothing. And it goes on and on. Sometimes at night I feel like I’m still shut up in the darkness of the boat, just floating and floating, and if I tried to go out of this house it would be just like the ocean, it would be nothing. I feel I’m drowning. It’s the snow, we never had that at home ... it takes the soul out of me somehow. It’s blasphemous, I know, but when I look out the window I think: there’s no God out there. There’s no one to see what you do. (Atwood, *Grace* 31)

Grace's description of the scene above is a direct inversion of a similar moment in *A Time For Judas*. Faced with a similar circumstance, Callaghan's Judas recounts for Philo how:

I stopped on the road, wondering where I was. It was pitch black. I looked up at the sky over the Judaeen hills, a sky filled with stars. Then I saw Jesus in each bright star as the canopy came down around me, and heard him in the deep night's silence like a majestic music, and felt him in a soothing, orderly rhythmic motion all around me. (115)

Rather than Judas's moment of wonder, Atwood instead seems to be suggesting the "outer darkness" in Gnosticism – a unique, pessimistic view of the cosmos inherent to Gnostic thought. According to many ancient Gnostic sources, the believer facing this predicament experiences that particular sense of "thrownness" or being trapped in the world with feelings of uncompromising hostility toward the body. The material universe thus becomes a "closed prison," an "abode of death," and a "sea of darkness" (Grimstad 8), images that are evocative of Grace's incarceration, her time in the Kinnear household, and journey across the ocean, respectively. Hans Jonas ponders this idea of the "outer darkness" and "with what feeling Gnostic men [and women] must have looked up to the starry sky":

How evil its brilliance must have looked to them, how alarming its vastness and rigid immutability of its courses, how cruel its muteness! The music of the sphere was no longer heard, and the admiration for the perfect spherical form gave place to the terror of so much perfection directed at the enslavement of man. The pious wonderment with which earlier man had looked up to the higher regions of the universe became a feeling of oppression by the iron vault which keeps man exiled from his home beyond ... [And yet,] the Gnostic view is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but eschatological: if the world is bad, there is goodness of the outer-

worldly God; if the world is a prison, there is an alternative to it; if man is a prisoner of the world, there is a salvation to it and a power that saves. It is in this eschatological tension, in the polarity of the world and God, that the Gnostic cosmos assumes its religious variety. (261)

Atwood leaves the reader in the flight-at-night scene with an image of the universe as a closed system, echoing a Gnostic vision of the cosmos as a place “deprived of its supreme divinity ... a confined space, beyond which there was another world ... the world of light [that] was the world of freedom” (Rossbach 53-4). Indeed, that Grace recognizes this cosmic predicament, and the imprisonment of mankind in particular, is telegraphed by a moment earlier in the novel in which she observes that “God is everywhere, and cannot be caged in, as men can” (254).

Thus, the idea that knowledge of one’s divine nature is something necessary, yet forbidden, assumes a crucial role in *Alias Grace*, particularly in relation to the image of the apple. Stefan Rossbach explains that, “Adam actually obtains knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit. This act is an act of liberation, of awareness, of awaking from the sleep of ignorance” (51-52). Indeed, that Grace has come to view knowledge of good and evil in a Gnostic light by the time she narrates her tale for Simon Jordan is signaled at a moment much earlier in *Alias Grace*. In that scene, Simon Jordan and Grace play a game of word association – one of the methods Simon has devised in his attempts to better understand Grace’s psyche. When asked about the apple he offers to her, she remarks to herself:

I am so thirsty the apple looks to me like a big round drop of water, cool and red. I could drink it down in one gulp. I hesitate, but then I think, There's nothing bad in an apple, and so I take it. I haven't had an apple of my own in a long time I stand holding the apple in both hands. It feels precious, like a heavy treasure. I lift it up and smell it. It has such an odour of outdoors on it I want to cry The truth is I don't want him watching me while I eat. I don't want him to see my hunger. If you have a need and they find it out, they will use it against you. (39-40)

Simon's offer of the apple, held out in front of him "like someone holding out a bone to a dangerous dog, in order to win it over" (39), is part of his broader objective to extract knowledge from Grace that might determine her guilt or innocence. On one level, this scene is especially evocative of a passage from the Gnostic treatise *Authoritative Teaching*:

... we exist in this world, like fish. The adversary spies on us, lying in wait for us like a fisherman, wishing to seize us, rejoicing that he might swallow us. For he places many foods before our eyes (things) which belong to this world. He wishes to make us desire one of them and to taste only a little, so that he may seize us with his hidden poison and bring us out of freedom and take us into slavery. For whenever he catches us with a single food, it is indeed necessary for us to desire the rest. Finally, then, such things become the food of death.

Now these are the foods with which the devil lies in wait for us. First he injects a pain into your heart until you have heartache on account of a small thing of this life, and he seizes (you) with his poisons. (Robinson 82)

Simon is aware of this game. He is aware that the assorted vegetables he had previously presented Grace with "have been a dismal failure" (322). As such, he begins to see himself as a fisherman, believing "he'll pry [the truth] out of her yet. He's got the hook in her mouth, but can he pull her out? Up, out of the abyss, up to the light. Out of the deep blue sea" (322). The aim, the novel suggests, is to

dissect Grace in an effort to find hidden knowledge. Elsewhere, Simon boasts, “he had been where [women] could never go, seen what they could never see; he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside” (82). Yet, he is surprised by his own metaphor: “He wonders why he’s thinking in such drastic terms. He means her well, he tells himself. He thinks of it as a rescue, surely he does.” In turn, when Simon asks if there is a kind of apple one should not eat, Grace is “quick to give [her] stupid look” before acknowledging: “the apple of the Tree of Knowledge, is what he means. Good and evil ... but I will not oblige. I look at him. I look away. I look at him again. I hold the apple in my two hands. He waits. Finally, I lift the apple up and press it to my forehead” (40-2).

It is not until later, when Grace is released from prison, that she speaks at greater length about the apple in a letter to Simon, with whom she has lost contact following his hasty escape from Kingston over his sexual conduct with his landlady (“I found myself in complicated circumstances which could rapidly have become quite damaging, both to myself and to my future prospects” [423]), he explains in a letter to a colleague). She writes:

I’ve thought a good deal about you and your apple, Sir, and the riddle you once made, the very first time that we met. I didn’t understand you then, but it must have been that you were trying to teach me something, and perhaps by now I have guessed it.

... the Bible does not say Trees. It says there were two different trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but I believe there was only the one, and that the Fruit of Life and the Fruit of Good and Evil were the same. And if you ate of it you would die, but if you didn’t eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death.

Such an arrangement would appear to be more the way life is. (459)

Grace's conclusion is essentially a statement of Gnostic dualism, and the episode with the apple, moreover, inverts the Christian reading of Genesis to stress the liberation achieved through forbidden knowledge.

In that same letter, Grace shares with Simon a plan to make her own "Tree of Paradise" quilt, but concedes, "I am changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas" (459). "On my Tree of Paradise quilt," she explains, "I intend to put a border of snakes entwined; they will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others, as I will make the eyes very small, but they will be snakes to me; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing" (459-60). Grace knows that her ideas are unorthodox, adding for Simon: "I am telling this to no one but you, as I am aware it is not the approved reading"; yet her comments signal the influence that Jeremiah appears to have had on her thinking. On this point in particular, Atwood may be drawing upon the Gnostic teacher Marcus, who was well-known for his abilities to draw women away from orthodox churches and into heretical groups. In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels describes him as:

... a diabolically clever seducer, a magician who compounded special aphrodisiacs to "deceive, victimize and defile" his prey ... Marcus addresses them in such seductive words" as his prayers to Grace, "She who is before all things, "and to Wisdom and Silence, the feminine element of the divine being. Second ... Marcus seduced women by "telling them to prophecy" which they were strictly forbidden to do in orthodox church. (59)

Grace and Mary Whitney both prophesize in the novel, tossing apple peels over their shoulders in a game to determine which man they will marry. Likewise,

when Jeremiah first confronts Grace with his knowledge of Mary Whitney's death, she is surprised. When asked how he guessed it, she reports to Simon his response that "The future lies hid in the present, for those who can read it"; and later, how "He put his finger alongside his nose, to signify silence and wisdom" (265).

The moment closely precedes another point in Grace's narrative where she describes Jeremiah's suggestion that she run away with him and be his partner in a medical clairvoyance scheme. That the scheme itself parallels the Gnostic Marcus's invitation to women "to act as priests in celebrating the eucharist with him" cannot be overlooked (Pagels 59-60). Of the scheme itself, Grace reports Jeremiah as having explained:

I was the one who made the passes and took the money, and she was the one to have a muslin veil put over her, and go into a trance, and speak in a hollow voice, and tell the people what was wrong with them, for a fee of course. It is wellnigh foolproof, for as they can't see inside their own bodies, who's to say whether you're right or not. (267)

When speaking to Simon of Jeremiah's offer, she states: "I won't conceal from you, Sir, that the idea [to leave with him] was greatly tempting" (*Alias Grace* 268).

Yet Atwood implies a double meaning here: Jeremiah's statement is a barb directed at the public's lack of knowledge; but more importantly, mocks their lack of self-knowledge as well. For what's inside their bodies, he suggests, is an unrealized Gnostic potential that has either yet to awaken, or which they are incapable of awakening.

The final communication between Jeremiah and Grace occurs in the form of a letter late in the novel, after she has begun her new life with her husband Jamie Walsh. Responding to a single button she received in the mail months earlier, “the same pattern as the button you gave to me in the kitchen at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson,” Grace muses that “[p]erhaps there was another message in it ... as a button is for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them, and you may have been telling me to keep silent, about certain things we both know of” (428).

Grace’s descriptions of Jeremiah to Simon emphasizes his cunning, mysterious ways: “He had eyes like blackberries,” she says, “and the air of being able to see more than most could; and I could tell he was trying to look into my mind; but in a kindly way. For I believe he always had a regard for me” (265). Later, she adds: “he was a great man for divining what was meant, even if not spoken out loud.” And yet, even Grace seems uncertain of the former’s motives for helping her: “Was it as a challenge, and to outwit the others,” she asks him following her release from prison; “or was it out of affection and fellow-feeling?” (456). When she last sees Jeremiah, she observes that he is again presenting himself to the public as a medium, and notes that he “was more elegantly dressed than ever ... doing a very good imitation of a man who is distinguished and at home in the world, but with his mind on the higher truth.” The culmination of this relationship is significant, as it reveals the implications that their unorthodox ways of thinking raise for Grace’s revised sense of morality,

specifically given the suggestion in the novel that neither Grace nor Jeremiah are “at home in the world.” Hans Jonas explains:

In this life, the pneumatics, as the possessors of *gnosis* call themselves, are set apart from the great mass of mankind. The immediate illumination not only makes the individual sovereign in the sphere of knowledge (hence the limitless variety of Gnostic doctrines) but also determines the sphere of action. Generally speaking, the pneumatic morality is determined by hostility toward the world and contempt for all mundane ties. From this principle, however, two contrary conclusions could be drawn, and both found their extreme representatives: the ascetic and the libertine. The former deduces from the possession of *gnosis* the obligation to avoid further contamination by the world and therefore to reduce contact with it to a minimum; the latter derived from the same possession the privilege of absolute freedom ... The law of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” promulgated by the Creator is just one more form of “cosmic” tyranny. The sanctions attaching to its transgression can affect only the body and the psyche. (46)

In her review of A.D. Nuttal’s *The Alternative Trinity*, Margaret Anne Doody offers a useful reading that complements this idea of the Gnostic’s mission:

Typically, the Demiurge who created this present material world is a tyrant and a deceiver. The illuminated person must not fall into the trap of believing the kind of orthodoxies held by the foolish. An alien in the world of matter, the Gnostic personality is aware of the resources of its own dynamic and Light-oriented soul. It is easy to see how conventions, orthodoxies, and authority could seem to be part of the cheap masquerade of the world of illusion and error – and how maddening such a view must be to authorities. (Doody 107)

The “pneumatic morality” Jonas describes aptly accounts for Jeremiah’s and Grace’s world-views. Grace imagines herself as superior to her captors, on account of the fact that she has freed her spirit, if not her body, from the tyranny of those who oppress her.

“All in the Way of Looking At It”: Atwood’s Mary

Historically, the name “Mary Whitney” appears as Grace’s alias in the picture that accompanies her confession, but, as the Atwood notes, “none of the commentators [of the case] ever mentions a thing about it” (Interview). Mary’s presence in *Alias Grace* is thus largely the product of invention, yet is crucial to the Gnostic subtext of the novel as conveyed through Grace’s narrative. Readers will recognize in Mary Whitney a composite of many figures; among them, the woman from Sir Walter Scott’s “The Lady of the Lake” (a poem with which both Grace and Mary Whitney are familiar); the pregnant, abandoned maiden in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s similarly-themed “Charity”; and more notably, as Morley Callaghan draws upon in *A Time For Judas*, the Gnostic Mary of the Apocrypha. Yet, “I didn’t make her up completely, Atwood protests. “My reasoning was that if Grace was going to use an alias, she wouldn’t have used ‘Whitney’ unless she had known some ‘Whitneys’ (“Natural Born Quilter”). Consequently, the history she imagines for Mary is a well-crafted one; both of the girl one might expect – a servant of similar age and station to Grace, in whom the latter might confide – and of another, then-contemporary persona whose life is informed by the lives and experiences of other young women during the period. Of this last point in particular, Atwood explains:

Mary’s story and sad end [from a botched abortion] is based on a sad end in a biography of a doctor at the time. An account of the life of a country doctor in mid-[nineteenth] century [whose] name was Doctor Langstaff. And he in fact practiced in Richmond Hill, but right after the murders – he didn’t know Grace – but there are several cases of girls like [Mary] dying in

that fashion ... So she was based on that, and she was certainly based on lives of servants at the time. ("Natural Born Quilter")

In the Bible, we can observe that Mary is significant in canonical accounts of the nativity only in relation to her son Jesus, but that as soon as her role in his life diminishes, she disappears from those accounts. Similarly, the Bible contains nothing on Mary's life prior to that role, nor does it shed light on her last days and death (Clayton 6). Atwood's likely awareness of this, and her presumption of similar omissions with respect to the possibility of an historical Mary Whitney, furthers a parallel imbued in *Alias Grace* between the biblical and historical past. The attraction to an apocryphal or Gnostic Mary is in the author's interest here: First, it reflects the marginalized status of women observed in both Christian and Canadian history; and secondly, it allows – through ties to such non-canonical texts as *The Gospel of Mary* – a literary precedent for Atwood's positioning of Mary Whitney as "teacher" in *Alias Grace*.

Atwood has already pointed to the Apocrypha once before in the novel with Grace's discovery of the tale "Susannah and the Elders." Her characterization for Simon of a Mary who possesses "strange ideas," and of Mary's unorthodox world-view, only serves to reinforce that "Apocrypha" itself

Originally meant something "kept hidden because of its costliness or because of the objectionable nature of its content," then "of hidden origin" and was term associated especially with Gnosticism. When Christian writers took over the term they associated it with the rejected Gnostic texts and used it pejoratively, and by about 400 the word designated texts regarded as disreputable or even heretical, which could not be read in church. (Clayton 7-8)

Mary's role in the novel, like Jeremiah's, then, is to specifically pass along practical teachings about the nature of the world that, in hindsight, are cast by Grace as Gnostic missives, effectively elevating Mary's role in Grace's story to a role akin to the Gnostic Mary of the Apocrypha.

During her time with Mary Whitney Grace finds herself exposed to ways of thinking that she had neither known nor previously considered. "Mary took me under her wing from the very first," she explains to Simon. "I was made to be presentable ... But first I [had to] be scrubbed like a potato, I was that filthy" (*Alias Grace* 151). While speaking to Simon of hers and Mary's relationship, Grace emphasizes Mary's belief that

being a servant was like anything else, there was a knack to it which many never learnt, and *it was all in the way of looking at it*. For instance, we'd always been told to use the back stairs, in order to keep out of the way of the family, but in truth it was the other way around: the front stairs were there so that the family would keep out of our way. They could go traipsing up and down the stairs in their fancy clothes and trinkets, while the real work of the place went on behind their backs, without them getting snarled up in it, and interfering ... making a nuisance of themselves. They were feeble and ignorant creatures, although rich, and most of them could not light a fire if their toes were freezing off, because they didn't know how ... [or that] if they were to lose all their money tomorrow and be thrown out on the streets, they would not even be able to make a living by honest whoring. (158, emphasis mine)

Two things are important here: first, the notion that the truth of one's circumstances is "all in the way of looking at it," and – more importantly – that one's situation can be improved if looking at those circumstances from an unorthodox way of thinking; second, Mary's identification of the Alderman Parkinson family as "feeble" and "ignorant." This distinction, on one hand,

illustrates contempt for those of a higher class or station, but also, suggestively, is later presented by Grace as a reinforcement of the gulf between those with knowledge (or *gnosis*) and those without. Such a viewpoint helps to explain Grace's relationship with the apple of knowledge and, particularly, with Atwood's suggestion of the true motives behind those who have imprisoned her.

A similar moment occurs as Grace recounts for Simon how the girls decided one day to delay their return to the Alderman Parkinson home so that Grace might view "the women who made a living selling their bodies" (152). What is crucial about this scene in particular is not the concept of prostitution itself; rather, it is the manner by which Grace evaluates what she sees. She remarks:

[A]lthough they might look very elegant from a distance, with feather and satins, up close you could see that their dresses were soiled and ill-fitting, as every stitch on their backs was rented by the day, and they scarcely had enough left over for their bread; and it was a dismal sort of life, and [Mary] wondered why they did not throw themselves into the lake, which some did, and were often found floating in the harbor. (152-3)

Grace's view of the prostitutes moves beyond facades or cosmetic attributes to display a more practical sensibility, focusing not on the occupation itself, but on the hardships they face as women. The novel uses this scene to preface Grace's later disillusionment with Christianity. For instance, Mary teaches Grace of the idea of Eve's curse, and "Eve's curse ... was stupid, and that the real curse of Eve was having to put up with the nonsense of Adam, who as soon as there was any trouble, blamed it all on her" (164) – reminding us of the persecution of Susannah in "Susannah and the Elders," and of similar displacements of

women's histories within the biblical canon. Much like the religious and moral hypocrisy Grace observes elsewhere, Mary is instrumental in showing Grace alternate interpretations of the visible world around her: an idea originally presented in relation to their roles as servants, but later extended to focus on the plight of women in general. "Mary was an outspoken young woman," she explains to Simon, "and she had very democratic ideas, which it took me some getting used to" (159). Indeed, instances such as Mary's playful mockery of authority, and Grace's observation that Mary "prayed so much because she was praying to God to get her white teeth back again, but so far no results" (148), are retold to Simon in terms that suggest it was she in particular who is responsible for Grace's disillusionment with orthodoxy.

Thomas Kinnear's explanation to Grace of stories "they'd decided should not go in the Bible" is apropos, then (222). For instance, when faced with the potentially incriminating truth surrounding Mary's death – that she was made pregnant by the son of her employer and dies from a botched abortion – the girls' employer, Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, informs Grace, "We will not discuss [the subject] further, as it will only lead to unhappiness and added misery ... [W]e will not say what Mary died of ... That will be best for all" (177-78). Thus, like the apocryphal Mary, the life of Mary Whitney, particularly the days preceding her death – is treated in Atwood's novel as a controversial subject, a buried account, in part because it does not fit within what others choose to view as the more acceptable version of history. Thus, just as Philo recognizes in *A Time For Judas*

that no one will remember Mary of Samaria, so too is Mary Whitney's story expunged from history.

Having lost her mother during the voyage to Canada, Grace recalls: "I was pleased to be with Mary Whitney, as I liked her at once ... She said I might be very young, and as ignorant as an egg, but [felt that] I was bright as a new penny, and the difference between stupid and ignorant was that ignorant could learn" (147-49). What Grace learns, however, is an unorthodox way of viewing the world, and knowledge in particular. Like Pandora's box, the question is not "why did Pandora open it?" but rather – as Mary asks – "why did they leave such a box lying around, if they didn't want it opened?" (146). The attitude Mary displays toward knowledge echoes Grace's own attitude toward the apple. On one hand, Mary's statement connotes with what Hans Jonas describes in *The Gnostic Religion* as "the subjectivist argument of traditional moral scepticism: nothing is naturally good or bad, things in themselves are indifferent ... [and that] only by human opinion are actions good or bad" (272). Yet Mary's question also imparts a rationalization common to many of the Gnostic sects: a distinction between knowledge and ignorance that many Gnostics equated with the very difference between life and death; salvation and oblivion.

This idea of saving knowledge allows Atwood a cunning separation of mind and body, permitting Grace to subvert, spiritually, freedoms that have been taken from her physically through her incarceration. Pagels explains:

Many Gnostics ... insisted that ignorance, not sin, is what involved a person in suffering. [And consequently,] the Gnostic movement shared

certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques ... [M]ost people live, then, in oblivion – or in contemporary terms, in unconsciousness. Remaining unaware of their true selves, they have no “root.” (124-25)

The dilemma Pagels describes is one similarly faced by Maria Theotoky in Davies’s *The Rebel Angels*: It is not until Parlabane, a “Rebel Angel,” awakens Maria to her own root that she understands her own nature. Likewise, in *Alias Grace*, the absence of gnosis or self-knowledge is an obstacle that prevents one from achieving fulfilment, just as the unwillingness to seek out self-knowledge is, in itself, a secondary form of destruction (Pagels 126). Thus, throughout the novel we become aware – as Grace does (and Simon does not) – that uncovering gnosis facilitates transcendence of the trappings of ignorance and suffering that imprison us. The Valentinian school of Gnosticism, for instance, holds that “what makes us free is the knowledge of who we were, what we have become; where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth, and what rebirth” (Jonas 334). Grace’s discussion of these issues with Simon – the early arrival in Canada, the manner by which she has been “thrown” into her present circumstances in prison, and her mention of the apple prophecies – illustrates a careful consideration of those same questions.

A Gnostic Mary would thus have been attractive to the author, particularly for her ability to serve the novel’s themes of challenging the forces by which accounts like Grace’s and Mary’s were historically suppressed. Gnosticism supports this, in part, because we are told that “since the official Church was

patriarchal and authoritarian, Gnosticism gave expression to those matriarchal and libertarian tendencies where are there, suppressed or not, in all societies” (Rexroth xix). In *Alias Grace*, the manifestation of those tendencies seems to originate from Grace’s recognition that “it was the doctor that killed [Mary] ... him, and the gentlemen [including Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s son] between them” (178). Mary’s death is a physical one, but it is also an historical one. Grace tells us:

The way in which Mary died was hushed up as much as possible. That she had died of a fever may or may not have been believed, but nobody said no to it out loud. Nor did anyone deny that she’d left her things to me, in view of what she had written down; though there were some eyebrows raised at her writing it, as if she’d known ahead of time that she was going to die. (197)

Mary’s removal from the “official” history in the Alderman Parkinson home, in conjunction with the earlier “Susannah” tale, provides Grace with a first-hand understanding of women’s lives as texts, particularly in the sense that both history and the Bible, from her experience, have been shaped by men in a manner that grants them privilege. That Grace recognizes the parallel of hers and Mary’s role in history, is suggested in the novel when she remarks: “the Bible may have been thought out by God, but it was written down by men. And like all things men write down, such as the newspaper, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong” (459). How Grace presents that omission to Simon Jordan, however, offers the key to how we read Mary Whitney and, ultimately, to how we read Grace herself. Given Thomas Kinnear’s placement of the “Susannah and the Elders” tale outside the Bible, it seems appropriate that Grace

should choose to cast Mary's life and teachings in a similar fashion, imagining them as non-canonical and – after her time spent with Jeremiah – as specifically Gnostic doctrines.

This idea of growth or transgression is best evidenced through Grace's revision of the Holy Trinity to favour a more Gnostic, matriarchal relationship. The novel does so by having Grace characterize her father for Simon as a wicked, hateful tyrant who mistreats his children – one similar to the cruel Jehovah or Old Testament Demiurge. In this way, the novel establishes an allegorical relationship between man/patriarchy and God the Father. Amusingly, when speaking to Simon of her own father, Grace recalls a time in which she “was still trying to please him” (108), yet subsequently professes to Simon her moral qualm that “it is not right to speak ill of a parent” (149). What follows, however, is a narrative shift that serves to highlight his cruelty. Grace confesses:

I believe it was only [after my mother's death] that I truly began to hate him, especially considering how he had treated our mother in life The older I became, the less I was able to please him, and I myself had lost all of a child's natural faith in a parent, as he was drinking up the bread out of his children's mouths, and soon he would force us to begging, or thieving, or worse. Also his rages returned, stronger than before my mother had died. Already my arms were black and blue, and then one night he threw me against the wall, as he'd sometimes done with my mother, shouting that I was a slut and a whore, and I fainted; and after that I feared he might someday break my spine, and make a cripple out of me. (129)

Grace's description of her father recalls William Blake's Urizen, the “cruel father of children,” first seen in *The Book of Urizen* (1794) and again in *Vala; or, The Four Zoas*. It is Mary Whitney who, through her unusual teachings, liberates Grace from her father's tyranny – a moment that arrives in the novel when Mary

tasks the stablehands with driving Grace's father away when the latter returns once more, looking to take her wages (157). As Grace's father is removed from the picture, so too is the Old Testament God exorcized from Grace's life. Indeed, that the novel uses Grace's father as an analogue for the Old Testament Jehovah is playfully implied elsewhere by Simon Jordan. Following a dream he has about his own father, he quickly associates the dream with Grace's tale and remarks to himself: "One father leads to another" (140).

Most significantly, however, throughout *Alias Grace*, Mary Whitney's role as a teacher of new knowledge is paralleled by the Gnostic text, *The Gospel of Mary*. In the latter, much as can be observed of Morley Callaghan's Mary Magdalene in *A Time For Judas*, Mary Whitney attempts to realize her role as a disciple of Christ despite the objections of patriarchal forces, particularly those of the male disciples. Gathered with these disciples, she encounters hostility and disbelief after disclosing what she claims the Saviour taught her privately, through thought. Following an argument questioning her right to preach the gospel, the Saviour intervenes, saying that whoever the Spirit inhabits may be able to speak, man or woman:

... Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren ... "What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you." And she began to speak to them these words: "I," she said, "I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him ... Lord, ... how does he who sees the vision see it (through) the soul (or) through the spirit?" The Saviour answered and said "He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but with the mind, which is between the two ... that is what sees the vision. (*The Gospel of Mary* 472)

[w]hen Mary had [finished speaking] she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Saviour had spoken with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say about what she has

said. I at least do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.” Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioning them about the Saviour: “Did he really speak privately with a woman (and) not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us? (473)

Thus, *The Gospel of Mary* informs the role that Mary Whitney occupies in Grace’s narrative, both in terms of her unorthodox views and her role as a medium or teacher of those views. If a woman and – more specifically – a servant, succeeds in this, Mary says, those of her kind will reach a unique conclusion about their place in the world; “in the end, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all” (158). Her comments imply the greatest advantage for someone of their class and station in life lies in secret or hidden knowledge.

“That Which Is Born of the Flesh”: Atwood’s Simon / The Gnostic Potential

There is a telling moment in *Alias Grace* in which Atwood’s invented psychologist, Dr. Simon Jordan, reaches a conclusion regarding women’s attraction to him, believing that “after a time he thought he knew. It was knowledge they craved; yet they could not admit to craving it, because it was forbidden knowledge – knowledge with a lurid glare to it” (*Alias Grace* 82). The moment for Simon is fleeting – he is alluding to his own carnal nature – yet his insight becomes prescient when one considers the broader approach the novel takes toward orthodox teachings. Indeed, of all her commentators, it is Simon

who comes to the closest to understanding Grace's world-view, although Atwood does not allow him to form a complete connection. The most he can discern of Grace's story, based on what she has told him, is that "some of her memories, especially those of the day of the murders, would suggest a fanaticism of the religious variety" (322).

Simon Jordan was a late addition to the novel: early manuscript drafts list him as "William Andersen" and "Dr. William Jordan," respectively.¹²⁶ Atwood's choice of the name "Simon," and the close relationship he shares in the novel with the incarcerated Grace Marks, a "fallen" woman, is on one hand evocative of the story of Simon Magus and Helen of Tyre. This Gnostic myth deals with the fall of the female Pistis Sophia or Wisdom (archetype of the soul) into matter where she remains imprisoned until she can be liberated through the agency of the salvific male. In the Simon Magus myth, the fallen Sophia, sometimes referred to as *Sophia Prunikos* ("Wisdom the Whore") (Jonas 187), is imprisoned within a human body: The feminine soul descends into the world where it is seduced, prostituted, and taken captive by the worldly powers. There, Helen is imprisoned by lower beings until such time as Simon, a Christ figure, rescues her from that lower realm, something Simon Jordan attempts, psychologically, to accomplish for Grace. This story of Simon and Helen influenced treatises in the Nag Hammadi collection and the Sophia literature of the Gnostics, particularly in the references to Sophia as "whore" – an aspect that recalls Grace's and Mary

¹²⁶ Early drafts of *Alias Grace* are available as part of Margaret Atwood's collected papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto.

Whitney's interest in the lives of prostitutes, as well as Grace's comment to Simon that the co-accused James McDermott had referred to the Kinnear household as a "parcel of whores" (255).

Simon Jordan of course also recalls Davies's Simon Darcourt in *The Rebel Angels*, the latter of whom explains the myth of the Gnostic Sophia in detail. In addition to a shared, unique narrative structure and a thematic emphasis on self-knowledge and wisdom, both novels display an affinity for unorthodox or heretical ideas, especially with regard to the divine feminine. It is significant that, as shown earlier, that Darcourt, an Anglican priest and professor who found himself "greatly taken up with the Gnostics because of the appeal of so much that they had to say" (*The Rebel Angels* 235), applies the Gnostic notion of "Sophia," the personification of God's Wisdom, to Maria Theotoky, a graduate student with whom he has become infatuated. In so doing, he comes to believe that "my Maria was, perhaps for me alone, a messenger of special grace and redemption" (*The Rebel Angels* 235). Atwood's Simon possesses a similar attraction in *Alias Grace*; he believes that he too has found his spiritual partner. His conclusion that "Grace Marks is the only woman he's ever met that he would wish to marry" says much about the unusual romance that both Davies and Atwood construct for their central male and female characters in their respective works (140).

Simon Jordan serves as a representative of the scientific, as opposed to spiritual, mind. Among his first considerations of Grace's character, therefore, is

the possibility that she is mentally ill. Terms such as “multiple personalities,” “amnesia,” or “sociopath” were each, in some form, inherent to mid-nineteenth century advances in psychology and, implicitly, stand in direct relation to Grace’s character. Yet, the novel also draws upon a more all-encompassing form of madness. As Atwood notes:

when mad, at least in literature, you aren’t yourself; you take on another self, a self that is either not you at all, or a truer more elemental one than the person you’re used to seeing in the mirror. You’re in danger of becoming, [as] in Shakespeare’s works, a ... beast, and in Susanna Moodie’s words, a mere machine; or else you may become an inspired prophet, a truth-sayer, a shaman, one who oversteps the boundaries of the ordinarily visible or audible, and also, and especially, the ordinarily sayable. (Atwood, “Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For”)

The Gnostic’s desire to uncover knowledge about himself or herself is thus akin to what modern psychology attempts to do – it is simply conveyed in terms of myth. Utilizing that parallel in *Alias Grace* is perhaps the novel’s greatest subtlety. Under Gnosticism, Atwood’s Grace can achieve a universal station higher than that of her accusers – identifying with the greater, unknown God who is beyond the Christian God – while subverting the curiosity of Victorian society by codifying that narrative. As an integral part of this narrative strategy, the relationship between Grace and Simon must be founded in part on the gulf between spiritual myth and psychology. Jungian scholar June Singer describes this in terms of masculine and feminine principles, explaining that both are necessary to achieve a state of wholeness (98-9). Thus, Simon Jordan must be initiated into Grace’s world, for his ability – or inability – to recognize the intricacies of Grace’s worldview is integral to his understanding of her narrative.

Yet, Simon realizes the inherent difficulty of this endeavour. He reports later in a letter to a colleague how, toward the end of his conversations with Grace, he could “scarcely determine whether [he] was awake or asleep”; and later, how “I have cast my nets into deep waters, though ... I may have drawn up a mermaid, neither fish nor flesh but both at once, and whose song is sweet but dangerous” (423).

This idea of reaching down, or plunging under (“How far, exactly, will he go?” Simon asks himself; “how far in?” [366]) is central to our understanding of Atwood’s fictional psychologist, for it positions Simon, from his point of view, as Grace’s potential saviour. Biblically, his surname suggests that he has the potential to cross Jordan, yet his willful exploration of the lower realms of his character are of greater significance. While this plunging under is read by Simon himself as the actions of his unconscious mind, the novel shows him acquiescing to his sensual nature, which in itself precludes any greater Gnostic awareness or insight:

Especially with their main weapon of love, eros, the cosmic powers know how to lead humans into their earthly involvement, which is possible only because of their numbness, ignorance, unawareness, sleep and drunkenness. (Rossbach 53)

Simon himself seems to know that his life is divided between those two states, and of the liberating effect Grace’s presence has on him. On one hand, he imagines the lull of cities where “he would be anonymous, and ... [where] he would be able to lose himself completely” (*Alias Grace* 366). Moreover, he admits “he’s tempted to succumb”:

He would choose one of their proffered young ladies, the richest one. His daily life would be orderly, his breakfasts would be edible, his children would be respectful. The act of procreation would be undergone, unseen, prudently veiled in white cotton – she, dutiful but properly averse, he within his rights – but need never be mentioned. His home would have all the modern comforts, and he himself would be sheltered in velvet. There are worse fates. (89)

In contrast, Simon recognizes that “[o]nce he’s with Grace, things are a little better, as he can still delude himself by flourishing his own sense of purpose” (291).

Yet, Simon’s path to gnosis is never fully achieved, partly on account of the novel dismissing then-conventional psychiatric diagnoses by emphasizing instead the importance of Grace’s spiritual needs over assumed or projected ideas about her mental well-being. Driven to believe that hers is an affliction of the unconscious mind – something in need of remedy – Simon fails to recognize the possibility of an alternative world-view. Indeed, his failure to acknowledge the importance of the spirit is highlighted most succinctly when Jeremiah – using the alias Dr. Jerome DuPont – questions the former on his conclusions about Grace

Marks:

“I have not drawn any conclusions, as yet,” says Simon. “In any case, I am less concerned in [Grace’s] guilt or innocence, than in ...

“Than in the mechanisms at work,” says Dr. DuPont.

“That is not quite how I would put it,” says Simon.

“It is not the tune played by the musical box, but the little cogs and wheels within it, that concern you.”

“And you?” says Simon, who is beginning to find Dr. DuPont more interesting.

“Ah,” says DuPont. “For me, it is not even the box, with its pretty pictures on the outside. For me it is only the music. The music is played by a physical object; and yet the music is not that object. As Scripture says, ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth.’”

“St. John,” says Mrs. Quennell. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

“And that which is born of the flesh is flesh,” says DuPont. (85)¹²⁷

Grace’s extension of this comment – that “all flesh is weak” (117) – together with the emphasis that Jeremiah places on the spirit rather than the physical container or body – highlights the novel’s statement concerning the limits of the scientific or rational mind. In particular, Simon’s regard for one’s spiritual needs is notably absent from the novel. “The universe was indeed a mysterious place,” he muses, reflecting on Reverend Verringer’s sermon; “but God had blessed man with a mind, the better to understand whatever mysteries were truly within his comprehension” (300). Moreover, when Simon is prodded by Reverend Verringer to disclose his religious denomination,

Simon dodges. “My father’s family was Quaker,” he says. “For many years. My mother is a Unitarian.”

“Ah yes,” says Reverend Verringer. “Of course, everything is so different in the United States.” There is a pause, while they both consider this. (*Alias Grace* 77)

The scene above is curtailed to preclude further consideration of the implications of either denomination. The manuscripts for *Alias Grace*, however, reveal more about Atwood’s intentions for Simon Jordan’s heritage. A draft of “Puss in the Corner” chapter finds the author sketching the family background of “William,” a early version of Simon’s character. In that draft, William’s grandfather is described as a Quaker who, “despite modest beginnings, had prospered in later

¹²⁷ Simon’s debate with Jeremiah strongly parallels a similar argument in MacEwen’s novel, *Julian The Magician*, between Julian and Philip Korowitch, the town’s physician (57-9).

life, but kept a plain and indeed nearly an ascetic household.” Moreover, Atwood writes,

The old man was a steadfast believer in his own faith, and nurtured William in the belief that there was a part of the Divine Spark in every human soul, no matter how outwardly debased, and that one must follow the leadings of one’s inner voice; and William, despite his outward show of skeptical urbanity, has never been fully able to rid himself of either of these convictions.

The passage above is omitted from the final version of the novel, but its inclusion of the Divine Spark and reference to an ascetic lifestyle certainly evokes a Gnostic view. Atwood acknowledges that the Quakers “took up a lot of the original Gnostic skeins” in that they “allowed authority in women, [and] were against sex.”¹²⁸ Moreover, the Quaker belief in the Divine Spark is in itself similar to that of the Gnostics. Yet, despite their overlapping beliefs, Quakerism or Shakerism cannot fully account for the novel’s theological leanings, many of which – such as Grace’s “flight at night” scene – are explicitly Gnostic in their cosmology.¹²⁹ Intriguingly, one of the historical Grace’s fellow convicts – a woman not mentioned in the novel, but referred to briefly in Atwood’s historical research as the tellingly-named Sophia Sparks – may account for the origin of

¹²⁸ Atwood to Ryan Edward Miller, February 14, 2005.

¹²⁹ Quakerism is also far too recent a religious movement to be offered as an explanation for these aspects. Given the novel’s attention to The Apocrypha and the Bible’s construction, as well as to what was occurring historically around the time of the murders, a Gnostic reading is a more likely explanation.

the Divine Spark in Simon's family history, and for the parallel between the Gnostic Sophia and Grace Marks's character in the novel as well.¹³⁰

Often, Simon's first experiences with a Gnostic worldview arrive in the form of dreams, where he imagines in typical Gnostic fashion, a plunge into the depths of the unconscious, communicated in *Alias Grace* through the use of traditional Gnostic symbols involving water or chaos. Initially, these dreams are highly eroticized, evoking what Jung would term "the voice of the Unknown, that ever threatens with new schemes, new dangers, sacrifices, warfare, and other troublesome things" (*Psychology and Religion* 21). Similarly, in Gnosticism, truth emerges from the depths of unconsciousness, but appears clothed in symbols, particularly because language is a human construct and truth – according to many Gnostics – cannot be known by any other way than through symbolism. The same would appear true for Simon as well. Immediately upon learning of the details surrounding the departure of Grace's father, he sleeps, imagining:

The door at the end opens. Inside it is the sea. Before he can stop himself, down he goes, the water closing in over his head, a stream of silvery bubbles rising from him. In his ears he hears a ringing, a faint and shivery laughter; then many hands caress him. It's the maids; only they can swim. But now they are swimming away from him, abandoning him. He calls out to them, Help me, but they are gone.

He's clinging onto something: a broken chair. The waves are rising and falling. Despite the turbulence there is no wind, and the air is piercingly clear. Past him, just out of reach, various objects are floating: a silver tray; a pair of candlesticks; a mirror ... a gold watch. Things that

¹³⁰ Sophia Sparks appears several times in the Inspector's Memorandum Book (3.2.1843-1.10.1864) alongside the historical Grace Marks. These documents are available in transcribed form as part of the Margaret Atwood Collection at the University of Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. Atwood makes no mention of Sophia Sparks in the novel, but her presence in the author's research materials is highly suggestive of the impetus for Grace's character in the novel.

were his father's once, but sold after his death. They're rising up from the depths like bubbles He watches in horror, because now they're gathering, twining together, re-forming. Tentacles are growing. A dead hand. His father, in the sinuous process of coming back to life. He has an overwhelming sense of having transgressed.

He wakes, his heart is pounding; the sheets and comforter are tangled around him, the pillows are on the floor. He's soaked with sweat. After he's lain quietly for a time, reflecting, he thinks he understands the train of association that must have led to such a dream. It was Grace's story, with its Atlantic crossing, its burial at sea, its catalogue of household objects; and the overbearing father, of course. (*Alias Grace* 140)

Atwood's subjection of Simon to a Gnostic vision of matter or chaos, and his recognition of a bond with Grace's own story, is important to the relationship between these two characters – a relationship that occurs primarily on an unconscious level. Such a descent, as it is known among the Gnostics, holds its origins to many divergent speculations. Of one in particular, suggested by Simon's feelings of bondage or seduction, can be observed in Manichaeism where, as Hans Jonas explains, the images are usually violent; and moreover, for the descent itself, "the whole process is initiated by the powers of darkness, [although] there is a voluntary element ... with various motivations such as curiosity, vanity, [and] sensual desire" (63). Given that Rachel Humphrey, Simon's impromptu lover, appears in the novel "dressed in black ... her veil [blowing] out behind her like dark smoke," one could assign the responsibility for that descent to her; and yet the novel makes it clear that Simon too "says no when he means yes. He means more, he means further, he means deeper" (*Alias Grace* 365).

Amusingly, Atwood does not allow Simon to form a complete connection between Grace's display of self-knowledge and his own burgeoning sense of *gnosis*. He recognizes that "[a]lthough she converses in what seems a frank enough manner, she manages to tell me as little as possible, or as little as possible of what I want to learn" (133). Much later in the novel, he expands on this idea, remarking:

Grace's will is of the negative female variety – she can deny and reject much more easily than she can affirm or accept. Somewhere within herself – he's seen it, if only for a moment, that conscious, even cunning look in the corner of her eye – she knows she's concealing something from him. As she stitches away at her sewing, outwardly calm as a marble Madonna, she is all the while exerting her passive, stubborn strength against him. A prison does not only lock its inmates inside, it keeps all others out. Her strongest prison is of her own construction. (362)

Instead, the further he moves toward his sensual nature, the more prominently we find it manifested, both in the dream world and in the waking world. In this way, Simon's struggle between ignorance, represented by his sensual nature, and *gnosis*, the spiritual awakening he experiences during his time with Grace, suggests the Gnostic potential within each of us to cultivate an awareness of our divine origins.

Traditionally, in Gnosticism, this goal is accomplished by engaging solely with immediate experience and observation, rather than through the earthly illusions of truth and fulfillment offered by family life or sexual relationships. While unconsciously, Simon recognizes the connection he is drawing to Grace, and later reads those experiences through a framework of psychoanalytic theory,

his conscious mind is less open to those ideas. The reader learns that Simon “has studied in London and Paris ... with the most advanced thinking of his time” (362), yet – much like the same academics Davies critiques for their lack of insight in *The Rebel Angels* – Simon is unaware of his own “root.” According to the Gnostic *Book of Thomas the Contender*, “whoever has not known himself has known nothing” (qtd. in Pagels 134). The same, apparently, is true of Simon Jordan.

In his final vision of Grace Marks, Simon imagines her in a dream

coming toward him across a wide lawn in sunshine, all in white, carrying an armful of red flowers: they are so clear he can see the dewdrops on them. Her hair is loose, her bare feet; she’s smiling. Then he sees that what she walks on is not grass but water; and as he reaches to embrace her, she melts away like mist. (413)

Here, the mythic structure Atwood sets up is fulfilled: Simon’s descent has brought about Grace’s redemption, while Grace herself is suggested to walk on water as a female Christ figure. It is an accomplishment that parallels Grace’s physical release from prison when finally pardoned, but is performed on a mythological or spiritual level. It is Simon, and not Grace, who has failed to cross over Jordan into paradise, much in the way that Simon Darcourt in Davies’s *The Rebel Angels* and Simon the thief in Callaghan’s *A Time For Judas* are also denied a satisfactory crossing.

CONCLUSION:

“THE LURE OF THE UNMENTIONABLE”: GNOSTICISM AND THE CANADIAN WRITER

Margaret Atwood once remarked that “[t]he lure of the Canadian past, for writers of my generation, has been partly the lure of the unmentionable – the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo” (“Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For”). It is apropos, then, that – in the three novels I examine – the connection to Gnosticism in antiquity serves as an analogue for the value of that which was once lost or buried. In each work – Robertson Davies’s *The Rebel Angels* (1981), Morley Callaghan’s *A Time For Judas* (1983), and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) – the adoption of a Gnostic approach or narrative strategy affords the authors a variety of opportunities to work through that interest; among them, in Atwood’s and Callaghan’s novels, to reflect upon the erasure and displacement of women’s histories by drawing a subtle parallel between the marginalization of women’s histories and the suppression of the Gnostics at the hands of orthodox Christians; to identify, in Atwood’s and Davies’s works, the specific Gnostic attitude toward salvation (and the Gnostic Sophia in particular) as an emblem for hidden wisdom or self-knowledge; to witness, in Callaghan’s novel, the responsibility of the storyteller to promote truth, however unpopular; and finally, as evidenced by all three literary texts, to find in Gnosticism a “language” or interpretative framework by which to challenge traditional notions of modernity and conservatism. In this way, the dissemination

of Gnostic thought in the public milieu from the 1970s onward made it possible for these Canadian writers to make use of Gnosticism's theological underpinnings in often brilliant and subtle ways.

There is also much to be said of these works in terms of intertextual play. Each of the novels proffers its own version of the biblical Mary (Maria Theotoky, Mary Magdalene, and Mary Whitney) who is recast as a kind, knowing teacher or companion. As well, there are three Simons, with Simon Darcourt and Atwood's Simon Jordan sharing perhaps the most in common in that both men are drawn, consciously or not, to contemplate the world through a Gnostic eye. Moreover, in all three texts a guide or mentor initiates the individual's path to wisdom or self-knowledge. In Davies's *The Rebel Angels*, it is the highly eccentric Parlabane who leads Maria to self-knowledge by encouraging her to accept her Gypsy "root"; in *A Time for Judas*, Callaghan's Judas Iscariot confronts Philo with new truths about Christ's crucifixion – a revelation that forces Philo to partake in an intense period of self-examination and reflection; and finally, in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Jeremiah the peddler prompts Grace Marks to dismiss concern over her earthly trappings and behaviours in favour of an implicitly Gnostic salvation that lies beyond the judgments of her captors. In this way, the three novels overtly or covertly showcase the Gnostic's spiritual freedom – the emergence from a state of ignorance to *gnosis* or self-understanding – through a moment of revelation: a flood of truth and new knowledge reserved for an elite few. Thus *gnosis* becomes an answer to feeling lost, a remedy for the "thrownness" or alienation

the individual might experience in the world. In *Omens of Millennium* (1996), Harold Bloom argued that “thrown” is the most important verb in the Gnostic vocabulary: “It describes,” he says, “now as well as two thousand years ago, our condition: we have been thrown into this world, this emptiness” (320). In his subsequent book, *Genius* (2003), Bloom even makes introductory reference to Gnosticism as being “the religion of literature” (14), a concept Davies, Callaghan, and Atwood seem to have embraced.

Modern Canadian writers’ roles and interests with respect to the transmission and appropriation of Gnosticism arrived at an historical moment when interest in ancient and so-called “modern” Gnostic ideas had reached an apex in both popular North American media and academic circles. The adoption of those ideas in contemporary literature saw many key tenets of Gnostic thought adapted to fictional tales that suited those works’ unique political, social, and religious commentary. To this end, *The Rebel Angels*, *A Time For Judas*, and *Alias Grace* all seem part of a broader questioning – a renegotiation of traditional faith in light of the questions posed by the then-recently-translated Gnostic texts. In his book, *Locations of the Sacred* (1998), religious scholar William Closson James – speaking more broadly about the history of religion in Canada – provides an insight that is useful in terms of explaining this phenomenon:

Canadians of European descent take it for granted that their religion, usually Christianity, exists (whether actually or potentially) in some pure form untrammelled with any kind of contamination from ‘culture.’ Perhaps they assume this most readily if they are born and grow up within Canada. Yet even they struggle ... to reconcile the old (their inherited Christianity)

with some form of the new (whether feminism, political beliefs, or New Age spirituality, to cite a few examples). (241-2)

James's observation speaks to a unique form of reconciliation at work in the three novels; namely, how best to absorb texts from antiquity that, on the surface (and indeed, to most readers), stand at odds with orthodox Christianity, and to deploy them in a display of the "unmentionable." By framing such texts less as "heresy" and more as "alternative" modes of knowledge, the authors find clever utility in the Gnostic accounts. All three writers clearly understand that "canon" does not equal truth; but rather, is the product of forces that are often unkind to specific groups or beliefs. In Atwood's *Alias Grace*, the author uses what the novel's Grace Marks suggests are the apocryphal histories of women – her own tale, along with the suppressed histories of fellow servant girl Mary Whitney and housekeeper Nancy Montgomery – to illuminate similar processes at work in the construction of the Bible. When confronted for the first time with the tale of Susannah and the Elders, for instance, Atwood's Grace reports learning from her employer, Thomas Kinnear, how

the Apocrypha was a book where they'd put all the stories from Biblical times that they'd decided should not go into the Bible. I was most astonished to hear this, and I said, Who decided? Because I'd always thought that the Bible was written down by God, as it was called the Word of God, and everyone termed it so. (222)

In *The Rebel Angels*, Robertson Davies also draws from apocryphal or heretical work. Notably, Maria Theotoky expounds upon the legend of *The Rebel Angels* to illuminate its esoteric qualities: "It's a marvellous piece of apocrypha,"

she exults to Simon, who – in the moment – is a professor reduced to receiving instruction from another. Whatever Simon might be expected to know, it is not surprising Maria's Rebel Angels had not come to his attention. "They were real angels, Samakazi and Azazel," Maria explains, and they betrayed the secrets of Heaven to King Solomon, and God threw them out of Heaven" (256). In return, she elaborates, the Rebel Angels gave mankind "another push up the ladder, they came to earth and taught tongues, and healing and laws and hygiene – taught everything," adding that they were often special successes with "the daughters of men" (257). There could be nothing Satanic about these beings, she insists, for "they weren't soreheaded egotists like Lucifer" (257). Maria's statement later proves ironic, given the climactic developments of the novel: and given, too, Maria's belief that her own Rebel Angels were Simon and Clem. Likewise, Morley Callaghan's *A Time For Judas* demonstrates that this type of questioning is a necessary act of faith. It is a sentiment recognized by one of Callaghan's readers who, in a letter dated February 17, 1984, told the author of his approach to Judas's tale:

I think what you have done is simply cast the love of God in a new + glearing (sic) way. Yet in its newness is not invention or a changed attitude; it is simply the word that has always been with us, + yet it must constantly be rediscovered + re-hashed to make its validity all the more real.

In *The Rebel Angels*, Davies uses Gnosticism to embellish a broader intellectual point; namely, the importance that we still seek, and discover, value in that which has long since been discarded or perhaps considered unorthodox, even profane. *A Time For Judas*, similarly, employs Gnosticism to render new explanations for

old theological problems. While calling attention to the very nature of storytelling itself, Callaghan reminds us that all gospels – canonical or otherwise – are to some degree products of invention; yet *A Time For Judas* is careful to emphasize that alternative versions of familiar gospel accounts are no less valid than their widely-accepted counterparts. Instead, they are merely the version of truth that was not needed at the time. The “gospels” or versions so skilfully constructed by Davies, Callaghan, and Atwood strive toward a conversation they felt was sorely needed at the time of writing, one best achieved through an artful exhibition of the “unmentionable, the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo.” These writers’ efforts fulfill what a number of other Canadian authors – including Gwendolyn MacEwen, Anne Carson, Marian Engel, and others – only furtively gestured toward. Collectively, they speak to a chapter of Canadian writers’ religious imagination that is full of ingenuity, but until now has gone relatively unnoticed.

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