Monstrous Theologies The Theme of Anti-Sacrifice in the Sci-Fi Pulps

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> When human life lay groveling in all men's sight, crushed to the earth under the dead weight of superstition whose grim features loured menacingly upon mortals from the four quarters of the sky, a man of Greece was the first to raise mortal eyes in defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of gods did not crush him, nor the lightning flash and the growling menace of the sky. Rather, they quickened his manhood, so that he, first of all men, longed to smash the constraining locks of nature's doors. (Lucretius, *De rerum natura,* Book I, 29)

> It is not certain whether Lucretius accurately represents Epicurus's opposition to stellar theology when he says that it was motivated by the danger that the gods might return to the world, the possibility of a relapse *in antiquas religiones,* into the mythical consciousness of dependence on unlimited powers. In any case Lucretius seems to stand closer than does Epicurus to the "Gnostic" suspicion that the stars could represent powers that are ill-disposed toward man. [For Lucretius] the cosmos is potentially the demonic . . . (Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 166-67)

I

Science fiction is by widespread consensus the prose genre devoted to representing the precepts of the physical sciences–the precepts of *materialism*–diegetically: standard definitions of science fiction typically explicate the genre under the related rubrics of extrapolation and plausibility.(1)

Those seeking to understand science fiction in its generic particulars will therefore

find its paradigm, according to this received definition, in the texts of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. In confronting the recalcitrant physicality of the ocean's depths, Verne for his part carefully imagines a device, Nemo's submarine, which can subdue watery resistance and lay clear abyssal mysteries; the *Nautilus* does this, importantly according to the consensus, without violating any known limitations of physics or mechanics.(2) In speculating on the future of warfare, H. G. Wells for his part posits slight increases in the dependability of traction-engines and in the versatility of dirigible airships and he then proposes, in "The Land Ironclads" (1897) and *The War in the Air* (1906), eminently credible scenarios of technological combat in the European near future. This branch of "hard" science fiction finds extended life, and indeed *appears* to become the core of the genre, in the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 40s, especially in John W. Campbell's *Astounding,* where Campbell himself, E. E. Smith, and Eric Frank Russell enthralled readers by describing the instrumentality of space travel, planetary conquest, and interstellar warfare. Campbell's planetary machinery might be less "plausible" than Verne's submarine or Wells's battle-tanks, but the principle of story-construction remains the same: the saga finds its purpose in the careful delineation of mechanical details and in the equally minute depiction of death and wreckage. The novels of Hal Clement continue the formula in a slightly different but still purely phenomenal way, concentrating on mechanical adaptation to extreme physical conditions: Clement is nothing if he is not factually and physically correct. For all his literary sophistication and sociological erudition, Kim Stanley Robinson differs but little from Clement. His *Mars* Trilogy still functions according to the Wellsian mode, is still a tale of planetary conquest, fully a century after Wells inaugurated the tradition.(3) (The difference is that Wells's *The War of the Worlds* is not technologically triumphalist, but cautionary.)

The representative science fiction story thus constitutes a kind of positivism, or phenomenalism, in prose. Just give us the facts, ma'am, as the hero of another genre might say. Insofar as science fiction maintains its contact with science, however, students of the genre need to remember that science itself, in both its antique and modern origins, began as a critique of theology, and to some extent as a type of *substitute-theology* intended to overcome an existing theology regarded as monstrous by scientific critics. Lucretius' paean to Epicurus, which I cite in my epigraph, offers a case in point, perhaps the paradigmatic one.

It is important, in fact, to assert what criticism commonly denies: namely that science fiction originates not in industrial modernity (although that is when the genre, latent for many centuries, at last fully revived) but in Late Antiquity and is cognate with the advanced forms of physical speculation of those days.(4) But Late Antique fantastic narrative (the lunar and archipelagic voyages) also partake in the spiritual developments of the time, especially in the consolidation of the mystery-

cults and the proliferation of Gnostic systems. Where the speculation of a materialist like Epicurus creates a picture of the universe as a plurality of worlds, the speculation of religious thinkers like Plutarch and Valentinus creates a world-feeling deeply paranoid in its basic attitude, distrustful of a cosmic dispensation that it finds hostile, and obsessively vigilant against demonic forces.(5) In the words of Hans Jonas: ". . . Cosmos. thus becomes . . . an emphatically negative concept, perhaps more strongly because more emotionally charged than it had been a positive concept in the [older] Greek conception" (*The Gnostic Religion* 250). Let me emphasize that the Epicurean and Plutarchan worlds are *the same world,* differentiated through divergent evaluations. Plutarch is neither so unscientific nor Epicurus (or Lucretius) so de-divinized as casual acquaintance might imply. There are religious elements in atomism and scientific elements in neo-Platonism. Plutarch, for example, contributes to astronomical speculation in his dialogue *On the Face in the Moon* and to itinerary fantasy (a voyage to remote islands) in the dialogue *On the Decline of Oracles.*(6)

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Much the same could be said of the twentieth century, technically sophisticated but spiritually and often culturally atavistic: science becomes a caricature of itself in scientism and masses of non-believers embrace a baroque folklore little distinguishable from that of a previous age. "The fusion of fictional imagination and phenomenal obsession," writes Eric Voegelin of this aspect of modernity in *New Order and Last Orientation* (*circa* 1950), "was finally achieved on the occasion of Orson Welles's broadcast of the invasion from Mars. A panic broke out among the listeners because they believed the fictional invasion to be real, and they could believe it because they lived in a phenomenal world in which invasions from Mars are something to be expected in the same manner as the appearance of a demon with claws and a tail was something to be expected in the world of a medieval demonologist" (191). The banishment of gods by a view of the world that denies the supernatural nevertheless shades over into an expectation of demons. The world might have become *all* phenomenon with no supernatural exterior, neither heaven nor hell, but the demons, in the form of naturalistic entities, remain rampant even so. In *The Ecumenic Age* (1965), Voegelin argues again for the homology of antique demonism and modern scientific fantasy: "In fairness to the ancients one must say that they were not more indulgent in this respect than the moderns are in their comparably structured state of existential disorientation, for, ever since the plurality of worlds has been introduced again to the general public through Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1688), Western society has descended to the vulgarian grotesque of flying saucers, an invasion from Mars, investment of public funds in listening to signals from other worlds, a wave of excitement that pulsar emissions could be such signals, and the industry of science fiction that is

based on this conceit" (81). Plutarch's demonic ontology in his Delphic dialogues is thus as detailed, as scientific in appearance, as Epicurus' atomistic ontology in the famous *Letter to Heraclitus;*(7) and the modern "industry of science fiction," in Voegelin's term, is generally as baroque and as paranoid as either of its precursors. The demonic vision and the atomistic one communicate with one another at a deep level even while seeming to be different to the point of incompatibility.

In respect to science fiction, then, the ancient precursors can help to illuminate the modern practitioners of the genre; they can help us to see science fiction as something other than narratives of phenomenalism. Allow me to speak, then, of that Latin-speaking Epicurean Lucretius and of another writer of Late Antiquity, Lucian of Samosata, the true originators of science fiction. With a word about early Christian narrative, I will then pass onward to the cases of Catherine L. Moore (1911-1982), Henry Kuttner (1914-1957), and Leigh Brackett (1915-1978). Perhaps surprisingly, we shall find in their seemingly strictly commercial work many of the themes that are essential to Late Antique speculation and fantasy–to an ecumenic world in a state of prolonged religious crisis.

Lucretius' explanation of the universe constitutes, as is well known, a rigorous materialism. Taking the doctrine of the atoms from his philosophical precursor Epicurus, Lucretius describes a world fully explicable in terms of primary physical causation. According to ancient sources, Epicurus' own poem concluded with a fully worked out theology, but that poem has not survived. Lucretius' theology very probably falls short of Epicurus' in its scope, but what Lucretius does tell us, primarily in *De rerum natura,* Book V, but also in Books I and VI, merits attention. The term *superstitio,*in its modern usage, derives from Lucretius, who intended by it a kind of false consciousness centered on erroneous ideas about "the gods." Lucretius' materialism leads him not to an atheism, in which one no longer thinks the concept of the divine, but rather to a cosmology that subordinates both humanity and divinity to a purely natural scheme, while significantly retaining the gods under a modified notion. Thus, according to Lucretius, while one "must not suppose that the holy dwelling-places of the gods are anywhere within the limits of the [familiar, human] world," (175) one must still grant their existence in one of the *other,* plural worlds.(8) The gods consist of matter, just like human beings, but constituted of rarer atoms than those of the earthly realm and therefore "elusive to the touch and pressure of our hands" and having "no contact with anything tangible to us" (175). Yet still the gods exist, *even though they have been demoted.* While the gods' "dwelling-places," as Lucretius says, "must be unlike ours" (175) because they must correspond to the other matter in virtue of which divinities differ qualitatively from mortal creatures, yet these divine dwelling places also exist. Lucretius consigns divinity to remote interstices among the plural worlds that constitute the inexhaustible universe *in toto; he places them,* that is to say, *safely*

distant from terrestrial humanity. But under what philosophical (or other) motive must the gods be thus banished, held distant from humanity so that humanity is made safe from them?

As Blumenberg has suggested, it is because Lucretius fears a return of the gods, a resurgence of stellar worship, a *lapsus in antiquas religiones.* In ancient times, Lucretius says in Book I, false beliefs concerning the gods (that they mixed with humanity and put demands on it) led to the institution of human sacrifice, instantiated most famously and terribly by the immolation of Iphigenia at Aulis. In Book I, where the reference to Iphigenia appears, Lucretius describes Epicurus in Promethean terms as the one whose scientific vision liberated humanity from superstition: “When human life lay groveling in all men’s sight, crushed to the earth under the dead weight of superstition whose grim features glowered menacingly upon mortals from the four quarters of the sky, a man of Greece was the first to raise mortal eyes in defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of gods did not crush him, nor the lightning flash and the growling menace of the sky” (29). Lucretius thereby directly links the insights of science to the refinement of religion through the illumination and overthrow of gross and epistemologically inadequate beliefs and practices. Jonas cites the importance of the Prometheus-figure to the Late Antique, specifically to the Gnostic, theological vision. As in Lucretius’ Epicureanism, Prometheus becomes the “challenger” of a malign, this-worldly god, and acts on behalf of a humanity oppressed by that god, or by the concept; thus “the victim of the older mythology becomes the bearer of the Gospel in the new” (96). Human obtuseness might yet neutralize the attempted assistance by such a liberator. Thus, in Book VI of his treatise, Lucretius worries that the Epicurean noetic liberation might grow weak or even dissolve, leading precisely to a religious atavism in which the newly benighted would saddle themselves again with “cruel masters whom they believe to be all-powerful” (219) and revive obscene practices like human sacrifice. Lucretius develops a similar insight in Book III:

> As for Cerberus and the Furies and the pitchy darkness and the jaws of Hell belching abominable fumes, these are not and cannot be anywhere at all. But life is darkened by the fear of retribution for our misdeeds, a fear enormous in proportion to their enormity, and by the penalties imposed for crime–imprisonment and ghastly precipitation from Tarpeia’s Crag, the lash, the block, the rack, the boiling pitch, the firebrand and the branding iron. Even though these horrors are not physically present, yet the conscience-ridden mind in terrified anticipation torments itself with its own goads and whips. It does not see what term there can be to its suffering nor where its punishment can have an end. It is afraid that death may serve merely to intensify pain. So at length the life of misguided

mortals becomes a Hell on earth. (127)

3

In Book V, finally, Lucretius describes how “mankind is perpetually the victim of a pointless and futile martyrdom” and how the failure to see reality clearly has inveterately “stirred up from the depths the surging tumultuous tides of war” (215). Error and violence go in tandem in Lucretius’ thought.

Superstition is thus false, in Lucretius’ view, but it is effective. Under the delusion of the divinity as a “cruel master,” fathers will surely let the blood of their daughters in macabre offerings. Lucretius’ theology amounts, then, to a secularism which admits the gods but banishes them to a safe distance and then emphatically denies that they place any sacrificial requirement on the human race. A rational order will prevail as long as the displacement and the denial remain in force. Yet seductions exist that tempt people back into the embrace of outmoded and, objectively speaking, disgusting customs and forms. Reason can fall prey to its opposite and nothing guarantees that the distorted practices of earlier times will not enjoy a revival.(9)

Just this vision–of an arduously stabilized ecumene threatened from without by eruptions of superstitious unreason–appears to structure the plot of Lucian of Samosata’s notorious *Vera Historia* or “True History” of the mid-second-century A.D. I say “notorious” since theoreticians of science fiction have expended much ink in denying that the *Vera Historia* really is a science fiction story.(10)Even by the criteria of “hard” science fiction, however, Lucian’s tale of interplanetary warfare seems to qualify for admittance to the genre. No critic of the tale known to me has noticed, for example, that in the prologue Lucian’s narrator explicitly relates how, in preparing for his journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules, he carefully reconstructed his sailing vessel, making modifications calculated to help the craft resist the devastating storms reputed to blow in the unexplored ocean-sea. *Tekhne* (Lucian’s term) forms a theme in these passages. Lucian’s discussion of these modifications indeed resembles, in embryo, the obligatory engineering digression in a Campbell story. Voyaging beyond the Pillars of Hercules will subject a vessel to extraordinary strains; such a vessel must therefore be constructed according to exacting specifications and of the most durable materials. It must be well provisioned. Those who crew it must expect to endure harsh conditions at length. Lucian’s description of the interplanetary arsenals employed during the solar-lunar war prefigures the arsenal-catalogues of Campbellian science fiction, and is again technistic in its tone.

The real significance of the *Vera Historia* for my argument, however, lies in its depiction of a realm outside the settled world. To describe this world as demonic is

to link it to the paranoid world of the Gnostics, the one beset by *powers* who compete with humanity and remain hostile toward it. While Lucian's hero relishes his adventures, the events that befall him and his crew boast a horrific quality. The Lucianic cosmos is basically an inhuman place, made cozily domestic only in the restricted region where a proper independence of orderly humanity has been tenuously achieved. The tornado that whisks the hero and his companions to the moon resembles that great vortex of atoms under the image of which Lucretius presents his universe of inconscient matter, of an infinite number of infinitesimal particles combining and recombining without aim. The superlunary realm turns out to be one of continuous and colossal *polemos.* But the earth itself, outside the administrative *nomos* of the Empire, resembles a chamber of horrors. The satiric tone of the tale tends to mask this horror, but the horror lurks in the background nevertheless. In the Lucianic world, "apparent change for the better [is] only the prelude to something worse" (264). After the narrator and his crew return from the moon, for example, they find themselves in an ocean-sea crowded with: a bottomless chasm which seems to be swallowing up the universe; an island inside a gargantuan whale where fish-men and lobster-men ("an ugly pack of brutes" who "live on raw meat and are very aggressive" [265]) harry the small community of human beings, who eventually turn upon and slaughter them; a matriarchy which is monogeneric because the women have systematically slaughtered the men (a situation borrowed from Apollonius of Rhodes); and a sacred grove where the bewitching trees transform men into cypresses and pines. Incidentally, Lucian's protagonist also discovers that the gods now live on an island far out in the ocean-sea, at home in their isolation, rather like the gods of Lucretius. They do not much like human beings and urge visitors to be gone after a stipulated period of sociable welcome. In the last sentence of the tale, the ship goes to pieces "against [a] rocky coast and completely br[eaks] up" (294). Satire turns to pessimism.

Early Christian narrative–Augustine's *Confessions,* Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony,* the saga of Saint George or the voyages of Saint Brendan–occupies the same booby-trapped world as the one described by Lucian, but the point is now not merely to report on the nastiness of the powers and cults; the point is to exorcise the powers and cults, by revealing the falsity of local beliefs and replacing them with the new, true, non-bloodthirsty ethos. Augustine's intellectual battle with the Manichaeans and Anthony's victory after a siege by devils offer two illustrative cases. Anthony's victory is especially interesting since, for Athanasius, the devils that throng the saint are real, but they can be banished by *mental concentration.* It is my contention that much of twentieth century science fiction conforms to this pattern of the Promethean (if pagan) or Saintly (if Christian) revelation and its attendant exorcism of the demons and suppression of ritual murder. Later, I will introduce the idea of *Paraceltic* narrative. For now, I content myself with introducing the term. The bridge between the early Christian narrative and the modern

scientific-fantastic tale is probably the medieval *Märchen*-genre, in which, when one leaves the comfort of the Christian hearth, one soon enough encounters cannibal-witches, ogres, trolls, and other devouring remnants of the superseded heathen order. My exemplars are not the philosophically sophisticated narratives of the literary deans of the SF genre, Wells or Stapledon or Lem, but a bevy of stories by three representatives of pulpdom.

The three sets of texts are: Catherine L. Moore's "Northwest Smith" Stories, Henry Kuttner's novellas of decadent futures, and Leigh Brackett's explorations of pagan Mars. It is precisely because these narratives do not aim at erudition of any kind that their incorporation of the theological themes is of such interest.

II

4

Insight into the casual philosophical origins of C. L. Moore's fiction can be gleaned from a reading of the letters that H. P. Lovecraft sent to her in the late 1930s. As Lovecraft responds systematically to Moore's own arguments, it is possible to understand Moore's thinking even in the absence of her side of the exchange. Lovecraft takes issue, for example, with Moore's left-leaning politics of the time, arguing that doctrinaire Marxism was little more than a secular substitute for religion and myth. Marxism, in other words, even though it pretends to be a materialism, lacks an understanding of religion and can offer no genuine advance upon it; as a type of pseudo-scientific mystique, Marxism indeed amounts to no more than a cult decked out in political rhetoric. More important to human beings than the idea of God, Lovecraft argues, are the ideas of order and ethics. Humanity discovers order in the cosmos and applies the pattern of order in its social existence, which becomes more orderly as the system of ethics is rationalized through observation of the human character. In the Lucretian scheme, men attribute their dependence on blood-rites to a demand made by the gods, but once they discover that the gods are not the bloodthirsty creatures of myth and that the demand for violent propitiation originates with a *human* proclivity, then men can consciously alter their behavior and reorganize society in reasoned and non-violent, or non-sacrificial, ways. The new order might also be attributed to divinity, but in this case the divinity will be an emblem for something conscious and elevated rather than the reflection of superstitious fear. For Lovecraft, godhead reflects the ethical level of a community, and ethics of the highest type "is simply a condition–like the existence of the atmosphere" (*Selected Letters* 242), as he put it to a mutual acquaintance of his and Moore's. (That statement, about godhead as the ethical "condition" of developed society, is, by the way, a fair definition of secularity: morality, which once had a direct relation to religion, gradually detaches

itself.) Whether Lovecraft succeeded in persuading Moore or not–the evidence suggests that he indeed made an impression–Moore's own considerable body of fiction shows an obsession with the remote origins of the God-concept and of religion, so much so that she becomes a kind of speculator who investigates how the present managed to become what it is by transforming itself from its primordial opposite.

What is striking about Moore's stories is their conviction that this origin, this primordial noetic opposite of the present, is sacrificial, and that the niceties of myth and metaphysics conceal the requirement of an immolation. In Moore's stories, moreover, the sacrificial cult always stands opposed by an explicitly anti-sacrificial ethos that corresponds both to Lovecraft's Epicurean idea of a universal enlightened condition and to a secularization of the basic Judaeo-Christian ethics. There is no explicit mention of Christianity, however, which, in Moore's speculative future, has receded entirely into the ethical background. Of course, the thrill of Lovecraft's own stories, equally non-Christian, lies in their revelation that the very complacency of post-religious society courts catastrophe, and that the tenuous human happiness might be shattered at any time by an eruption of primitive forces. Says the narrator of Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu": "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents" (*The Dunwich Horror and Others* 130). It is not so different in Moore. The world teems with invisible devils ready to pounce. The difference is that Moore's protagonist insists on correlating the contents. Let us examine, briefly, a first example, *Earth's Last Citadel* (1943), written with her husband Henry Kuttner. This tale deals with a far-futural earth dominated by a race of vampiric interlopers who manifest themselves as gods, and who are taken by the survivors of the human race to *be* gods. The result is a disaster for the deluded faithful. In *The Well of the Worlds* (1952), ostensibly by Kuttner but in the writing of which one suspects that Moore must have had a considerable hand, the human race again suffers under interlopers who claim to be gods.

Moore's most famous character, Northwest Smith, is a semi-criminal, semi-heroic denizen of low establishments on Mars and Venus, who in the course of his many adventures among the plurality of worlds encounters a series of power-drunk beings who, having set themselves up as gods in one circumstance or another, demand sacrifice and terrorize their captives. There is the vampiric Manga, on Venus, in "Black Thirst" (1934); the psychic parasite in "The Cold Gray God" (1935); and the sapient but altogether mad plant-carnivore in "The Tree of Life" (1936). In each case, Smith confronts the being, reveals its non-supernatural character, engages in a struggle of wills which is also a fight against temptation, and defeats the thing. In doing so, he invariably saves humanity from the depredations of an insatiable and corrupting force. He preserves, in other words, the existing condition (to borrow

Lovecraft's term) of normative, non-sacrificial social organization against a resurgence of sacrifice. Notice how, even in the simplified context of a popular narrative, the epistemological gesture accompanies the physical casting-out of the obnoxious agency. The intellectual demonstration (see, it isn't divine or supernatural, it's just a creature) does not spring from any necessity intrinsic to the narrative; Smith could simply defeat the evil being and deliver the oppressed. But it is important, as Moore sees it, to establish that the "gods" are simply monsters and that the victims have been deluded as well as oppressed. In "The Tree of Life" (1936), the entity's victims, including Smith, experience a "calling" (100) that plunges them into a "hypnotized" (101) state full of "unreasoning terror" (101) which then overwhelms the "sane part" (101) of the mind. Moore thus opposes the *unreason* of the cult against the *sanity* of the normative mind. In their deluded state, people offer themselves to the entity as "dusky sacrifices" (101).

The paradigm of Moore's anti-sacrificial narrative occurs in the fifth of her Northwest Smith stories, "The Dust of the Gods" (1934). Let me preface my discussion of it with a word about Northwest Smith, the true precursor of Spielberg's Indiana Jones: Smith is himself a savior-figure, as so many pulp-heroes crudely are, always ready to stand in for the very society that shuns him, which he nevertheless values for integral reasons of his own. It is a paradox of secularity that it, too, like its foil religion, stipulates the necessity of salvation, and indeed offers itself in substitute for superstition *as* a form of salvation.

In "The Dust of the Gods," a stranger bargains with Smith and Yarol to recover a certain substance from a remote polar location on Mars. The buyer of Smith's services proves to be an aficionado of an ancient sacrificial order wishing to revive its thoroughly nasty god, "Black Pharol," as he is called. This name, as is typical in science fiction of the period, has a slightly Egyptian character (it sounds like *pharaoh*); Egypt has always provided SF writers with the basic pattern for archaic, hierophantic cultures dominated by intracosmic gods, as exemplified in Stanley G. Weinbaum's classic "A Martian Odyssey" and its direct sequel "The Valley of Dreams" (1934). In Moore's tale: "Pharol, today, means unmentionable rites to an ancient no-god of utter darkness" (141), the stranger says, but it once had a more specific significance. The stranger then offers this précis of Martian–or rather cosmic–theological history:

> There were gods who were old when Mars was a green planet, and a verdant moon circled an Earth blue with steaming seas . . . Another world circled in space then, between Mars and Jupiter where its fragments, the planetoids, are now . . . It was a mighty world, rich and beautiful, peopled by the ancestors of mankind. And on that world dwelt a mighty Three in a

> temple of crystal, served by strange slaves and worshiped by a world. They were not wholly abstract, as most modern gods have become. (140)

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Mars has long since devolved into a desert planet and the moon, too, is airless and dead. The Three, as Moore calls them, antedate all other gods, who are, therefore, mere “echoes of them” (140). The Christian idea of the Trinity would be one such distant echo, but thoroughly transformed from the original, and one which, through the agency of Smith, will soon oppose and neutralize its ancient and intolerable prototype. Two of the primordial gods eventually died–the story-teller does not say how–while the third and mightiest lived, his name now a curse referring vaguely to “fearful things” (141). Pharol could apparently “incarnate [him]self in a material body” so as to “touch” his worshipers (141), and of course consume the offerings made to him. According to Smith’s commissioner, the dust of Pharol still exists–in the ruins of an immemorial temple–and he will pay handsomely for its recovery. Moore, like Epicurus-Lucretius, reduces the divine to a substance (“dust”) that has different properties from terrestrial substance but still belongs to a universe in which all phenomena are compounded of atoms. In “The Black God,” the “dust” of the divinity can be reactivated, and it therefore constitutes a persistent threat to the more or less peaceful and rational order of the established *nomos*. The antique “god” would pose a danger not only because he is powerful and voracious, but because people are willing to yield to antique notions, embrace the godhead of false gods, and take up hoary practices once again.

The descriptive detail that says that Pharol could “touch” his worshipers also deserves attention: A being who can “touch” other beings is (again) necessarily a material, that is to say a natural rather than a supernatural being. Pharol’s predatory nature threatens a more or less settled world. Smith, although an outlaw, implicitly values the settled nature of the existing, civilized, universe. One of the defining characteristics of the civic cosmos is that it has freed itself from the brutal practices of benighted antiquity. In the very first Northwest Smith story, “Shambleau” (1934), Moore. s protagonist gets into trouble by rescuing what appears to be a young woman from a Martian lynch-mob: his sense of the dignity of the persecuted victim leads him to put himself in danger by opposing the witch-hunters. (Later, ironically, Smith has to be rescued from the young woman, who turns out to be a monster in disguise; victimhood can be a disguise.) In the final Northwest Smith story, “Song in a Minor Key” (1957), this idea–of the normative as the empirically optimal condition of existence–takes the specific form of “familiar voices indoors . . . a girl with hair like poured honey hesitating just inside the door, lifting her eyes to him” (296). This adds up, in a few words, to marriage and society.

Smith indeed deplores the flaw his own propensity for violence–the very propensity that catapulted him away from the idyll while he was still young. Yet even in criminal exile, he has striven to defend what he has catastrophically forfeited. Smith's actions in "The Dust of the Gods" typify such a defense.

There is a Lucianic counterpart to this dispensation. If the world, as depicted in *Vera Historia,* is a chamber of horrors, there remains a refuge from it in the psychic orderliness of devotion, of the sort the details of which Lucian sets forth in *The Syrian Goddess,* his major work of theology. Devotion to the goddess brings peace to the worshiper, no matter the turbulence of the actual world. But back to C. L. Moore: with his Venusian friend Yarol, Smith travels to the Martian North Polar region where lies, as legend says, the ruined city where the gods of the Lost Planet "had been saved from the wreckage [of their world] and spirited across the void to a dwelling-place . . . that is not even a memory today" (147). The adjective *megalithic,* with its archaic and sacrificial connotations, perhaps best describes the city when, after traversing a subterranean labyrinth, the explorers at length come upon it: "Here and there, buried in the debris of ages, lay huge six-foot blocks of hewn stone, the only reminder that here had stood Mars' holiest city, once, very long ago" (152). They open a way into another subterranean passage decorated with "unheard-of frescoes limned in dim colors under the glaze" (154), reminiscent, as so often in the science fiction text, of some ancient hieratic style. They locate a sealed chamber whose door boasts the archaic insignia of Black Pharol. Smith's Venusian companion recalls that he "saw it once carved in the rock of an asteroid . . . just a bare little fragment of dead stone whirling around and around through space," from which he concludes that "the Lost Planet must really have existed . . . and [the asteroid] must have been a part of it, with the god's name cut so deep that even the explosion of a world couldn't wipe it out" (155). When they break the seal, a preternatural light dazzles them which is "like no light they had ever known before," for "tangibly it poured past them down the corridor in hurrying waves that lapped one another and piled up and flowed as a gas might have done" (156).

This is the pent-up atmosphere of the god, a kind of ether. Yarol deduces that the chamber of light is actually the interior of an asteroid: "A fragment of [the shattered] planet, enclosing a room, possibly where the gods' images stood, [which] was somehow detached from the Lost planet and hurled across space to Mars. It must have buried itself in the ground here, and the people of this city tunneled in to it and built a temple over the spot" (156).

Plunging deeper into the mountain-embedded asteroid, which is the chamber of "The Three," Smith and Yarol penetrate to the inner sanctum, "a vast crystal room" at whose center rises "a crystal throne [that] had been fashioned for no human occupant" (159). On this the elder deities once sat, to be propitiated by those whom

they enslaved. Smith and Yarol judge from the contours of the throne that the Three must have possessed a material shape entirely “outside modern comprehension” (159); but they were nevertheless quite material. Although the flanking pedestals remain empty, the middle one, that of Pharol, contains a pile of mysterious dust, “all that was left of a god–the greatest of antiquity’s deities” (160). With a mounting sense of alarm, they decide not to recover the dust for their commissioner, for “what man, with a god to do his bidding, would stop short of dominion over the worlds of space?” (160). Or what ravenous “god” would be content to do the bidding of a mere man, once revived? It is thus determinedly to prevent a *lapsus in antiquas religiones,* with its cultic and sacrificial implications, that Smith and Yarol now act. But how to dispose of a god’s deactivated remains?

6

Moore finds a marvelously ironic method whose metaphoric value is high. Making use of that SF cliché the blaster, Smith sets the dust afire. His “eyes were riveted on the clear, burning flame that was once a god. It burned with a fierce, pale light flickering with nameless evanescent colors–the dust that had been Pharol of the utter darkness burning slowly away in a flame of utter light” (164). Notice how Smith fills the Epicurean role as defined by Lucretius: In purifying the world of superstition he opens the way for a secular existence free from the perversions that inevitably accompany the false belief in predatory contractual gods. (Such beliefs are “false,” not because the entities towards which the worshippers direct their devotion do not exist but because the contract is invariably one-sided and fraudulent and entails the humiliation of the cultists and everyone else.) The verb “to purify” comes from the same root as the Greek *pur,* or “fire.” In the opening passages of *De rerum natura,* it will be recalled, Lucretius represents Epicurus as a kind of secular Prometheus delivering the world from benightedness by bringing back from the heavens the flame of knowledge (*scientia* as opposed to *superstitio*). As the ancient gods had demanded propitiation through burnt offerings on their altar (or at any rate as men had *imagined* that they did), so does science demand the immolation of the gods themselves in a final catharsis that will put an end to sacrificial terror. Smith, too, like Epicurus in the Lucretian text, takes on the Promethean aspect when he carries out his exorcism of the demons. Yet no such exorcism is ever definitive; fortune remains ill-disposed to men, and such incursions by ravenous predators can occur again at any time. Let us remember what Voegelin says about the public reaction to the Wells radio-hoax. People could believe that Martians had invaded because they lived in expectation of such things, not specifically, but generically. This was the case despite the triumph of the scientific view in modern society. That triumph did not banish the sacred, but merely cloaked the sacred in the terms of a pervasive phenomenalism.

By the period of Late Antiquity, the idea of hungry gods waiting in heaven for the smoke of the hecatomb to provide their dinner had become absurd enough that Lucian could satirize it in his short treatise *On Sacrifice*. And yet, beneath the satire, a certain unease makes itself felt: one ridicules the thing to keep it at bay. Moreover, Lucian's satire is contemporaneous with many a demonology and Gnostic tract. Lucian could smile (or maybe grimace), but many were afraid. Like the hungry gods that crowd around the smoking pyre in Lucian's sketch, Smith (although inadvertently) inhales the miasma: he suddenly has a reeling vision of "the history of a dead and forgotten world [which] flared by him in the dark" (165); Smith sees "man-formed beings [that] lay face down in worshiping wind-rows around a great triple pedestal" (165-66), the very image of degradation. This is the same "groveling" deplored by Lucretius and from which, according to him, Epicurus in his Promethean role delivered humanity. Modern people in North America could all at once ridicule outmoded ideas like ghosts and witches and desert their churches for the affable doctrine of how to make friends and influence people *and* be galvanized by their certainty that Martians had invaded New Jersey. Millions of people in the year 2000 believe that they or their fellow human beings are regularly kidnapped and tortured by aliens, after all.(11)

Recoiling from the violence and disgust of their experience, Smith and Yarol find their way out of the cavern. In a Nietzschean "Twilight of the Idols," Moore offers as the final image "the pale Martian day . . . darkening over the mountains" (166) where man has just by premeditation killed a god.

In the fourth Northwest Smith story, "The Scarlet Dream" (1934), Moore's hero operates in a less active mode, which is why I wanted to examine "The Dust of the Gods" first. The action in "The Scarlet Dream" begins with the discovery of a magical talisman in the form of a blood-red shawl, rescued from a derelict spaceship in the asteroid belt and quickly discarded by a series of alarmed owners. As Smith shoulders his way through the bazaar in the Lakkmanda Markets of Mars, "a flash of that peculiar geranium scarlet that seemed to lift itself bodily from its background and smite the eye with an all but physical violence" abruptly compels his attention:

> Smith felt sure that it was woven from the hair of some beast rather than from vegetable fiber, for the electrical clinging of it sparkled with life. And the crazy pattern of it dazzled him with its strangeness. Unlike any pattern he had seen in all the years of his far wanderings, the wild, leaping scarlet threaded its nameless design in one continuous, tangled line through the twilight blue of the background. (*Northwest Smith* 110)

The shawl has a metonymic, a sparagmatic, relation to its origin, for it is the hair of an animal perhaps long dead (a part abstracted from the whole); it even preserves some of the animation of its source, “sparkl[ing] with life” and constitutes a remnant of antique violence. Such violence generates an allure. The shawl’s hematic coloration indeed *dazzles* the onlooker. But the shawl’s origin belongs to the unknown. According to the man who sells it to Smith, the previous owner “found it in a derelict ship floating around in the asteroids . . . a very early model . . . probably one of the first space-ships, made before the identification symbols were adopted” (111). This links the shawl to the predatory outer-world from which Black Pharol comes in “The Black God.” Smith’s Venusian friend had once seen Pharol’s seal on a remote asteroid. Once again, the Lucretian dispensation is in evidence: the gods, who exercised a baleful influence on prehistoric humanity, have fled to the edges of the universe. It were best for humanity that the gods remain where they have flown. Yet fragments of the banished bad old days repeatedly penetrate the inner, settled world of the enlightened order, like the dust of a god or a luminous shawl. Smith can have the shawl for a single *cris*, or dirt cheap; the seller, moreover, anxiously wants to rid himself of it since it “gives [him] a headache to look at the thing” (110). (Notice that this manifestation of the primitive does not fit comfortably *in the market.*) Though large (“six foot square”), the shawl easily fits into Smith’s palm when he folds it up; it can be carried like a talisman. Antique, mysterious, fascinating, the shawl nags at Smith’s consciousness. In his quarters he takes it from his pocket and shakes it open, producing “a sudden wild writhing of scarlet patterns over walls and floor and ceiling” (112). Spreading it out on his table, Smith traces the intricate pattern with his finger: “The more he stared the more irritatingly clear it became to him that there must be a purpose in that whirl of color” (112). As Smith falls into dream, the threaded design becomes “a labyrinthine path down which he stumbled blindly” (112).

The shawl’s dazzling exterior thus beckons both eye and mind to enter a complex interior in which the explorer runs the risk of losing himself fatally; it is a kind of temptation which would not have been unfamiliar, say, to Theban Anthony, fighting off demonic temptations in the Egyptian desert. Power and beauty alluringly combine. The shawl’s magical interior corresponds to a violence partly concealed by the exterior. The Lovecraft connection is obviously important. The Moore-Kuttner universe shares a great deal, in fact, with the Lovecraft universe, both being chock-full of ancient, bloodthirsty gods who, in an opportunistic manner, await the moment when they can emerge from hiding to reestablish themselves at the center of a sacrificial cult. Beauty turns out to be one of the attributes of violence, to result, indeed, from an originary violence that humanity has long since suppressed and which, therefore, it has all but forgotten, like some minotaur in an ages-untried

maze. Passing through sleep, Smith awakens in a sinister dream world where “the sky [is] a great shawl threaded with scarlet lightning” (112) and finds himself “mounting a long flight of steps” under what is now a “lovely twilight [where] the air was suffused with colored mists, and no wind blew” (113). Smith slowly becomes cognizant of “a stirring in the dimness, and a girl came flying down the stairs in headlong, stumbling terror. He could see the shadow of it on her face, and her long, bright-colored hair streamed out behind her, and from head to foot she was dabbed with blood” (113).

This incident confirms the natural inferences one wants to make about the shawl on the basis of Moore’s initial description, particularly with respect to its scarlet hue, for red is inevitably associated with blood, and even more so with violent blood-letting. The architecture “contained” within the shawl must be a sacred architecture, so that meeting a blood-bedaubed victim is perhaps *not* surprising, but entirely to be expected, nor does it astonish that the girl is in flight from something that she finds difficult to name: “It–it has her! Let me go! . . . It has her–oh, my sister!” (114), she cries. The repeated “it” functions here as does the substitute for the holy name in many an ancient cult: The pronoun refers, *blankly,* to something protected by an unimaginably strong taboo. “My sister . . . It caught her in the hall–caught her before my eyes spattered me with her blood” (116). *It–the thing* is the god of the twilight world into which Smith has unluckily fallen and where he is marooned along with others who have blundered through the “gate” constituted by the pattern woven monstrously into the shawl. (As such, “the thing” resembles the voracious alien in *Earth’s Last Citadel,* but it likewise resembles *any* sacrificial deity from Dionysus to Kukulkan.) The girl explains that the pattern represents a “Word” that opens the gate, but that the gate opens only one way. The architectural space where Smith encounters the girl is, of course, a “Temple.”

> It is better not to look out the windows of this place . . . For from outside the Temple looks strange enough, but from the inside, looking out, one is liable to see things it is better not to see . . . What that blue space is, on which this gallery opens, I do not know–I have no wish to know. There are windows here opening on stranger things than this–but we turn our eyes away when we pass them. You will learn . . . (118)

Outside the Temple, Smith discovers a somber idyll, a world of gentle rolling hills covered with grass and sparsely populated by those unfortunates who have been sucked into it through the esthetic seduction of the “gate.” The girl lives in a “tiny, shrine-like building of creamy stone, its walls no more than a series of arches open to the blue, translucent day” (120), situated on the shores of a lake. In the distance,

mountains loom in a thickening mist. “Rather tiresome” (120), Smith thinks, when the girl describes her life: “[I] swim in the lake, sleep and rest and wander through the woods” (120). The people live in isolation from one another because “it is best not to collect in crowds” which “seem to draw–it” (120). This life is not only physically indolent; it also qualifies as intellectually hampered. The girl explains it this way to Smith: “Those who wonder–those who investigate–die . . . Life is bearable only if we do not look too closely” (128). Smith. s response is “Damn your beliefs!” (128). Here again Moore opposes *investigation,* a trait associated with reason, against *belief,* which passively accepts the cultic reality and interdicts intellectual curiosity. A sentence from *Vera Historia,* where Lucian describes life inside the whale, is appropriate to Moore’s story: “We were like prisoners . . . where the regulations allowed one to do exactly what one liked, except escape” (269).

All of this occurs, fantastically enough, inside the woven texture of the shawl. Thus the hideous events that take place while Smith dwells in the sacrificial tableau constitute the inward principle of the shawl’s outward form; the shawl as work of art emerges from the propitiatory rites associated with a deity whose existence springs from the crowd. “Crowds . . . seem to draw it.” The shawl incorporates its own origin in a demand for blood-offerings and recreates that origin in an endless cycle of ritual closure. Moore’s labyrinthine *encosmos* neatly if rather ominously articulates itself around a structuring principle, the “Word” referred to by the girl, which designates the founding murder. This *verbum,* when spoken aloud, reproduces the violence wreaked by the thing:

> It is death to pronounce the Word. Literally. I do not know it now, could not speak it if I would. But in the Temple there is one room where the Word is graven in scarlet on the wall, and its power is so great that the echoes of it ring ever round and round that room . . . It is a word from some tongue so alien . . . that the spoken sound of it, echoing in the throat of a living man, is disrupting enough to rip the very fibers of the human body apart . . . to destroy body and mind as utterly as if they had never been. (123)

This magical prohibition against the pronunciation of the “Word” reproduces the sacrificial *tabu* against investigating the state of things and therefore against *understanding* the situation in which one is caught. It is also the case that the “Word” offers the one exit from the sacrificial encosmos where Smith finds himself caught. Smith thus confronts a non-negotiable ethical cul-de-sac: if he goes to the room of the “Word” and pronounces the phonemes, it will kill him; and while standing near someone else who pronounces them–as the girl suggests–might

enable him to escape, to ask her to help in this way would mean asking her to commit suicide. The escapee would be complicit in a homicide. It is in the very nature of the “Word” to keep everything within the scarlet dreamland in stasis, with those on whom the thing preys, like the girl’s sister, being replaced by inadvertent newcomers such as Smith. Smith substitutes for the dead sibling, arriving in the moment when she dies and filling her niche by becoming the survivor’s companion. The speech that Moore gives to the girl echoes the ancient idea of word-magic, by which language itself is thought to have the power to affect the world directly. The notion that the name of God is too powerful or dangerous to invoke audibly is familiar from the Hebrews, among whom historically the public terms *Elohim* and *Adonai* substituted for the sacrosanct Yahweh. The onomastic ban points to a primitive phase indeed in the development of the Biblical God: precisely the pre-Biblical, or sacrificial, phase. The ban upholds the nescience requisite to sacrificial closure.

8

Smith escapes from the Scarlet Dream in which he is stranded when the girl decides to sacrifice herself for him: she agrees to go with Smith to the particular room in the temple where the “Word” echoes and to pronounce it, opening an egress by which he can return to his world even while she dies. Smith does not know of the self-immolating part of her plan. He merely thinks that she is going to make sure that he does not get lost in the labyrinth. In “the Scarlet Dream,” then, Smith himself submits to salvation from an otherwise fatal cycle. In this sense, “The Scarlet Dream” and “The Dust of the Gods” form an intelligible sequence, in which Smith first experiences the arbitrariness and brutality of a sacrificial order and then aligns himself actively against such an order.

The salvific overtones of the girl’s self-immolating act support my claim that the protagonist’s role in Moore’s stories is, essentially, that of a Christian hero, sometimes a martyr. In “The Scarlet Dream,” Smith benefits from the selflessness of the girl; elsewhere he is more active in suppressing the *old ways.* He thus resembles the demon-expelling saint, but in the secular guise, increasingly demanded by the twentieth century, of an existential loner at odds with the bourgeois society that expels him. In another of Moore’s short-story cycles, the one devoted to the medieval heroine Jirel of Joiry, we find many of the same motifs and themes as in the Northwest Smith cycle. Jirel, like Smith, blunders into sacrificial precincts and does battle with the demons. Not quite a member of Christendom, she nevertheless defends its mores against those of the atavistic and bloodthirsty cults.

III

Henry Kuttner's "The Vintage Season" (1946) deals with the creation of a work of art by an artist of the future who visits the earth in the immediate post-World War Two present, when the story was written.(12) But this act of creation is also an act of sacrifice, and the work of art that stems from the event has the character of an immolatory token. In fact, because "The Vintage Season" is a time-travel story involving the usual paradox, it resists any straightforward rehearsal. The basic elements of the narrative are, nevertheless, these: Oliver Wilson owns a house that three eccentric "vacationers" who call themselves the Sanciscos want to rent; to one of them, a woman named Kleph, Wilson feels considerable attraction, and he therefore lets the house despite the fact that he might garner a windfall from it if he sold it outright to a buyer who has been pressing. Wilson's fiancée Sue pesters him to renege on the deal and to sell, but Oliver refuses. The interest in this detail lies in Kuttner's opposition of the market to the Bohemian group. The group represents *culture* and seems to promise something superior to the bourgeois world of exchange. Moore's Smith regrets leaving the comforts of marriage and participation in the *nomos.* Kuttner's Wilson, vulnerable to the temptations of art, cult, and difference, regrets his prior immersion in what strikes him now as the tediously normative. He is an alienated bourgeois taking the usual route of opposition to the market for the mere sake of opposition. If resentment *is* the sacred, as Girard so often intimates, then Wilson's alienation renders him particularly vulnerable to the Bohemianism of the foreigners. Estranged from Sue, Wilson remains in the rented house, even though the renters openly resent it, hoping to encounter Kleph. The name "Kleph" has a musical connotation, of course, but Kuttner appears to be playing on the Greek word for "thief," as in "kleptomaniac." Kleph has come to take something. Kuttner will portray artistic endeavor as a form of radical–that is to say sacrificial–expropriation. Here again, something pre-political and essentially barbaric stands opposed to the orderliness of the market-oriented society.

The Sanciscos behave like Wildean esthetes: "There was an elegance about the way [their] garments fitted them which even to Oliver looked strikingly unusual" (*No Boundaries* 2); "the feeling of luxury which his first glance at them has evoked was confirmed by the richness of the hangings they had apparently brought with them" (7); Kleph's coiffure strikes Wilson as perfectly sculpted, "as if it had been painted on, though the breeze from the window stirred now and then among the softly shining strands" (12).(13) From such behavior, Wilson infers that their depth of culture radically exceeds his own, an inference sustainable, as it turns out, in esthetic terms only and not in any ethical sense. As in the case of the magic shawl in the Northwest Smith story, phenomenal beauty guarantees nothing about ethical acceptability. A certain type of intense beauty indeed radiates from a certain type of archaic violence, which the beauty tactically conceals. Kleph shows some reciprocal though ultimately condescending interest in Wilson, who visits her in her room one afternoon while the others are away. The foreign accouterments of

Kleph's room include a peculiar "picture of blue water" (14) hung above her bed the marvels of which entrance Wilson. Describing Wilson's response to this, Kuttner represents the esthetic state known as fascination: "The waves there were moving. More than that, the point of vision moved. Slowly the seascape drifted past, moving with the waves, following them toward the shore" (14). The images compel Wilson's attention; he cannot peel his eyes from them. Smith has the same problem when he gazes too intently at the weird shawl, in Moore's story.

Superimposed on the seascape, a man appears, singing: "He held an oddly archaic musical instrument, lute-shaped, its body striped light and dark like a melon and its long neck bent over its shoulder" (15). The tune is vaguely familiar, until Wilson recognizes it as "Make Believe" from the Jerome Kern musical *Showboat,* but treated to subtle and far-reaching variation that removes it from banality and gives it an air of the sublimely mysterious. Kleph says of the technique: "We call it kyling" (15). Then a "clown" replaces the singer and launches into a monologue "full of allusions that made Kleph smile, but were utterly unintelligible to Oliver" (15). The phantasmagoric quality of the display is amplified by the effects of a slightly hallucinogenic beverage that Wilson joins Kleph in drinking. Kleph herself dances "a formalized sort of dance" (16). Fascinated by Kleph's unfathomable but undeniable beauty, Wilson fails to notice that she is mocking him in the way that some sadistic explorer might mock a bewildered aborigine. Eric Gans, in his discussion of modern art in *Originary Thinking* (1993), refers to "the terrorizing effect of modern newness" and the "sometimes terroristic intentions of the artist" (194). The incomprehensible mockery in Kleph's seascape, with its opaque "allusions" and mocking "clown," already point to such a terrorism. "The scandalizing of the bourgeois is an aggressive act quite different from the withdrawal into the 'ivory tower' that characterizes the latter part of the romantic era . . . Resentment of the bourgeoisie is resentment of the market, and the market includes everyone" (197), Gans says.

9

"The Vintage Season" surely qualifies as one of Kuttner's best efforts and one of the most admirable things about it is the way in which he succeeds in indicating the Sansico's malign strangeness. Kuttner's futurians strike the reader as genuinely clandestine and malicious. They do and say things that make no sense in a familiar context. This is a difficult effect to pull off, and much SF that tries it, fails. It should be added immediately that Kuttner also superbly records the exclusionary power of artistic devotion when transformed by atavism into a cult of mystic connoisseurship; or, in slightly different words, the sacrificial power of snobbery. A work of art creates a community through being understood by those who attend to or contemplate it; but Wilson cannot understand what he experiences in Kleph's holo-kinetic "picture,"

and Kleph herself makes no effort to enlighten him. The impasse of understanding effectively excludes him from the community. The others act in an openly hostile manner, clearly regarding Wilson as a barbaric intruder on their affairs. While the Sansiscos make a deliberate effort to suggest to Wilson that they are including him, they are in fact casting him in the role of the victim: Wilson is being carefully set up; he will become the subject matter of one of the vacationers' all-too-scrutable esthetic projects–and entirely at his own expense.

Newly arriving compatriots gift Kleph with a red leather box, a new work by the artist Cenbe, "his latest" (23), but unfinished. Kleph inquiring "what period" the piece represents, the messenger explains: "From November, 1664 . . . London, of course, though I think there may be some counterpoint from the November 1347" (23). The box is a kind of music box. When Kleph later plays it and Wilson overhears, he comprehends that it "was music, in a way. But much more than music. And it was a terrible sound, the sounds of calamity and of all human reaction to calamity, everything from hysteria to heartbreak, from irrational joy to rationalized acceptance" (25). Says Walter F. Otto in *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (1933): "The terrors of destruction, which make all of life tremble, belong also, as a horrible desire, to the kingdom of Dionysus" (113). Walter Burkert refers to the "terror, bliss, and recognition of an absolute authority, *mysterium tremendum, fascinans,* and *augustum*" that inhabit the "holy," and remarks that "the most thrilling and impressive combination of these elements occurs in sacrificial ritual: the shock of the deadly blow and flowing blood, the bodily and spiritual rapture of festive eating, the strict order surrounding the whole process–these are *sacra* par excellence" (*Homo Necans* 40). The Sansiscos are Bacchants, devotees of a cult of primitive violence, no matter that Kuttner assigns it to a distant human future. Although they never kill directly, they nevertheless fasten parasitically upon occasions that they know in advance will entail wholesale suffering and death, and they do nothing to stop it. It is as if they were killers. Here then is a perfect example of the *lapsus in antiquas religiones* from Lucretius.

Pushing open Kleph's door, Wilson confronts a "mist spinning with motion and sound" for which "he had no words" (25): "Basically, this was the attempt of a master composer to correlate every essential aspect of a vast human experience into something that could be conveyed in a few moments to every sense at once" (26). The experience evokes, among other distressing responses, the memory of "secret things long ago walled off [behind] mental scar tissue" (26). A certain distorted face constitutes a "recurring motif, always more tortured, more helpless than before" (27). The effect of it all is anything but cathartic–the point seems to be the prolongation of distress without any promise of deliverance–and the unrelieved sadism of it emphasizes the violent otherness of Cenbe's "dreadful symphony" (27). Kleph confides that she should never have played it while there was any chance

that Wilson, or any other human of the present day, might overhear. “I forgot what the effect might be on one who had never heard Cenbe’s symphonies before” (28), a statement whose proleptic irony Kuttner’s narrative will more than bear out.

Cenbe himself will soon arrive, along with increasing numbers of the decadent foreigners, and it presently becomes clear that they are in the city–in Wilson’s house–to witness some upcoming event of which they, being from the future, have in context exclusive knowledge. The dates provide a clue: Plague struck London in both years, 1347 and 1664. What strikes the city in which Kuttner sets “The Vintage Season” is a meteorite. It turns out that Wilson’s living room affords the best possible vantage for viewing the wholesale destruction. In his description, from Wilson’s stunned viewpoint as influenced by the Sansicos, Kuttner estheticizes the holocaust (readers are to understand that what to us would be a horror is to the futurians a source of profound artistic satisfaction): “On the far skyline fire was already a solid mass, painting the low clouds crimson. That sulphurous light reflected back from the sky upon the city made clear the rows upon rows of flattened houses with flame beginning to lick up among them, and farther out the formless rubble of what had been houses a few moments ago and was now nothing at all” (41). One might be reminded of the remarks invariably made about the twentieth century’s avatars of destruction, especially Hitler and Stalin, that they took pleasure in the esthetic element of devastation. Hitler, for example, is said to have enjoyed newsreels of the carnage wrought by his armies in their *Blitzkrieg* campaigns; and Stalin’s sadism is well documented. Kuttner is hardly making something up. It has, in effect, been done.

The clamor of pained voices and the wail of sirens become “a terrible symphony that had, in its way, a strange, inhuman beauty” (42). Wilson has, to this extent at least, become an initiate of the cult. Cenbe, who alone remains when the others, sated by the spectacle, have left, tells Oliver frankly that “I need – this” (46). Oliver himself lies sick in bed–the meteor has brought with it a new disease, “the blue plague,” and Wilson is its first victim–while Cenbe explains: “I am a composer . . . I happen to be interested in interpreting certain forms of disaster into my own terms” (46). Dying, Wilson comprehends that “the whole world of *now*” simply “is not quite real to Cenbe” (48); the creation of his symphony requires him to negate the reality of the other–to sacrifice his subjects so that they become nothing more than esthetic material. Cenbe might be analyzed as one of those thematically modern artists whose ideology consists of an attack against humanism. Is the human being the noble creature that the bourgeoisie claims it to be? Are we to believe all this posturing and declamation? Is not the human being merely another animal, explicable by the laws of matter and, like all other matter, the potential substance of infinite technical and esthetic manipulations? Cenbe is also and more simply a murderer.

Thus when Kuttner shifts the viewpoint and provides a straightforward account of Cenbe's masterpiece situated in Cenbe's own cultural framework, the effect is even more chilling than what has gone before; it is a review of the premiere:

> Cenbe's new symphonia was a crowning triumph . . . and the applause was an ovation. History itself, of course, was the artist . opening with the meteor that forecast the great plagues of the fourteenth century and closing with the climax Cenbe had caught on the threshold of modern times. But only Cenbe could have interpreted it with such subtle power. (49)

10

In Moore's stories, sacrifice is the vestige of an ancient order waiting to be revived; Northwest Smith, like Lucian's voyager or the early saints, encounters these vestiges in remote outposts of the ecumene from which, however, they nevertheless unremittingly threaten to overwhelm the whole with their "subtle power." In Kuttner's "The Vintage Season," as in his novellas *Earth's Last Citadel* and *The Well of the Worlds,* sacrifice is the order into which a decadent society slips when Judaeo-Christian Revelation no longer tempers innate viciousness and no longer clarifies the human tendency to create social unity out of the invidious and lethal unanimity of a sacrificial ritual. Rarified notions of the beautiful can serve as a Lucretian "cruel master" just as well as an atavistic notion of godhead. Cenbe's esthetic society is just this type of primitive polity, its refined elegance, artistic sensitivity, and intolerable hauteur notwithstanding. These are not really esthetic in a genuinely modern sense; they are hieratic. In "The Vintage Season," Kleph, Cenbe, and the others, behave as though they themselves were gods, with the immeasurable rights accruing thereto. Cenbe's "Symphonia" is the ensign of their own projected godhead.

IV

Leigh Brackett belonged to the same story-telling generation as Moore and Kuttner; she was married, in fact, to another science fiction writer, Edmond Hamilton, just as Moore was married to Kuttner.(14) The four lived in and around Santa Monica in the 1930s through the 1950s and knew each other well. Responding, as Moore did, to Lovecraft's opening of antique vistas and to Stanley G. Weinbaum's opening of the solar system, Brackett wrote a series of tales involving the antiquated cultures of Mercury, Venus, Mars, and the Asteroids under the ecumenical dominion of a Terran Empire in its brash ascendancy. Brackett's Martian stories parallel Bradbury's, but are more brutal than his, granting a greater degree of robustness to the colonized

Martians. Brackett nevertheless, like Moore and Kuttner, ever apologizes for the normative, and this means that she defines the difference between the ethically acceptable and the ethically unacceptable according to the absence or presence of sacrifice. It is significant that, in one of the few explanations that she offered of her interest in the popular forms, she said the following: “The so-called space opera is the folk-tale, the hero-tale, of our particular niche in history” (Preface to *The Best of Planet Stories* 2-3). “The Beast-Jewel of Mars” (1948) is explicitly devoted to an examination of sacrifice and provocatively links sacrifice to the politics of resentment.

“The Beast-Jewel of Mars” revolves around *Shanga,* translatable as “the return” or “the going-back” (*The Coming of the Terrans* 8), a cult “forbidden centuries ago by the city-states of Mars” (9), which has reappeared with the arrival of the earthmen. The cult thus corresponds to a Lucretian *lapsus in antiquas religiones.* The sacred objects of the cult, the Jewels of Shanga, date back reputedly to “a half a million years ago” (14) when the priests of Caer Dhu carved them by a science now lost. The scheme resembles that in “The Dust of the Gods” by Moore, where a fragment of demonic Pharol’s vanished world turns up in the deep rubble of the polar mountains of Mars. Certain plotters, as we have seen, want artifacts from the anomaly, the ones that Smith and Yarol refuse to export but, rather, destroy *in situ.* In Brackett’s story, a Martian named Kor Hal tells protagonist Burk Winters that, despite having inaugurated Shanga as an escape from war and violence, the people of Caer Dhu quickly “perished” and “in one generation . . . vanished from the face of Mars.” Brackett gives us a sketch of the Lucretian notion of how the ennui of long-standing security makes the beneficiaries of earlier demonic banishments vulnerable to cultic revival. Only a continuously upheld psychic vigilance can keep such atavistic deformations at bay.

Because Shanga exerts an addictive attraction on those who indulge it, however, shame attaches to the habit. Winters himself seeks in Shanga an escape from romantic tragedy, namely, from the death of his fiancée, who herself frequented the cult. Shanga addicts, like all addicts, crave their drug in ever stronger doses; no longer satisfied with the Shanga experience offered to urbane weaklings, Winters inquires about “the real thing” (9). The price turns out to be much higher than expected. Winters finds himself abducted by Kor Hal to Valkis, “very evil, but not tired” (13), one of the ancient Martian cities where earthmen do not come. The rays of the Jewels affect people in a particular way: They induce atavism, on the mental level at first, but then on the physical level; Shanga releases its subjects from neurosis by releasing them from the modernity of their minds, dragging them back to the animal level. In its most potent form, the Jewels catalyze physical regression, from human to ape and beyond. Exposed to “the real thing,” people quickly degenerate into animal helplessness. Stripped of much of his intellect, Winters

appears in confusion before Kor Hal and certain other Martians.

> “Captain Burk Winters,” said Kor Hal. “Man of the tribe of Terra – lords of the spaceways, builders of the Trade Cities, masters of greed and rapine.
>
> “Look at him, Oh men of Valkis!” cried Kor Hal. “He is our master now. His government kings it over the City-States of Mars. Our pride is stripped, our wealth is gone. What have we left, oh children of a dying world?”
>
> The answer that rang from the walls of Valkis was soft and wordless, the opening chord of a hymn written in hell. Someone threw a stone. (19-20)

Winters suddenly becomes the object of a classic lapidation and of other noticeably pharmakotic indignities. As does Moore in “The Scarlet Dream,” Brackett associates the demonic with crowds. But the Valkisians postpone killing their victim, the better to prolong his humiliation, just as Cenbe, in Kuttner’s “The Vintage Season,” lingers over the prolonged misery of those on whose misery he makes his art. The cultists herd Winters into the *chora* of an immensely old amphitheater where they have confined other addicts of Shanga who at last foolishly asked for “the real thing.” Nightly, the Valkisians expose these unfortunates to further baths of the Shanga radiation, causing ever further degeneration. While Brackett’s text is not quite as dense with invention as Moore’s or Kuttner’s, she nevertheless grasps the basic function of sacrifice in a more schematically clear way than Moore or Kuttner. Sacrifice supplies the means whereby a threatened group vents its resentment against real or imaginary enemies and resolidifies itself in the face of imminent dissolution. Such consolidations anew are never more than temporary, however, which is why, in historical societies based on sacrifice, the rituals become increasingly grandiose and bloodthirsty. The Mesoamerican societies overthrown by the Spaniards offer the outstanding example. Fand, the queen and high priestess of Valkis, explains the Valkisian motive to Winters this way during one of his carefully planned lucid episodes: The earthmen, says Fand, made of Mars “a world that could not even die in decency and honor, because the carrion birds came flying to pick its bones, and the greedy rats suck away the last of its blood and pride” (34-35). Shanga is private retribution. Winters calls Fand a “fanatic” and says that she goes “even beyond fanaticism” (49). The whole of Valkis does seem bloodthirstily mad, as symbolized by Fand’s mother, a shriveled old woman with wild hair who chants in tongues like some mindless sibyl. Winters somewhat improbably contrives to kidnap Fand herself into the pit where, exposed to the radiation, she instantaneously reverts to the ancestral protomorph of the Martians. In the mêlée that follows, Winters escapes.

11

Sacrifice is the secret shame of Brackett's Mars, deplored even by most Martians. In the late and luridly titled "Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon" (1964), an earthman named Bentham and a Martian named Firsa Mak try to enlist the help of a young official of the Colonial government, Harvey Selden, to expose and abrogate the secret of the Mad Moon cult. Bentham, Mak, and their confederates must overcome the problem that no one believes in the existence of sacrifice. Selden, who has been schooled on earth in Martian history and culture, rehearses the textbook statement that the imputation of blood rites was merely a case of mistaken interpretation on the part of early explorers who did not correctly grasp the metaphorical content of certain Martian tales: "The early accounts," Selden says, "resulted from distortions of folklore, misinterpretation of local customs, pure ignorance [and] in some cases . . . downright lies. . . . We don't believe in the Rites of the Purple Priestess and all that nonsense" (146). Selden continues:

> "The men who did the serious research, the anthropologists and sociologists who came after the . . . uh . . . adventurers, were far better qualified to evaluate the data. They completely demolished the idea that the rites involved human sacrifice, and then of course the monstrous Dark Lord [whom] the priestess was supposed to serve was merely the memory of an ancient Earth-god . . . Mars-god, I should say, but you know what I mean, a primitive nature-thing, like sky or wind. [There was a rite] but the experts proved that it was purely vestigial, like, well . . . like our children dancing around the May-pole." (147)

Selden goes so far as to denounce the first phases of humanity on Mars as "strictly piratical" (146), to which Firsa Mak poses an unexpected rejoinder: "Why is it that all you young Earthmen are so ready to cry down the things your people have done?" (147). Like Winters in "The Beast-Jewel of Mars," Selden finds himself kidnapped, but not by someone bent on sacrificing him to assuage envy; rather, by Mak and by another earthman, Altman (Mak's brother-in-law), who, at great risk to themselves, wish to prove to their captive that the rumors of human sacrifice in the cult of the Mad Moon stem from fact, not from any "distortions of folklore." Mak represents the faction of Mars that prefers the orderliness of secular, rationally administered, bourgeois society to the "iniquity" (148) of archaic culture. As long as the old cults persist, as Mak and Altman see it, just so long does the danger of a planetary *lapsus in antiquas religiones* persist along with it. Notice Brackett's doubling of the Lucretian superstition-science dichotomy. At the first level, there is *the Mad Moon Cult* itself, a repulsive phenomenon of archaic times, superseded by

a rational and non-violent order; at the second level, there is the *scientistic superstition* that denies the presence, in past ages, of sacrificial practice, a position opposed by the genuine knowledge that such practices did indeed exist and can enjoy a resurgence. Helpful to such a resurgence is the idea that such things do not now and never did exist. Brackett's too-sophisticated fictional world has its own version of Rousseauism: the savages cannot have been savages, Selden says in effect, but must have been noble; there are signs, *vestiges,* of sacrifice, but no actual sacrifice exists behind these misleading tokens. It is a form of deconstructive nescience ensconced among the bureaucracy and an attitude remarked by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* when he writes that:

> The failure of modern man to grasp the nature of religion has served to perpetuate its effects. Our lack of belief serves the same function in our society that religion serves in societies more directly exposed to essential violence. We persist in disregarding the power of violence in human societies; that is why we are reluctant to admit that violence and the sacred are one and the same thing. (262)

Let us credit Brackett, our commercial writer and participant in what Voegelin calls "the industry" of science fiction with having had just this Girardian insight. I admit that, occasionally, while writing about these stories, I have had the thought that my commentary is too sophisticated for the material. But the conformance of Brackett's characterization of Selden with Girard's theoretical formulation makes me see that my writers really are on to something. They have an insight and it is consistent.

In Jekkara, one of the forbidden cities, Mak and Altman smuggle Selden into the nocturnal rites. Brackett does a creditable job of garbing a Dionysian rout, culminating with a troglodyte sparagmos, in exotic Martian detail. A chorus laments and harps strum manic rhythms as Deimos, known in Martian as Denderon, appears in the night sky above Jekkara's central square. One might call this, borrowing a phrase from "the Vintage Season," "a dreadful symphony." But worse is to come. The revelers march off to a Jekkaran cavern, the disguised interlopers following discreetly. Like Northwest Smith, Selden senses the pull of the very thing that frightens and disgusts him: "A strange and rather terrible eagerness began to stir in him, and this he could not explain at all" (157). We can explain it, of course, as *mimesis.* When the choral singing stops, Selden sees six revelers cull themselves submissively from the crowd, as if hypnotized or drugged, and stand with a priestess on a dais in the remotest depth of the cave. A monstrous cyclopean form manifests itself in the gloom; the six victims vanish in a manner which Selden either does not see or immediately forgets. Selden reluctantly understands that his

kidnappers want him to “tell the Bureau about . . . about *that*” (159). Altman confirms the inference. Mak gives the case as he sees it:

> “This is a burden. We have borne it, Selden. We even take pride in bearing it.” He nodded toward the unseen hills. “*That* has the power of destruction. Jekkara certainly, and Valkis probably, and Barrakesh, and all the people who depend on this canal for their existence. It can destroy. We know. This is a Martian affair and most of us do not wish to have outsiders brought into it. But Altman is my brother and I must have some care for his people, and I tell you that the priestess prefers to choose her offerings from among strangers . . . ” (159)

Back in the safety of civilized Mars, however, Selden reverts to the pure bureaucrat and skeptic. He cannot bear to contradict the textbook lesson that declares the blood-rites to be an ethnocentric slur on a foreign and subject people. Disturbed, he nevertheless keeps his peace and gradually comes to believe what the psychiatrists tell him when he complains of ineradicable anxiety rooted in his recent official posting on the Red Planet: “The whole affair had been a sex fantasy induced by drugs with the priestess and mother-image. The eye which looked at him then and which still peered unwinking out of his recurring dreams was symbolic of the female generative principle, and the feeling of horror that it aroused in him was due to the guilt complex he had because he was a latent homosexual. Selden was enormously comforted” (162). Of the two strands of Martian culture–the one that consists of rites like Shanga and the Mad Moon and the one that, as we read in “The Beast Jewel of Mars,” deliberately suppressed such Dionysianisms–Selden sides effectively with the former. Notice that, as Brackett explains in “The Beast-Jewel of Mars,” it was the *City-States* that banned sacrifice. Brackett thus defines her Martian *civilization* according to the same anti-sacrificial criterion which appears in the stories of Moore and Kuttner. In the *polis,* the elders have banned ritual violence and the Furies have become the Supplicants, as they have also in Aeschylus. Selden petulantly refuses to fill the Promethean role, ascribed by Lucretius to Epicurus, of a deliverer-from-superstition; in this, he is the opposite type of Northwest Smith. Yet the point of the story remains the same.

In a sequence of planetary romances, Brackett’s character John Eric Stark plays the role of deliverer-from-false-gods. In the best of these, *The People of the Talisman,* the false gods are simply technically sophisticated sado-masochists who lure outsiders into their realm on the basis of a tantalizing legend. In the course of the action, Stark is crucified and scourged, seeks revenge, exposes the mendacity of

the false gods, renounces revenge against the character who ordered his torture in the earlier episode, and vanquishes the sado-masochists. It is perhaps a coincidence that Stark's initials are J-E-S; then again, perhaps it is not.

V

René Girard reminds us, in *The Scapegoat* (1981), that Christianity is an explicitly anti-sacrificial religion, and that the whole of the Passion and its aftermath serve the purpose of laying clear the hitherto repressed facts about persecution and victimage so as to deliver humanity from the vicious cycle. This impulse was not, as the case of Lucretius shows, unique to Christianity, which, in any case, owed its critique of the pagan cults to Judaism; the revelation of sacrifice had been gathering force since the Prophets. But the Gospels do seem to crystallize the insight in a dramatic and cogent way. The name *Satan,* Girard remarks, means "persecutor." Satan is also a *slanderer* (this is the meaning of the Greek *Diabolos*) and a tempter, whom the Gospels consistently associate with crowds. The collocation *persecutor-slanderer-tempter* is appropriate and telling because persecution requires vilification and is an almost unavoidable temptation for human beings. The *crowds* in the Old Testament are invariably lynch-mobs, as they are in the rites of Dionysus in Heraclitus' anti-sacrificial polemic:

> Paraders by night, magicians, Bacchantes, leapers to the flute and drum, initiates in the Mysteries–what men call the Mysteries are unholy disturbances of the peace. (Fragment 76)
>
> And Dionysus, through whom they go into a trance and speak in tongues and for whom they beat the drum, do they realize that he is the same god as Hades, Lord of the Dead? (Fragment 77)
>
> They cleanse themselves with blood: as if a man fallen into the pigsty should wash himself with slop. To one who does not know what. s happening, the religious man at his rites seems to be a man who has lost his mind. (Fragment 78)

Both Moore and Brackett likewise, by pure intuition it seems, associate ritual violence and bloodletting with *crowds.* Neither seems to have been a particularly religious person, yet both, in their role as story-tellers, thought a good deal about what makes the primitive, primitive. Both wanted to make their tales exotic by exhibiting something authentically primitive at the narrative cynosure. The same can be said of Kuttner in "The Vintage Season." Kuttner implicitly defines evil as that which delights the crowd by sacrificing someone to it. Neither Moore, nor

Kuttner, nor Brackett needs to have been doctrinally a Christian to have been a theoretician, in his or her way, of the difference between a modern ethos and a primitive one. After all, this distinction is pre-Christian, going back at least to Heraclitus, finding only a more systematic articulation in Epicurus. Nevertheless, the West owes to Christianity, to the Gospels, its definitive summation of the problem. Christianity opposes to the Persecutor-Slanderer-Tempter the *Paraclete,* a word which can be translated as “advocate” and “protector.” The Paraclete stands for the continuity and dispersion of Revelation, in this case, the Revelation of sacrifice as a tragic form of eternal recurrence involving the murder of arbitrarily selected victims, and a way of life which closes off all nobler possibilities. Moore’s Northwest Smith and Brackett’s Burk Winters are, in their minor, pulp-fiction way, Paracletic heroes. Harvey Selden, by contrast, is conspicuously complicit with the persecution of victims and is, in essence, “anti-Paracletic.” But Brackett’s story unequivocally condemns Selden, so that the story itself can be called Paracletic. One could say the same of Kuttner’s “The Vintage Season.” In the stories under discussion, Christianity never becomes a theme, but it constitutes, I would argue, the background condition (to borrow that Lovecraftian term) of the narrative. Smith and Winters meet sacrifice on its home ground and oppose it on behalf of its victims.

But is science fiction generically Paracletic? Have I not carefully selected the handful of stories that fit my limited and prejudicial thesis?

13

The answer is *no.* An astonishingly large number of the best science fiction stories in fact fit into the category of Paracletic narrative. One could even begin with one of the works that I cited in the opening paragraph as an example of “hard” science fiction, Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea.* Captain Nemo, I submit, partially fits the profile of a Paracletic hero. He explains very clearly to Monsieur Arronax that he regards war as an irrational spasm endemic among the nations and that his mission, utilizing the *Nautilus,* is to make an end of war. Robur, in *Robur the Conqueror,* makes the same claim in regard to his self-appointed mission. Both Nemo and Robur are deluded and commit acts which tragically contradict their stated mission, but *in part* they fulfill the Promethean role first set out by Lucretius in his great poem to the scientific spirit, *De rerum natura.* Quite a few of Wells’s protagonists are also deliverers-from-superstition, like the anonymous narrator of *The War of the Worlds* or the anonymous protagonist of *The Time Machine.* It might be significant that Wells’s childhood was religious–specifically Methodist–and that a certain metanoiac fervor characterized him lifelong.

Olaf Stapledon’s two great science fiction epics, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker,* are so thoroughly imbued with Epicureanism–leavened unexpectedly by a Platonic

idea of God as the demiurge–that I cite them almost with embarrassment as being very nearly too good for my argument; it is further the case that in both of those colossal narratives, sacrifice, anti-sacrifice, and *Christianity-as-anti-sacrifice,* are explicit themes. There are serial Christs in *Last and First Men* and a section of *Star Maker* deals with "the Christs of the many worlds." (I am quoting the phrase from memory.) I need only mention Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz,* especially the second part. And Cordwainer Smith deals with sacrifice in "The Dead Lady of Clown Town," "Under Old Earth," "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," and "A Planet Named Shayol," stories which I would place in the top rank of the genre. But even a story like Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Gods of Mars,*which critics might place in the lower ranks, meets the criteria for inclusion into the Paracletic subgenre–if subgenre it is–of science fiction.

The real definition of science fiction, it strikes me, is not as the genre that deals with the social consequences of physical science, but *the genre that deals with theological questions in an age which, officially, has little use for theology.* While finding Voegelin's interesting comments on the genre useful, I nevertheless differ from him in thinking that the modern fantastic story, while clearly expressing the intellectual and spiritual confusion of the times, also occasionally arrives at unexpected clarity.

Science fiction writers have apparently intuited something that our friend Eric L. Gans makes clear in a succinct passage in his *Originary Thinking* (1994), namely, that God is the name for everything that is problematic about human beings, especially the deadly threat that they pose to themselves, and that atheism can never be more than a derivative position:

> Doctrinal atheism in the modern sense only occurs in conjunction with the rise of a rationalized market economy in the early modern era. But what concerns us here is a far broader notion of unbelief that is independent of any assertion of this unbelief or even of any possibility of such an assertion. What is in question is the possibility of the subsistence within an individual of the scene of representation and its associated phenomena–language, desire, the esthetic, and so forth–in the absence of the idea of God. But once the scene has been established through the originary revelation, then, strictly speaking, this idea is no longer necessary for the individual, even if it may remain indispensable to the communal functioning of the scene without which the individual could not subsist. We retain the idea of God without necessarily believing in it because of the indispensable persistence of the communal ground of the scene independently of the individual members of the community. (42)

God, in other words, is the condition (Lovecraft's term again) of social existence. But this condition is itself subject to historical alteration. Girard argues that all archeological and historical cults before Judaism and Christianity were sacrificial, based on the scapegoating mechanism and requiring serial victims; Judaism and Christianity reveal the scapegoating mechanism as the background of the social structure and reveal, at the same time, its arbitrary and murderous nature. This revelation demands the discarding of the sacrificial "condition" in favor of a new, non-sacrificial "condition." Late antique narrative–from the Plato's *Apology* through Lucretius' casting of Epicurus in the Promethean role to Augustine's biography and Athanasius' hagiography–focuses obsessively on the pressing need for this transformation. Blumenberg, whom I cite in my epigraph for other reasons, argues that the assertion of historical parallelism–the claim that Late Antiquity and Modernity are homologous–is an error. Yet it seems to me that the overcoming of Gnosticism, the intellectual task which properly characterizes Late Antiquity according to Blumenberg, recurs in the twentieth century, just as Voegelin argues. I would only stipulate that Gnosis is a variant of the old sacrificial mentality, a doctrine of crisis which seeks victims, as it is essentially exclusionary. (Flaubert portrays it this way in *La tentation de Saint Antoine.*) The twentieth century is, after all, full of prophecy and revelation most of which requires the massacre of whole groups of people deemed to be impeding history or preventing the establishment of justice or utopia. The Nazi crimes are universally known and are sufficiently horrific by themselves. Yet they do not stand unmatched. A perusal of Courtois' *The Black Book of Communism* (2000) reveals not only that the twentieth century has been a colossally sacrificial century, but that rationalizing intellectuals, like Brackett's Selden, have persistently refused to recognize that the insurgent regime is based on a continuing massacre of the anathematized. Courtois arrives at a formulation that parallels that of Girard cited earlier about the modern denial of violence. With respect to the one hundred million Communist victims, Courtois says, a certain "silence" has "managed to win out over the sporadic moments of self-awareness resulting from . . . new analytical work . . . or an irreproachable eyewitness account" (26). Courtois refers to the "widespread reluctance to confront the issue" (26). Related to this *political* denial of violence is an equally widespread *cultural* denial, as in the case of the apologetics for the Mesoamerican cults and the persistent attempt to de-link tragedy from sacrifice.(15) Yet such contradictions of a nagging suspicion always feel inauthentic. In *The Scapegoat,* Girard argues that:

> The failure of mythological genesis, in the case of the martyrs, makes it possible for historians *to understand in a rational light* for the first time and on a large scale the representations of persecution and their corresponding acts of violence. We come upon crowds in their course of their *mythopoeic* activity, and it is not a pretty a sight as our theoreticians

> of myth and literature imagine. Fortunately for anti-Christian humanism, it is still possible to deny the presence of the process that gives birth to mythology in every other context. (200)

14

Girard also permits us to understand the *limit* of the Epicurean or Lucretian epistemology: “The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch-hunts, but the fact that there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented” (204). Epicurus could invent the scientific view of the world because he followed a line of thinkers stretching back to Heraclitus who had performed a massive critique of the Greek sacred. Yet Lucretius remains correct in his assumption that the return of the sacrificial idea of the gods would in effect mean the banishment of the rational order.

I have argued, in a series of articles on modern poetry, that modern poets return to the problem of the ethical condition of modernity again and again and find it appallingly atavistic. Science fiction writers enact the very same gesture. Since the only alternative that can be posed against a sacrificial “condition” is an “anti-sacrificial” one, modern poets–Eliot, Stevens, Williams–more or less inevitably espouse a version of Biblical ethics. Science fiction writers can only do the same, and have done the same. Not all of them, of course, but *the best of them,* including even the pulp writers that I have dealt with in this essay.

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Notes

1. Virtually all of the definitions sampled by John Clute and Peter Nicholls in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* rework this basic idea: A science fiction story "is a narrative of an imaginary invention or discovery" (J.O. Bailey); or it is "speculative fiction . . . which makes use of the 'scientific method'" (Merril); or it is "an awareness of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures, and the insights of the past century of science are accepted as fictional points of departure" (Scholes). But Clute and Nicholls quote Brain Aldiss as defining the genre as "a search for the definition of man," and David Ketterer as calling it a genre that deals in insights that "put humanity in a radically new perspective." The Aldiss citation comes from *The Trillion Year Spree;* the Ketterer from *New Worlds for Old.* Neither work pursues the tentatively "anthropological" definition very deeply.(back)

2. Indeed, crude submersibles had already reached the prototype stage decades before Verne wrote his novel; Robert Fulton built one for Napoleon as early as 1802.(back)

3. I do not wish to do any injustice to Robinson's remarkable imagination: the *Mars* trilogy is intricately plotted, epic in scale, scientifically punctilious, and audaciously inventive; it is even superficially anthropological, in the sense that its shows the adaptation of different terrestrial people (Europeans, Russians, Arabs, Chinese) to the conditions that they find on the Red Planet, and plays with the development of new-age cults in the novel environment. But Robinson is ultimately no more anthropological than Campbell or Clement, in whose tales the machinery forms the center of interest and the characters are strictly props. I still highly recommend Robinson as a great read.(back)

4. In the entry under "History of SF" in Clute and Nicholls' *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1995), Nicholls argues that "a cognitive, scientific way of viewing the world did not emerge until the 17th century" and that, since "SF proper requires a consciousness of the scientific outlook," it cannot have existed in any "meaningful" way until then. Nicholls remains unaware of how rich the scientific heritage was in Antiquity, from Ionian speculation all the way through to Hellenistic mathematics. It also assumes (naturally, one might say) that the essential matter of science fiction is the "cognitive, scientific way of viewing the world." This is precisely what I wish to call into doubt.(back)

5. Plutarch's cosmos is as teeming with demonic entities as Epicurus' is with the primordial atoms. It is this *teeming* character that gives even those serene moments of Plutarch's text, as in *De Iside et Osiride* when he contemplates the

salvific powers of the deity, the sense of a permanent and ineradicable crisis.(back)

6. The latter includes a description, by one of the interlocutors, of an exploratory voyage to the north of Britain, where the narrator of the tale discovers an island on whose shores he hears a great choral lament. The clamor, he explains, was the folk of the island crying out in sorrow over the death of their god, said to have been Pan.(back)

7. This not not Heraclitus of Ephesus, the Ionian logos-philosopher, but a friend and contemporary of Epicurus in the Third Century B.C.(back)

8. Lucretius takes over from Epicurus (who took it from Anaximander) the concept of the plurality of worlds. When Lucretius says that the gods do not belong to *this world,* he means that they belong to one of the *other worlds.* The definition of the term “world” (*mundus*) is: a phenomenal system as visible to its inhabitants; the totality of what our senses comprehend as the world is repeated infinitely, in the Epicurean conception, to other cognizing subjects elsewhere.(back)

9. Episodes that we regard as recursions to sacrifice, such as the witch-mania of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were understood in their own terms as struggles against recrudescences of pre-Christian cults. The Puritan witch-hunters, for example, attempted to link witchcraft with the old Aztec rites suppressed (but not entirely, it appears) by the conquistadors.(back)

10. Clute contributes the entry on Lucian in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.* He gives Lucian to the category of “proto science fiction” and acknowledges *The True History* as providing a kind of tenuous ancestry to the modern genre of the fantastic voyage. But he is still reluctant to grant that Lucian full admission to the genealogy of the genre. (back)

11. The abduction-theme in ufology is noteworthy in the present context: those who believe that they have been abducted, and those who, at second hand, believe the stories, invest in a tale of tribulation with obvious sacrificial overtones. The bizarre ordeals that the aliens inflict on their captives make no sense from any human perspective, but they invariably take the form of a gaggle of demonic creatures unified through their concentration on someone who, in his subjective sense of the exercise, is a victim. The “abductees” invariably feel misfitted to society after their experience and tend to be lonely and neurotic (as perhaps they were well before their subjective experience). For the “abductees,” as for the denizens of the Gnostic universe, reality is an unpredictable place fraught with demonic pitfalls. The image of this radical contingency is that of someone being made the object of an

immolation.(back)

12. Some dispute exists over whether Kuttner is the sole author of this story; the anthology, *The Best of C. L. Moore* (1975), edited by Lester del Rey, attributes “The Vintage Season” to her. It originally appeared, however, under Kuttner’s by-line. (back)

13. I have often suspected, but cannot confirm, the influence of late-romantic and symbolist poetry on writers like Moore, Kuttner, and perhaps even Brackett. The delectation in luxury, which is part of the environment in which characters like Northwest Smith move, resembles a similar phenomenon in mid- and late-nineteenth century literature. It might be Swinburne, who was widely read among English-speakers in the first of the twentieth century, who supplies the influence.(back)

14. Brackett is the most accomplished of my trio. In addition to her pulp fiction in the planetary romance and detective genres, she also wrote screenplays for Hollywood, including a writerly collaboration with William Faulkner on *The Big Sleep,* and did much work as the wordwright for Howard Hawks and John Wayne, including *Rio Bravo, El Dorado,* and *Rio Lobo.* Her last completed literary project was the screenplay for George Lucas’s *The Empire Strikes Back.*(back)

15. The Aztecs, claims Marvin Harris, needed the meat. So it was okay. About the defense of tragedy against the contamination of violence, consider this: After Eric Gans gave his talk on the genetics of tragedy at a scholarly conference, the moderator of the session broke every rule of such occasions by expatiating for ten minutes on the pristine, *i.e.*, putatively non-violent origins of Greek tragedy, and denounced the opposing view as unworthy of consideration. It was a remarkable spectacle. As for my dragging-in of contemporary politics, it is not so arbitrary or tendentious as it might seem. Remember that Lovecraft, in writing to Moore in the 1930s, cautioned her about her then devotion to Marxism, which he described as a kind of religion.(back)