Pyre: A Poetics of Fire and Childhood in the Art of Henry Darger

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Art

Chapel Hill
2007

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ABSTRACT

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Pyre: A Poetics of Fire and Childhood
in the art of Henry Darger
(Under the Direction of Carol Mavor)

Art making for Henry Darger is a recovery of childhood vision with eyes wide open. At the heart of this vision lie the language of fire and the language of childhood, both possessing primal natures too unpredictable and protean to control completely. Fire and childhood reign in Darger’s imagination as icons of instability—mutable and bewitching catalysts pressing and exceeding the boundaries of description and possibility.

Previous scholarship interprets Darger’s visual work in three frames: one, purely narrative, reflecting only the written text of the Realms of the Unreal; two, a Freudian analysis disclosing the artist’s childhood; and three, a paradigm of outsider art. The chapters that shape Pyre acknowledge the value of these interpretive frames, finding their analyses both useful and problematic in revealing meaning in Darger’s art. Pyre broadens current scholarship through inclusive and interdisciplinary modes—reading Darger’s artistic production as a personal mythology filtering and re-interpreting culture. Accordingly, this reading forges new perspectives antithetical to the dominant conceptual model of the solipsistic “outsider artist.”

As a visual artist, Darger conveys moments beyond description through vacillating knowns and unknowns. He wields fiery tropes and narratives bringing forth flame’s vast ability to stimulate reveries of generation, animation, sexuality, desire, spiritual passion, and
destruction. *Pyre* locates these potent manifestations in couplings of fire and little girls, asserting that, within this striking duo, Darger relays the wealth of his art’s emotional investment, spiritual aspirations, and erotic tensions.

*Pyre* considers the range of fiery metaphor and visible flame within the allure of panoramic spectacle, within combinations and re-combinations of girl-bodies, within the invocations of childhood innocence and Catholic religiosity, and within the undercurrents of heated desire that unfurl into excesses of poetics and meaning. Returning time and again to flame’s mercurial manifestations, *Pyre* reveals the elusive transmissions and irresolvable tensions that drive Darger’s *Realms of the Unreal* and locates circuits through which his project, created in a space of privation, openly converses with visual culture and the historical milieu of Darger’s time.
In dedication to my mother, Mary Lou, who gave me a love for art and to my father, Ron, who gave me a love for history
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Art Department and Graduate School for providing support for research and funding of this project. Generous grants from the Henry Luce Foundation for American Art in 2004-2005 and a Terra Foundation for the Arts / ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art in 2005-2006 made it possible for me to conduct archival research and to complete this dissertation. I am also thankful for the opportunities to present versions of chapters in 2003 at the Southeastern College Art Conference and at UNC-Chapel Hill and in 2005 at the “Supreme Sacrifices: Outsider Art at a Crossroads” symposium, North Carolina State University, Raleigh.

Numerous individuals and institutions deserve recognition for their generous support and contributions. First and foremost, I thank my wonderful advisor, Professor Carol Mavor, for her wisdom, mentorship, and laughter. Carol introduced me to the intellectual pleasures of scholarly pursuits. She taught me how to approach material critically, creatively, and with sensitivity. Along with Carol, I wish to thank Professor Mary Pardo for the many hours of stimulating conversation and for cultivating my visual acumen. Carol and Mary have been invaluable to this project. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to study with both of you. Thanks, too, to Professor Mary Sheriff for expanding my knowledge of early modernism and for offering several teaching opportunities within and outside the art department. And, to the remaining members of my dissertation committee, Professors

vi
Dorothy Verkerk, María DeGuzmán and Tyler Curtain, I am most grateful for your enthusiasm, thoughtful feedback, and willingness to lend your wide-ranging expertise.

Several key individuals aided the research of this project. Thank you to Brooke Anderson, Curator, American Folk Art Museum for opening the archives of the Henry Darger Study Center and allowing me to spend numerous hours studying Darger’s art, writings, and compendium materials. Likewise, special thanks to Intuit: The Society for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, for permitting me to sift through Darger’s files and scrapbooks. I wish to thank Intuit’s Collection Committee Chair, Lisa Stone, for making my research visits possible. I am greatly indebted to Janet Newell, a good friend and fellow Darger enthusiast, for graciously sharing her charming East Village apartment with me during my numerous research and conference trips to New York City.

For their intelligence, devotion, and sense of humor, I thank my colleagues Ann Millett, Elizabeth Howie, Betsy Towns, Pam Whedon, and Lindsay Twa. Our “writing group” faithfully gathered throughout the last three years to read each other’s dissertation chapters, conference papers, and job talks. You’ve been (and will continue to be) great friends.

To my family, especially my father, I cannot thank you enough for your love and support. Baby Boo, my muse, you diligently kept me company at my desk. And, finally, much love and thanks to Treva Haynes for seeing me through the finish.
I encountered my first Darger “painting” (collage, graphite, watercolor on paper) in a university museum twenty years ago. The piece rolled on with some length, about six feet of paper lining up roughly a foot and a half high. An expansive, dual-tone landscape held a bevy of ghostly-white girls, turning and looking, wide-eyed and gasping—some sporting curling ram’s horns; others, showcasing resplendent butterfly wings. An array of vibrant colors punctuated the girls’ vacant forms. Cherry-red and lemon-yellow hummed along the surface of floral blooms and dots. Royal blue compelled an umbrella “to pop” in the background (ooh, the Morton Salt Girl). Looking more closely, I began to read the landscapes’ commercial, saccharine language, combining images from children’s coloring books and popular advertisements. A peculiar vivacity brimmed from this girl-infestation in polka dots or in shameless nudity. The painting simultaneously overflowed with charming cute-ness and disarming creepiness; I could not decide which aspect I found more attractive.

Ten years later, under the role of curator, I returned to this Darger painting and to two others: I borrowed them for an exhibition. The museum stored the pieces without frames and in a roll. Gently, we (the registrar and I) unfurled the works. I discovered that Darger embellished both sides of his paintings, and that his art—of ordinary paper, glue, and fugitive color washes—is so poignantly fragile and delicate.

Unrolling the scroll-like landscapes awakened their inhabitants. I found the girls’ gazes mesmerizing—their doll-like bodies willingly compliant with every awkward gait and
gesture. The scenes revealed portentous clouds lurking along horizons, flames ferociously licking at the heels of helpless children, and gargantuan flowers, widely opening, their petals straining towards the sun. Darger’s vision boasted a transgressive playfulness—an erotic pull between innocence and sensuality, suffusing with a heavy dose of childlike ebullience.

His art seemed so out-of-place in the university museum, juxtaposed to contrived designs of modernist sculptures, the tight decorum of English portraits, and the whiff of prestige and privilege emanating from the institution’s walls. Curiously, his make-do aesthetic also refused to blend-in with the vernacular and self-taught art of our show. Darger’s landscapes complicated my understanding of art and artistic production then. His art still complicates my work in difficult and pleasurable ways, today.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- List of Figures: xi
- Introduction: 1
- Chapter One: *Conflagration !!!*: 34
- Chapter Two: *Pure (Pyre)*: 80
- Chapter Three: *Desire*: 138
- Conclusion: *Life*: 190
- Figures: 202
- Bibliography: 272
## LIST OF FIGURES

1.1 Henry Darger, *SECONDS BEFORE DEATH*, *Dick speeds along on his home-made Scooter Car*, page from *Pictures of Fires Big or Small in which Firemen or Persons Lose their Lives*, c. 1950-70

1.2 Anonymous, *Untitled (boy on street watching fire)*, c. 1926
Collection of the Chicago Historical Society

1.3 Iserson Imports advertisement, “new scintillating spring fashions,” 1936

1.4 Henry Darger, *At Rossanna Hogan. Vivian Girls are again chased by foe, but escape by setting tall grass on fire near battle line*, n.d.

1.5 Henry Darger, *Untitled (battle scene during lightning storm)*, n.d.

1.6 Henry Darger, *At Sunbeam Creek. Are with little girl refugees again in peril from forest fires but escape this also, but half naked and in burned rags*, n.d.

1.7 Henry Darger, *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls)*, c. 1945

1.8 Anonymous, documentary photograph of Henry Darger’s apartment, c. 1973

1.9 Anonymous, documentary photograph of Henry Darger’s apartment, c. 1973

1.10 Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (avian habitat)*, 1942

1.11 Dorothea Tanning, *Children’s Games*, 1942

2.1 Henry Darger, *The Battle of Calverhine*, c. 1929

2.2 Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432

2.3 Martin Johnson Heade, *Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay*, 1868

2.4 Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. While sending warning to their father watch night black cloud of coming storm through windows*, c. 1945 (detail with Heade’s *Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay*)

2.5 Henry Darger, *A Host of Calverinians*, n.d.
2.6 Souvenir photograph of Henry Darger and Whillem Schloeder from Chicago’s Riverside Amusement Park, n.d.

2.7 Cover of *The Great Chicago Fire: The Human Account*, 1946 commemorative publication, Henry Darger’s personal library

2.8 Henry Darger, tracing of Sears Roebuck model, n.d.

2.9 Henry Darger, *At Cederine. She witnesses a frightful slaughter of officers*, n.d.

2.10 Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls)* featuring clumping girl-wall effect, c. 1945

2.11 Jan and Hubert van Eyck, detail of *Ghent Altarpiece*, featuring assembly of angels, 1432

2.12 Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (we will slam them with our wings)* featuring clumping girl-wall effect, c. 1945

2.13 Henry Darger, *Untitled (collage of faces with Joe Namath)*, c. 1968


3.1 “The Greatest Mother in the World,” 1918, World War I poster designed by Alonzo Earl Foringer

3.2 *The Littlest Rebel* film still, 1935, starring Shirley Temple

3.3 Henry Darger, *Untitled (Vivian collage)*, n.d.

3.4 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Infant Samuel Praying*, 1778

3.5 Henry Darger, detail from *Untitled (Vivian collage)* featuring girl in bed

3.6 Henry Darger, *At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck. The result after Violet saves a priest and his sacred monstrance for being shot*, n.d.

3.7 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Penelope Boothby*, 1788

3.8 “Butterflies” from Wheeler’s Graded Readers: A First Reader (1901)

3.9 “Butterflies” with Henry Darger’s additions of tongue and black eyes

3.10 Documentary photograph of Henry Darger’s apartment featuring Catholic icons

3.11 “The Virgin of the Smile” icon
3.12 Henry Darger, *At Angelina Agatha*. Jennie in vain offers her sight lost in an accident for the conversion of John Manley her worst enemy. Instead her sight suddenly came back. n.d.

3.13 Henry Darger, detail of *At Angelina Agatha* featuring St. Thérèse of Liseux’s holy card and Sacred Heart of Jesus holy card

3.14 St. Thérèse of Liseux holy card (The Little Flower of Christ)

3.15 Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls)* featuring pansy-passion flower-pansy motif on girls’ skirts

3.16 Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (kindergarten scene)*, n.d.

3.17 Example of *hortus conclusis*: Follower of Robert Campin, *Madonna and Child with Saints in Enclosed Garden*, c. 1440

3.18 Henry Darger, *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee*. Vivian girls witness childrens [sic] bowels and other entrails torn out by infuriated Glandelinians. The result after the massacre. Only a few of the murdered children are shown here, n.d.

3.19 Henry Darger, cover to *Pictures of Fires Big or Small in which Persons or Firemen Lose Their Lives*, c. 1950-1970

3.20 Henry Darger, page from *Pictures of Fires* …, “no cartoons please”

3.21 Henry Darger, page from *Pictures of Fires*…, Bo Peep with commemorative Iroquois Theater Fire article (1968)

3.22 Jean-Baptiste Grueze, *Innocence*, c. 1790

3.23 Henry Darger, *Untitled (Heart of Jesus)*, n.d.

4.1 Henry Darger, *At Sunbeam Creek…At Torrington* (three panels), n.d

4.2 Henry Darger, *At Torrington*. Are persued [sic] by a storm of fire but save themselves by jumping into a stream and swim across as seen in the next picture, n.d.

4.3 Henry Darger, *Their color is caused by glare of flames. At Torrington. They reach the river just in the nick of time*, n.d.

4.4 Henry Darger, *Jennie Richee. They are placed in concentration camp with crowd of child prisoners*, n.d.
4.5 Anonymous photograph from magazine (bathtub quintet), from Henry Darger’s magazine clippings

4.6 Coppertone Girl advertisement

4.7 Hieronymous Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1505-1515

4.8 Henry Darger, *Untitled* (detail), n.d.

4.9 Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Storm Continues. Lightning Strikes Shelter but no one is injured* (detail), n.d.


4.12 “Joan of Arc Saved France,” 1918, World War I poster designed by Haskell Coffin

4.13 Henry Darger, flags of Abbiennia and Angelinia, n.d.


4.15 Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, c. 1952-54


5.2 Cover of “The Littlest Rebel” children’s book

5.3 Henry Darger, *At Resurrectoaction Run. Attacked by fierce Glandelinians, one of the Vivians hurls grenades*, n.d.

5.4 Andy Warhol, *Six Self-Portraits*, 1967

5.5 Andy Warhol, *Marilyn*, 1967

5.6 Henry Darger, *Untitled* (detail), n.d.

5.7 Andy Warhol, *Flowers*, 1964

5.8 Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Racing Through a field of gigantic flowers to seek shelter as the storm renews*, n.d.
Introduction

He wanted the quiet rapture again. The breath of desire that arose as he had looked over his best books. The quick joy of having good times of his babyhood days. Once he had such desires but they did not return now. They seemed to him to belong to another world, even if these scenes of his younger boyhood days were given back to him, he did not believe he would really know what to do. It would be like gazing at a photograph of a dead comrade—the days they spent together take on a mournful life in the memory, but the boy in himself surely is no more.

-Henry Darger, The Realms of the Unreal

SECONDS BEFORE DEATH…Dick speeds along on his home-made Scooter Car. A contrary mixture of childhood pleasure and impending danger overlaps and heightens a tenuous moment on this page within Henry Darger’s fire scrapbook, Pictures of Fires Big or Small in which Firemen or Persons Lose their Lives. (c.1950-1970) (fig. 1.1) Peculiar couplings of a boy at play and fiendish flame, of visual rhetoric governing coloring books and photo-journalism, and of an imaginary childhood and unimaginable reality collide and combust, re-vitalizing each other. Although Darger obscures the majority of the boy’s body, we can still follow his steady form thrusting forward, leaning into and resisting the drag of oncoming air. The curvature of his back extends into the photograph’s palpable division between thick smoke and inky sky; his head culminates in the explosive, round mass of a cascading fire-ball. We do not need to see his face for we already know this boy’s gleeful

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1 Henry Darger from The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion (unpublished, c. 1911-1939) as quoted in the documentary, In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger, Director Jessica Yu, Diorama Films, 2005.
expression. The combination of “child” with simple, dash lines tugging through the air comic book codes implying movement—trigger powerful memories of the thrill of speed and the euphoria of childish expenditure.

Drawing energy from the same active and serendipitous faculty as child’s play, this page unfolds in portentous ways striking the imagination to seek out connections where none existed previously. A simple process of collage abruptly restructures elements and visual formats enabling an emergent commingling of evanescent childhood with fire’s sublime allure. Amidst this page’s fleeting sensations, Darger deliberately sustains an edge of danger. He conjures a haunting and mythic memento mori out of the most incongruous, banal pictures. The pyric juxtapositions within this scrapbook, as within Darger’s art as a whole, belong to the realm of art and poetry, an expansive space that encompasses the infinite potentiality of the world and its objects.

As a visual artist, Darger conveys moments beyond description through vacillating knowns and unknowns. Familiar sights and scenarios—quotidian imagery and narratives—unravel, shift, and gain momentum as they metamorphose into strange, contradictory entities. His landscapes call from afar; infinite horizons beckon with mystery while the capricious churning of storm clouds signal latent danger. Fires pop up without cause or warning, emitting a poetics of surprise and theatrics. Little girls, embodying virtue and the mysteries of Catholic faith, enigmatically morph and sprout male genitalia, as well as, the resolve of warriors. These, among many formal and conceptual elements in Darger’s art, move through each other forming and re-forming their significant castes. Darger invites us to witness such transmutations offering little insight into their meaning or purpose. As a result,
Darger’s art forges a map of his desire—a rich and complex visual terrain of uncertainties, fragments, syncopating rhythms and multivalent paths.

Art making for Darger is a recovery of childhood vision with eyes wide open. At the heart of this vision lie the language of fire and the language of childhood, both possessing primal natures too unpredictable and protean to control completely. Fire and childhood reign in Darger’s imagination as icons of instability—mutable and bewitching catalysts pressing and exceeding the boundaries of description and possibility. Between representations arousing morbid fascination (SECONDS BEFORE DEATH) and the bliss of youthful buoyancy, Darger fabricates a paradoxical realm where divergent worlds communicate through patterns of contradictions and ambiguities. Inventing a personal mythology, Darger creates an excess of sensuous and disturbing images that oscillate between the sacred and the profane pulling the invisible veils of convention asunder and revealing, as he defines, “the unreal.”

The Realms of the Unreal

No one noticed Henry Darger’s art until six months before his death.\(^2\) In November of 1972, at age eighty, Darger moved into a nearby convalescent home operating under the Little Sisters of the Poor, Chicago. Realizing that Darger was too infirmed to return and to retrieve his belongings, his landlord Nathan Lerner, began to clean-out forty-years of clutter

\(^2\) According to landlord Kiyoko Lerner and neighbor David Berglund, each saw either a piece of Darger’s art in his apartment or witnessed him making it. Darger’s “isolation” appears to have been a two-way relationship; no one took much interest in Darger’s activities. Likewise, Darger did not tell anyone about his art. Art critic Michael Bonesteel writes, “Kiyoko recalled going into his room on one occasion to change a light bulb and noticing a drawing on the table. “Henry, you’re a good artist,” she remarked. “Yes,” replied Darger. “I am.” Bonesteel continues, “Berglund also remembered going into Darger’s room one day and seeing him work. “I looked over his shoulder as he was doing one of his big paintings. He was very happy doing this, singing a song quietly to himself.” See Michael Bonesteel, Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings (New York: Rizzoli Press, 2000) 13.
in Darger’s cramped studio—heaps of eye glass frames, Pepto-Bismol bottles, magazines, newspapers, and several balls of twine. Lerner found a bewildering array of writings and visual art hidden beneath these oddments and collections: a 5,084 page autobiography, *The History of My Life*; a ten year journal noting daily weather conditions and forecasts; a scrapbook of newspaper clippings reporting devastating fires that Darger pasted over coloring book pages; numerous, massive lexicons of pictures from popular media that Darger organized/pasted into phone books and coloring books; ledgers tabulating casualties (in the thousands) from fictional battles; loose-leaf collages he packed with human faces, with hand-colored battle scenes; and with little girls from every imaginable commercial source; drawings of flags and military regalia; and two monumental, multi-volume texts: *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the realms of the unreal, of the Glandec-O-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (c. 1911-1971) of 15,145 typed pages and a sequel, an untitled tale of the Vivian Girl’s adventures in Chicago (started c. 1939, unfinished) of 8,000 pages. Amazed by his discovery of such unrestrained expression, Lerner approached Darger, only to find reticence. “It’s too late now,” Darger lamented, and in a gesture of remarkable indifference, offered his apartment’s contents to Lerner.

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3 *The History of My Life* (written 1967-70) contains two separate stories, the first, an autobiographical narrative up to page 206 followed by the second, what Darger called, “a fictional story of a huge twister called ‘Sweetie Pie.’”

4 Notations in the weather books begin on January 1, 1958 (when Darger was 65 years old) and continue through December 31, 1967. Darger titled this ten-year collection *Weather Report of Cold and Warm, Also Summer Heats and Cool Spells, Storms and Fair or Cloudy Days Contrary to What the Weatherman Says, and Also True Too.*

5 This scrapbook, *Pictures of Fires big or small in which firemen or persons lose their lives,* recorded deadly fires from Chicago and other urban centers dating from the 1950s and 60s. Darger also used this scrapbook to augment his collection of fire and storm pictures. Graphite tracing marks along the outlines of smoke and cloud formations reveal that he studied and appropriated the articles’ photographic imagery.
Three bound volumes of illustrations accompanied *The Story of the Vivian Girls* (...the Realms) with around three hundred, double-sided watercolor-drawings of various sizes—some unfolding up to twelve feet in length. Without noting their number or sequence, Lerner cut each page from their binding (carefully hand-sewn by Darger) and introduced Darger’s work to the art world (gradually through students, then, small exhibitions, and, eventually, openly-marketing pieces through Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago).7 Today, Darger’s art scatters the globe. A complete account of its provenance and whereabouts remains unknown.8

The fictional narrative of *The Realms of the Unreal* describes, in encyclopedic detail, holy wars between practitioners of child-slavery—the god-less, satanic nation of Glandelinia—and the Catholic kingdoms under Angelinia. In this mythic saga, the Vivian Girls, seven young princess-orphans become the catalyst for insurrection and subsequent liberation of thousands of indigenous, child slaves. Set within an unnamed, imaginary planet, the narrative describes, with journalistic detail and cyclic repetition, battle scenes, acts of martyrdom, storms, and cataclysmic fires. Watercolor-drawings overlay sinister violence on verdant pastoralism: adult male armies (against idyllic landscapes with birds and flowers) pursue, strangle, and eviscerate little girls (nude and, at times, with male genitalia). In

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6 Considering that Darger was probably aware of his approaching death, being “too late” in regards to his art may suggest his inextricable connection to the life and vitality of his projects. Darger’s neighbor, David Berglund recounts, “I visited him in the home, just once. I looked at him and said, ‘Henry, you have paintings in the room!’ He got this look in his eyes...it wasn’t just the look, it was like I’d taken the wind out of him, and his eyes kind of moistened, and he said, ‘It’s too late now,’ and he didn’t want to talk about it.” John M. MacGregor, *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002) 84.

7 Nathan Lerner remembers three volumes of illustrations. Initially Lerner gave pieces of Darger’s art to his students at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1977, Lerner organized the first exhibition of Darger’s work at Chicago’s Hyde Park Art Center.

8 Twenty visual works, along with numerous, smaller collages, Darger’s writings, and his collection of literature, comprise the “Henry Darger Study Center” at New York’s American Folk Art Museum. Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago owns Darger’s personal effects, some newspaper clippings, and numerous scrapbooks, including *Pictures of Fires Big and Small*...
apocalyptic fashion, good eventually triumphs over evil, ushering in a golden age of childhood bliss.

Loosely basing his story upon the circumstances of the American Civil War, Darger appropriates whole paragraphs from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as well as, Stowe’s angelic protagonist, Little Eva. Additionally, Darger references locations and characters from L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books and emulates the multiple “little” orphan-adventurers from his collection of children’s literature (including Johanna Spyri’s *Heidi*, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, and Little Nell from Charles Dicken’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*).

Apart from a number of short catalogue essays, John M. MacGregor’s *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* (2002) presents the only critical discussion of Darger’s art work. In addition to composing an important biographical sketch of Darger’s formative years, MacGregor, (a psychotherapist, an art historian, and, the author of *Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (1989)) offers psychoanalytic interpretations on specific elements of Darger’s life and work. Overall, MacGregor argues that Darger’s art symbolizes a “depiction of an internal mental state: a deeply troubled and troubling externalization of traumatic experiences distressingly familiar to Henry Darger; a revisiting of scenes from his own childhood.”

A specialist on the controversial category of “outsider art,” MacGregor intersperses his scholarship with provocative suggestions of Darger’s degenerate mental state: “the split-off ‘Glandelinian’ portion of Darger’s psyche is arguably the mind of a serial killer made

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10 MacGregor, 21.
visible,” “indeed he (Darger) seems to have known almost nothing about sex,” and “Darger’s life was unique, bizarrely personal, pathological perhaps.”

Subsequent criticism of Darger’s art follows MacGregor’s lead, labeling Darger as the art world’s consummate “outsider artist”—an individual free of exterior, cultural influences and the “contaminating” effects of the art world. Art critic, Michael Bonesteel, one of a few writers who question the dominant categorical assessment of Darger’s art, expressed his reservations in 2001:

One is struck by the parallels between Darger and other hard-to-categorize artists, such as Joseph Cornell. Both were untrained, had longstanding artistic projects, were obsessed with nineteenth-century historical subjects, lost their fathers at critical ages, were sexually stunted and fixated on young girls, developed innovative collage-based methods of incorporating found imagery, and even discovered techniques for doing enlargements around the same time. And yet Cornell is considered one of the outstanding figures of mainstream art in the twentieth-century, while Darger is relegated to the world of Art Brut. This is not to say that we should abandon the idea of Darger as an Outsider artist, which in many respects he was; nor, for that matter, should we consider Cornell one, for in most respects he was not. But it is likely that the real difference between the two artists is more a matter of degree than kind. Perhaps it is not so much a matter of whether or not Darger belongs in the Outsider art category, but more a matter of whether that category can truly contain him.

Although Bonesteel posits dubious assumptions about Darger’s and Joseph Cornell’s “stunted sexuality,” he initiates a shift in thinking concerning what is “in” and what is “out”

11 John M. MacGregor, Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal, 23, 22, and 26, respectively.

12 Michael Moon’s scholarship on Darger (currently unpublished) is a welcome exception to this “outsider” trend. In October 2001, Moon presented a talk on the queer sensibilities of Darger’s art at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In Folk Art Magazine (the American Folk Art Museum’s publication), Moon expressed his interest in Darger’s re-casting of gender in appropriations of different modes and styles of writing: “He [Darger] often channels the Heidi books and so-called shopgirl-romance novels right alongside military memoirs and other hypermasculine forms of adventure narrative.” “Update: The Henry Darger Study Center” in Folk Art 29, no. 4 (winter 2004/2005): 78.

13 Bonesteel, 17.
of the art world, or mainstream culture. Considering Cornell as a parallel, hard-to-categorize example underscores the relativity of these divisions. Moreover, in light of Darger’s rising cult-like status and of contemporary art and theory’s interest in childhood, gender, and sexuality, one can, now, hardly perceive Darger as “outside.”

The art canon’s politics of marginalization and control fabricate this notion of “outside” in terms of outsider art (as this chapter will reveal). However, as Bonesteel intimates, a level of truth does prevail when referring to Darger as an outsider operating on the peripheries of conventions. As contemporary theory reminds us, truth is always provisional and partial, and reading a work


Who’ll save the poor little girl? Henry Darger.  
Who’ll save the poor little girl? Henry.  
Who’ll tell the story of her? Henry Darger.  
Who’ll tell it all to the world? Henry.  
Who’ll buy the carbon paper now? Henry Darger.  
Who’ll trace the lines of her mouth? Henry.

Who will conquer foreign worlds searching for the stolen girls? Princesses you’ll never fear the patron saint of girls is here!  
Who will draw the cavalry in and risk his very own precious skin to make our Angelinia a free and peaceful land, again? Henry.

Who’ll love a poor orphan child, Henry Darger, lost, growing savage and wild? Henry.

of art is a relative and unstable endeavor that scholars will inevitably revise. This
dissertation does not attempt to make a comprehensive, definitive interpretation of Darger’s
art. Instead, this introduction and subsequent chapters offer a conceptual framework for
approaching the art’s production of meanings and for approaching the art’s ambiguous
standing in the art world.

Previous scholarship interprets Darger’s visual work in three frames: one, purely
narrative, reflecting only the written text of *the Realms*; two, a Freudian analysis disclosing
the artist’s childhood; and three, a paradigm of outsider art (a construct selectively
incorporating frames one and two). The chapters that shape *Pyre* acknowledge the value of
these interpretive frames, finding their analyses both useful and problematic in revealing
meaning in Darger’s art. *Pyre* broadens current scholarship through inclusive and
interdisciplinary modes—reading Darger’s artistic production as a personal mythology
filtering and re-interpreting culture. Accordingly, this reading forges new perspectives
antithetical to the dominant conceptual model of the solipsistic “outsider artist.” The
following chapters do not intend to judge the idiosyncrasies of Darger’s artistic vision, in
particular, his depictions of children bearing markers of both sexuality and innocence. As
theorist James Kincaid demonstrates, culture produces “the child’s” purity while
simultaneously producing the fear of childhood experience, corruption, and eroticism. A
determination of Darger’s amorality or abnormality on our behalf reveals more about our
fears and anxieties than the actual machinations at work in his imagery.

From an open, yet, no less truthful and significant perspective, the narratives of *Pyre*
genear Darger’s art through thematic analysis of the artist’s writings, mature works, collages,
and compendium materials. The frequent presence of fire within Darger’s visual work, text,
autobiography, scrapbooks of newspaper articles, and personal collection of literature prompt my choice of flame as a thematic focus and as an entry point into his artistic vision.

Fire remains, as theorist Gaston Bachelard reminds us, an excessive, poetic image replete with inflamed speech, “beyond all decorative intent, at times even aggressive in its beauty.” Darger intuitively understands fire’s superfluous language. He wields fiery tropes and narratives bringing forth flame’s vast ability to stimulate reveries of generation, animation, sexuality, desire, spiritual passion, and destruction. *Pyre* locates these potent manifestations in couplings of fire and little girls, asserting that, within this striking duo, Darger relays the wealth of his art’s emotional investment, spiritual aspirations, and erotic tensions.

Correspondences between the languages of fire and childhood vitalize Darger’s artistic corpus through contradictions and transgressions, as well as, through resurfing measures of nostalgia, loss, and desire. Conceiving of fire and the girl-child as one of many symbolic, liminal embodiments in Darger’s art, this dissertation considers their poetic dimensions in surrealist terms, as fluid movements between matter and metaphor. Darger’s couplings of fire and girls take the ordinary into the extraordinary; they disturb and evoke ambiguity rather than specific ideas.

By considering parallels between Darger and Cornell, and, even, between the diverse works of Martin Johnson Heade, Andy Warhol and Hieronymous Bosch (all somewhat surreal, as well), *Pyre* probes the rich complexity teeming beneath the surface of Darger’s seemingly impenetrable, fictional world. While gathering these ends, *Pyre* considers the range of fiery metaphor and visible flame within the allure of panoramic spectacle, within combinations and re-combinations of girl-bodies, within the invocations of childhood
innocence and Catholic religiosity, and within the undercurrents of heated desire that unfurl into excesses of poetics and meaning. Returning time and again to flame’s mercurial manifestations, *Pyre* reveals the elusive transmissions and irresolvable tensions that drive Darger’s *Realms of the Unreal* and locates circuits through which his project, created in a space of privation, openly converses with visual culture and the historical milieu of Darger’s time.

**Childhood**

Darger (1892-1973) grew up in Chicago, a few decades after the Great Fire of 1871, during a tumultuous era framed by tremendous growth, political unrest, and growing concerns for child welfare. The nation’s second largest urban center gloated over the dignified presence of its neoclassical “White City,” while aldermen prospered financially in the red glow of the infamous Levee District. British journalist William T. Stead condemned Chicago in 1894 as “a cyclone of moral indignation,” pointing out the irony of hungry masses in a city with abundant supplies of grain and stockyards. The Progressive Era (1870-1930) ushered children’s rights to the fore as reforms in medicine, insurance, and child labor evolved into civic concerns for the physical welfare of the child. With issues such as the “moral hazards of the streets,” —the estimation of 5,000 children daily in busy Chicago

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16 The “white city” became the moniker of plastered, white-washed buildings at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition. The expo was postponed a year due to a long debate between officials of the city of Chicago and New York over location. Chicago’s shameless self-promotion earned it the nickname, the “windy city.” See James R. Grossman, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 882.

17 According to Chicago lore, the phrase “red light district” stems from the ubiquitous red glass used in transoms of the Levee District’s brothels. See Lisa Krissoff Boehm, *Popular Culture and the Enduring Myth of Chicago*, 84.

18 Stead was particularly aghast at the 3,000 men who were fed daily by the city’s saloons (far outnumbering those receiving aid from charitable social or church organizations). Come elect time, these men returned the favor with votes. William T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago!* (1894) 244 and 68.
thoroughfares, (boot-blacks, “newsies,” delivery boys and the myriad numbers playing, fighting, and spectating)—growing streams of spiritual, sentimental, and government reforms elevated the sacralization of children’s lives to public policy.19

Darger grew up in Chicago’s bustling streets during this sweeping crusade of child-saving and “windy” chatter. His autobiography, penned while in his sixties, nostalgically recounts moments of watching and setting fires (rarely, he speaks of other forms of play or entertainment). Numerous anecdotes suggest that his interest in flame evolved well beyond his formative years.20 Descriptive passages indicate the variety of experiences and social interactions that fire-watching and fire-play offered—from moments of reverie and familial bonding, to reactions of fear and respect, and to acts of revenge. Often his words carry a cautionary tone, as if monitored by paternal eyes, “I was also crazy about making bonfires, but was careful I was never scorched, singed, or burned.” Fearful of buildings on fire, “big or small as they were,” Darger confesses he would, “never run to go to fire.” Instead, the young Darger would, “stay at home to watch the great cloud of smoke or the glow in the sky at night-time.”21

Darger’s boyhood fascination with fire indicates a larger cultural phenomenon of fire-watching in early twentieth-century Chicago. Historians note that fires served as mass entertainment drawing thousands of onlookers; blazes filled newspaper stories and provided


20 One can also assume that Darger talked about fire as an adult – maybe too much: “One day I told Sister Dorothy and others of the big grain elevator fire I seen at the Illinois Central Railroad and one asked, did you set it?” Darger, History of My Life, 85.

21 Darger, History of My Life, 12.
the subject of theatrical performances. Firemen became “protectors of the innocent,” as they claimed a reverent status in the popular imagination. With this in mind, viewing a photograph of an anonymous boy in the street, dangerously close to firemen and reporters in downtown Chicago (c. 1926) (fig. 1.2), one begins to comprehend the spectacle that fire offered for both children and adults.

While Chicago commemorated the city’s watershed event, the Great Fire of 1871, with parades, pageants, and firework displays, fire continued to threaten human life and property. In 1903 alone, over 6,000 fires raged in Chicago, including the deadliest single building fire in the United State’s history—the tragedy at the Iroquois Theater killing 602 people, mostly women and children. The median age of the deceased hovered around nine, nearly the same age as Darger. Several destructive blazes throughout the following decades rekindled the social and cultural significance of Chicago’s battle against flame. As Darger’s scrapbook, *Pictures of Fires Big and Small in which Firemen or Persons lose their Lives* attests, popular coverage and civic investment in Chicago’s fires continued well into the late 1960s.


\[24\] Chicago’s deplorable stockyards made famous by Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) burned in 1910 taking with it 21 fallen firefighters. They burned again in 1934 along with eight city blocks in the south side totaling $6 million in damages. In 1946 the LaSalle Hotel fire killed 61 guests. A fire at Our Lady of the Angels elementary school in 1958 left 92 students and three nuns dead. McCormick Place’s “incombustible” convention halls lay in a twisted heap of smoldering ruins in 1967 totaling a loss of $52 million. Fires in Chicago consistently broke national records regarding loss of life and property. Newspaper clippings from several of Chicago’s fires dating from the 1950s and 60s comprise Darger’s fire scrapbook. See David Cowan, *Great Chicago Fires: Historic Blazes that Shaped a City* (Chicago: Lake Claremont Press, 2001) for a more complete history of Chicago’s fires 1812 to the present.
Numerous, lengthy descriptions of building fires comprise the early reminiscences of Darger’s journal. In later pages, he admits to incendiary, vengeful acts and to playing with firecrackers:

In order to get even with him [a street peddler], when he was not at home I took a few of the crates piled them in the center of the yard and set them on fire. Then I quickly left and sat on the steps in front of the house facing the alley. My father soon came out, it being near night, and sat with me. Just about dark we both noticed a light of brightness which I felt sure could not come from the few crates I set afire. I ran over there to see what was the cause. Against the west side of the house the peddler had stacked by three wide an actual wall of the crates. I could not believe my little bonfire so far from there could cause it, but the shebang, included the side of the house, was one high towering mass of singing flame. Some of the blazing crates crashed down, bouncing and covering the spot where I made the little one, erasing evidence against me … The cause of the fire was never known but secretly I found sure proof that my little revengeful bonfire did not do it.26

Asserting his innocence for the larger blaze, Darger feels little remorse and instead, blames the event on the unpredictability of fire. The delight that he takes in describing fire and his control of flame is evident throughout his autobiography, and, as further chapters reveal, throughout his art.

By all accounts, Darger appears to have been one of the city’s at-risk youth. When Darger was around four years old, his mother died while giving birth to his sister. Darger’s father, Henry Sr. gave her up for adoption and raised his son on his own. According to Darger’s autobiography, he spent most of his early childhood taking care of his lame father. Their interactions mainly consisted of reading the newspaper and watching fires in the city.

25 Darger includes a commemorative article about the Iroquois Theater fire from 1968 in his scrapbook. Historian Nat Brandt states that “except for fire buffs and local historians, few people even in Chicago are aware of the Iroquois Theater fire.” Brandt, 145. Darger’s concurrent interests in fires and the Civil War thread into a broader cultural enthusiasm for history and spectacle. The term “buff” meaning “enthusiast” stems from fire-watching. Historian Stephen Cushman traces the vernacular etymology of buff from the buff-colored overcoats worn by volunteer firemen in New York City around 1820 to the centennial of the American Civil War (1971-75) when the phrase “civil war buff” became idiomatic. Stephen Cushman, Bloody Promenade: Reflections on a Civil War Battle (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999) 21-22.

26 Darger, History of my Life, 15-18.
Bouncing around from Parochial Schools, to Catholic Boys Homes, and, at age thirteen, entering a “feeble-minded” asylum in central Illinois for “masturbation,” Darger lived most of his adolescent years in institutions. His lack of social skills and non-conformative behavior tested the resolve of many educators, clergy, and physicians. At age sixteen, after hearing of his father’s death, Darger escaped from the asylum and returned to Chicago. He lived the remainder of his life quietly, working as a hospital janitor, as a dishwasher, and in his late years, as a bandage roller. Attending Catholic Mass daily, sometimes thrice, Darger jokes in his autobiography of being a “sorry saint.”

He begins to write the Realms in 1911 amidst a conflating backdrop of his institutionalized (child-saved) and (partially) orphaned youth and against a cultural palette expressing a modern, ever-vulnerable image of priceless childhood. Society’s picture, increasing over-elaborating innocence and sacredness, perpetually placed the image of the child at risk. Attuned to culture’s child, Darger, now, eighteen, and the self-proclaimed “protector of children,” clipped images of children (mostly girls) from newspapers, coloring books, and comic strips. A particular child, Elsie Paroubek—a five-year old

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27 Darger often remarked about his indulgent and difficult behavior: “From the time I was a young boy, until even now, I always had a very rough nature or temper, always was and still am self-willed and also determined that at all costs, even at the expense of Sin, that all things shall come my way, no matter what might try to interfere or stand in my way.” Bonesteel, 8.

28 “I go to three morning Masses and communion every day, and one extra Mass on Sunday afternoon. And on Mondays, I go to the Miraculous Medal Novena Devotion. It too is followed by Mass. What did you say? I am a saint? Ha, ha. I am one, and a very sorry saint I am. Ha, ha. How can I be a saint when I won’t stand for trials, bad luck, pains in my knees or otherwise.” Bonesteel, 31.

29 Darger writes in his autobiography, “You remember I wrote that I hated baby kids. So indeed I did. Yet what a change came in me though when I grew somewhat older. Then babies at that were more to me than anything, more than the world. I would fondle them and love them. At that time just any bigger boy or even grown up dare molest them in any way.” Darger, History of my Life, 9. Darger describes a fictional children’s protection society known as the “Gemini” in the Realms of the Unreal which he and his friend, Whilliam Schloeder oversee. MacGregor, 62.
Chicagoan with “long curly golden hair, blue eyes and pink chubby cheeks”\footnote{30} murdered in 1911—emerges as a fictional character in \textit{the Realms}. Front page coverage of Paroubek’s disappearance and the subsequent discovery of her body shared prime space with commemoratory articles on the American Civil War’s semicentennial and the fortieth anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire. These three, converging “real” factors coincide with the inception of Darger’s fictional tale of battling nation-states, child-slavery, and rampant flame.

Drawing (literally) from newspapers and popular magazines over a sixty-year period, Darger found an accessible plethora of girl types to choose from. The precious “child” of social reform moved into commercial arenas in the 1920s-40s as state agencies, women’s magazines and department stores educated consumers on safe (and less physically restrictive) attire for children. Previous public conversations concerning safety turned to issues of good taste and style. Independent store chains such as Sears and Woolworth’s illustrated clothing styles targeting specific age groups. Merchants made a significant commercial investment in femininity, creating visual codes distinguishing toddlers from adolescent females. Accordingly, clothing advertisements visually orienting girls towards adulthood, fostered social tensions about sexuality and sexual display.\footnote{31} The industry responded by creating and illustrating modest fashions specifically for girls in-between childhood and adulthood.

Pairing an adolescent next to a little girl, a 1936 advertisement from Iserson Imports illustrates “new scintillating spring fashions” and age-appropriate hemlines.

\footnote{30} Newspaper description of Paroubek quoted in MacGregor, 494.

The younger girl, a Vivian look alike, would garner Darger’s attention. Her pouty expression, big eyes, and unsure posture signal an un-knowing innocence and vulnerability. Her appearance indicates a preadolescent, no longer babyish, but, still, little in social disposition and morphology. An older sibling extends her arm around the little one’s back in a reassuring gesture. The codes of her lean stature, her finger-wave hair, her sharp features, and her tailored, longer dress speak to her older age. A below-the-knee hemline emphasizes the adolescent’s modest comportment. Conversely, the fleshy, little girl exposes much more skin along her tender arms and chubby thighs.

Darger reiterates this little girl body type and clothing style throughout his art (up into the early 1970s). In the work he captioned *At Rossanna Hogan. Vivian Girls are again chased by foe, but escape by setting tall grass on fire near battle line* (fig. 1.4) the cut and silhouette of the girls’ garments indicates their gross age (according to industry standards, around age seven to twelve) while doubly-reading as innocence and vulnerability. While most girls wear “little” fashions, a taller, leaner girl stands to the right in an adolescent-cut dress. Enacting, perhaps, a fantasy of Darger’s, these girls set the landscape on fire to fend off invisible foes. Two girls start the blaze; another activates a firecracker that flits through the air, leaving a firefly-like trail, and, then, brilliantly explodes. With a decidedly childish perspective—playful, nonsensical, and rebellious—this scene compresses strands of childhood memory, adult fantasy, and a conspicuous display of girlhood that follows commercial culture’s standards.
“In” and “Out”

The madman is a reformer, an inventor of new systems, intoxicated with invention ... This is exactly what is required of the artist, and explains why the creation of art is so worthless when it does not originate in a state of alienation, when it fails to offer a new conception of the world, and new principles for living.

- Jean Dubuffet

Darger’s art spurns categorical containment; furthermore, his intense, autodidactic tracings of imagery shake the certainty of labels such as “drawing,” even “art” and “artist.” Remaining part of Chicago’s working poor throughout his life, Darger’s personal history resists the familiar cachet of modern narratives contextualizing artists’ lives—bourgeois (yet, anti-bourgeois in sensibility), with an education in the arts, and with the privilege of class and artistic legacy. Popular culture mentors and enriches Darger’s visual vocabulary, replacing instruction from academies and ateliers. Girls in department store advertisements (not Greco-Roman plaster casts) model idealistic human form. At times, Darger, re-presents these girls askew, maintaining a semblance of their gendered nature—enough to signify “girl”—while testing their elasticity and boundaries by sexing girls with male organs. The unusual circumstances governing Darger’s art and his proclivity to play with the pre-sexual nature of “the child” circumscribe the reasons why art historians categorize Darger as an outsider artist. These reasons hinge upon social issues pertaining to economics, education, and mental health, specifically, in terms of their lack. For some scholars, Darger’s lack of

wealth, his lack of training, and his assumed lack of psychological stability clearly define him as the prime example of an outsider artist.  

Art historian Roger Cardinal coined the term “outsider art” in his eponymous 1972 publication, heralding the anti-cultural sentiments of artist/collector, Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985). Cardinal defines the outsider artist by extending and re-defining Dubuffet’s brut, or “raw” artist beyond the context of asylum patients’ art: “not only the art of the clinically insane, but also other art of an authentically untutored, original and extra-cultural nature.” In more elaborate passages, Cardinal shapes the outsider artist into an individual that has somehow escaped a “corruptive” culture by virtue of his/her impulsive drives:

We understand by this term works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part (contrary to the activities of intellectuals). These artists derive everything – subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc. – from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to a completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists’ own impulses. It is thus an art which manifests an unparalleled inventiveness, unlike cultural art, with its chameleon – and monkey – like aspects.

The polemics of outsider art discourse frame the “unscathed,” raw artist within Nature (the self) and the unoriginal intellectual within Culture (society). The determining yardstick for outsider creativity (scholars’ bases for Darger’s status) is isolation,

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34 Although Dubuffet collected works from inmates inside and individuals outside asylums, his theoretical stance on anti-cultural purity privileged the social and psychological circumstances of asylum patients. As a result, art brut is often incorrectly translated as “art of the insane.” For quote, see Roger Cardinal, Outsider Art (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 24.

estrangement or alienation – a notion that problematically collapses the social into the aesthetic. Abstract concepts of isolation circulate freely within outsider art discourse, appearing self-evident and universally quantifiable. From a determination of isolation, an axiom prevails, asserting that isolation insures purity, rendering the artist a rarity and thus, determining the art work to be original. This inner sanctum of isolation-purity-originality confirms authenticity. A true, authentic art—one so original that it does not seem like art at all, an artlessness—must come from a place other than the mainstream or civilization.36

With a presumption of outsider art’s short life span and fragility, scholars underscore outsider art’s reliance on authenticity. “It really seems as if, like Orpheus, Western culture is doomed to destroy whatever is – or rather whatever was – strange, merely by gazing lovingly at it,” laments art brut scholar, Michel Thevoz.37 Such words echo cultural theorist, James Clifford’s description of a “salvage paradigm” plaguing anthropology and relating systems of commodity exchange—the art world.38 This paradigm, Clifford explains, asserts that authenticity exists just prior to the present but within salvageable distance. Striving to stay ahead of time’s linear progression and cultural assimilation, we feel the urge to retrieve authenticities from endangerment. For Clifford, authenticity exists not as an essential quality, but as something history and culture produces. The act of “salvaging” unveils itself as

36 Civilization, in this context, is always Western society, particularly, western art and the modernist avant-garde.


production. Outsider art discourse partakes of this fictional authenticity, and, like the discourse of “primitive” objects, constructs worth through conceptions of rarity.

Not surprisingly, Dubuffet found his first *art brut* examples in asylums. Unlike the space of childhood, where advancing time encroaches or the space of the aboriginal, where colonialism endangers, the creativity of the madman transcends mediation by historical, political, and temporal factors. The madman represents the ultimate isolate, a solipsistic system of creativity and resistance, the ideal artist, and counterculture hero.

Dubuffet’s heroic “discovery” was, on the contrary, a re-engineering of concepts contingent to a long history of discourses and practices. Prior to and concurrent with Dubuffet’s *art brut* pursuits, Surrealism heralded the madman as the paradigm of creative genius. As importantly, “madness” stood as a trope for their movement—as political and social critique targeting repressive bourgeois morality. Conversely, outsider art discourse conceives of “madness” within pathologic terms, celebrating a conflation of social and aesthetic “abnormality” as a new avant-garde. Following this trend, scholarship on Darger

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39 Additionally, Clifford challenges the popular belief that cultures deemed “primitive” do not change. These cultures are migratory and rooted, existing within and between groups and individuals.

40 Dubuffet’s search for systemic, original creativity led him from collecting children’s art (1942-45) to asylum art (1945-1970s). The asylum environment gave Dubuffet an undisputable base from which to build his theory of “raw” art.

41 The predominant, infantilizing view of the insane before Surrealism’s time fostered the belief that their artistic endeavors yielded a certain “child-poetics,” enabling a vision more intense than the general public. Psychiatrist Pliny Earle argued in 1845 that the main difference between “lunatics and persons retaining the use of reason,” is that the insane are “truly children of a larger growth.” This regression in human development conversely elevated their aesthetic capabilities: “It is well known that insanity not infrequently develops, or gives greater activity to powers and faculties of the mind, which, prior to its invasion, had remained either dormant or but slightly manifested.” Earle, Director of the Bloomingdale Asylum, New York, was famous for shunning mechanical restraint and promoting creative activity among patients. Earle’s comments from an essay, “The Poetry of Insanity” *American Journal of Insanity* 2 (1845) quoted in Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 221.
rarely strays from pronouncements of his ambiguous pathology (stunted sexuality, serial killer mindset), isolation, “genius,” and cultural innocence:

Totally isolated, he (Darger) had no one to share his dreams, his fantasies … His private world embodied all the richness and pain that was concealed within him… Every aspect of Darger’s picture-making process is unique, arrived at by strange and unconventional paths. Alone in his room, all unaware, Henry Darger reinvented art.42

This practice of maintaining outsider purity seamlessly falls into a parable of self-creation retold throughout Modernism. According to art historian Rosalind Krauss, this parable began with the first Futurist manifesto and defines originality among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. She explains,

For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naïveté. Or again, the self as origin has the potential for continual acts of regeneration, a perpetuation of self-birth.43

Additionally, the art brut/outsider artist theoretically springs forth from kindred “primitive” qualities in Western thought: impulse, savagery, and excessive intensity.44

Adhering to rhetoric of colonial tropes and control, art brut/outsider art purports more about culture and the ideology of its founders than about the so-called “raw” or “primitive” work it

42 MacGregor, 25.


44 Dubuffet’s thoughts on “savage” values acknowledge the sentiments of the Surrealists, especially those of André Breton, Salvador Dali, and Georges Bataille when he writes, “Without doubt we possess (at present) the best understanding that has been available in fifty years, of civilizations referred to as primitive, and of their ways of thinking. Their works of art strongly disconcert and preoccupy Western man. We have begun to ask ourselves whether Western civilization might not profit from lessons provided by these savages. It could be that in many areas, their solutions and their ways, which were once seen as so simplistic, could in the long run be more far-seeing than our own. As for me, I hold the values of the savage in high esteem: instinct, passion, caprice, violence, insanity.” Jean Dubuffet’s quote from a collection of essays titled Asphyxiante Culture (1968) cited in John M. MacGregor, The Discovery of the Art of the Insane (Princeton: University Press, 1989) 300.
claims to define. This use of the “primitive” follows a common practice in modern art history, where artists project their desires onto the art of others, as if a blank slate, and, as a result of this reflexive process, reinvent themselves.\textsuperscript{45}

Many artists before Dubuffet contributed to cultural primitivism, establishing a modern convention: Picasso, Matisse, the Surrealists, and the German Expressionists experienced an aesthetic alterity in African and Oceanic artifacts and Paul Klee, the CoBrA group (and initially Dubuffet) found inspiration in children’s art.\textsuperscript{46} The effect is a familiar story of encounters between Western artists and unknown, unclassifiable objects re-valued and appropriated by fine artists seeking a respite from a perceived bankrupt and stifling culture.\textsuperscript{47} Dubuffet’s embrace of the “primitive,” in terms of both positive and negative implications, falls into this narrative and suggests that his “discovery” should be perceived, instead, as an opportunistic moment within a trajectory of primitivist obsession.

Art world institutions continue to validate outsider art’s atavistic power to conjure up the “primitive,” and to re-transmit a freshness and innocence associated with the infancy of man and the individual. A growing number of collectors, curators, scholars, and the public aggrandize the category of outsider art, exploring it with celebratory exhibitions, catalogues, 


\textsuperscript{46} My examples of stylistic primitivism parallel the adoption of irrational, “insane” aesthetics in art brut/outsider art. Theories of primitivism extend well beyond this sampling of artists to those that “documented”/imagined: distant lands in colonial travel accounts, the Orient (Jean-Léon Gérôme), the American Southwest (Marsden Hartley), an abstract notion of the primordial (Abstract Expressionists), the unconscious (Surrealists), and many, many representations of those \textit{othered} by western societies since the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{47} Michel Thévoz, the curator of the art brut collection in Lausanne, Switzerland refers to culture as a “world of prostitution,” and museums as “corrupt.” Peiry, 255.
As a result, scholars and collectors of outsider art have been reluctantly slow to loosen their grip on this familiar primitivist discourse that Clifford aptly describes as, “an incoherent cluster of qualities that at different times have been used to construct a source, origin, or alter ego confirming some new ‘discovery’ within the territory of the Western self.”

This dissertation finds significance in outsider art’s contingency to surrealism and in outsider art’s conflation of the insane, the child, and the primitive—not in the category’s discourse of polemical positions or in outsider art’s maintenance of concepts such as originality and authenticity. At the core of this contingency and conflation rests a desire for visual rejuvenation and modernism’s quest to see truthfully through the pretenses of civilization into its savage, unorganized, and irrational interior. While labeling Darger as marginal, and insisting on keeping him there, scholarship fails to acknowledge that Darger, too, desires to tap into a distant embodiment of abundant, excessively animate life. The value of studying Darger’s art does not lie in situating him among the fetishized placeholders of innovation (the outsider artist); the value lies in considering the substantive dynamics that inform his art’s subjective voice poignantly yearning for, “the quiet rapture again… of younger boyhood days.”

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48 Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago accepts the term “outsider” without question. This organization currently exhibits and collects art they call “outsider art.” Raw Vision, a British art publication, includes articles on “Intuitive and Visionary Art, Outsider Art, Art Brut, Contemporary Folk Art, and Marginal Arts.”

Recovering Childhood

I'm an artist, been one for years, and cannot hardly stand on my feet because of my knee to paint on the top of the long pictures. Yet off and on I try, and sit down when aches or pains start.

-Henry Darger

Darger’s art re-structures the world. Darger, like all artists, makes the world strange.

As T.J. Clark eloquently sums in *The Painting of Modern Life*:

Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding…it prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.

If “madness” exists in Darger’s art, it resides partly in the nonsensical nature of his life-time project—decades of writing and art making that he conducted in private, seemingly without an (adult) purpose. From our perspective (as outsiders to Darger’s life), devoting such time and effort to art, without the goal of publication, exhibition, financial gain, or other obvious compensatory outlets, appears exceedingly irrational.

The intensely private context of his art, in conjunction with its comic book form and unapologetically perverse quality, additionally rubs against the grain of reason.

“Perversion,” here, reflects a disposition to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, and required. Darger appropriates popular images of girls, flowers, and soldiers and he plays with them (like toys) within a personal battlefield of representations. Testing the constraints of familiar ideas and images, in short, conversing with culture, Darger’s art aligns

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with the notion of the perverse, rather than with the notion of a sterile division “outside.” Representing children engaging in warfare, shooting and dying opposes cultural “norms” and constitutes a perverse act. Representing nude, hermaphrodite children engaging in warfare, Darger takes one further out along the precipice of perversion, into flights of irrational fantasy, challenging the delicate boundaries of what culture determines to be “natural.”

*Untitled (Battle scene during lightning storm)* (fig. 1.5) serves as a rich example of Darger’s perverse performances in which he juxtaposes violence, innocence, and bodies that fluctuate between male and female genders. Lightning bolts, above, and colossal flowers, below, punctuate tensions of bodies in full, somatic motion mid-ground. Nature goes awry everywhere in Darger’s queer, imaginary world.

The novelty of Darger’s art springs from such fearless, destabilizing depictions. So too, novelty exists in his process of mapping surfaces. Inhabiting space with amalgams of photographs, comic and advertising imagery, and text, Darger intuitively understands that all images are representations (governed by pattern, line, and contrast). Flatness never poses an obstacle. For example, in *At Sunbeam Creek* (fig. 1.6), Darger facilely combines different modes of representation. The photographic naturalism of a clipping depicting a mass of clouds (on the far left horizon) conforms to the comic strip world it enters. The cohesiveness of his surfaces—a graphic performance of writing, collage, drawing, and painting—continues throughout the sixty years of his oeuvre.

Looking at *Untitled* (fig. 1.7) this graphic mixture turns into an orchestration of hallucinatory energy. Bright colors and repetitive patterns bounce off little girls, who align like pieces of candy along a window display. Darger’ vision sparkles with a child-like
sensibility conjuring awe and curiosity. His exuberant surfaces evoke Baudelaire’s assessment of the modern artist’s vision as childhood recovered at will:

The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always drunk. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs from form and colour. I am prepared to go further and assert that inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussions in the very core of the brain. The man of genius has sound nerves, while those of the child are weak. With the one, Reason has taken up a considerable position; with the other, Sensibility is almost the whole being. But genius is nothing more nor less that childhood recovered at will—a childhood now equipped with self-expression with manhood’s capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated.53

The cluttering effect of Darger’s vision—an openness ranging from the banal to the spectacular, a fearless mapping of space, and a rampant, ocular vibrancy—speaks directly to Baudelaire’s child of sensibility, while, also, beckoning the adult of reason. Even the austere, monochromatic fire scrapbook page (SECONDS BEFORE DEATH) projects the residue of clutter. Text, photograph, and linear drawing overlap and merge into a mysterious, latent picture. “Clutter has rather ambiguous status,” suggests child psychologist Adam Phillips: “It invites us to make meaning.”54 Phillips suggests that clutter represents a paradox of being between the absence of order (pattern, reason) and elucidation. Clutter embodies an adolescent blooming of intellectual passions.

Such a childlike, open relation to the world, “structures” Darger’s artistic practices. Palpable in documentary photographs of his apartment’s interior, clutter, a seemingly disorderly tacking of pictures to walls and surfaces (a pastiche reminiscent of an adolescent’s


bedroom or an artist’s studio), spans the view. (figs. 1.8 and 1.9) Numerous faces shape the space in a manner similar to his flowing panoramic paintings—a framework without a frame, that liberates objects. Thousands of comic and coloring book images in make-shift scrapbooks (today, wrapped shut or too frail to open) await order and purpose. Like his imagery, all of these items share an aura of life, a sense of readiness, and a preparation for something greater than themselves.

From the perspective of Baudelaire’s artist as man-child and Phillip’s hopeful rendition of clutter, an illuminating parallel between Darger and the artist Joseph Cornell emerges. One finds this parallel, not within art history’s assumptions of “outside” and “inside” but, instead, within childlike vision and modernity’s investment in childhood. Both artists share a highly developed “pediocularity,” spurning an “adult” sense of logic for the free roaming fascination of a child’s view.\textsuperscript{55} Cornell’s \textit{Untitled} (1942) (fig. 1.10) pulls the viewer’s eye back and forth with each imaginary twinge and chirp of avian inhabitants. Rich with patterns, silhouettes, and fragmenting shapes, \textit{Untitled} presents an engrossing, natural wonderland, ripe with elusive meanings. Like Darger’s cacophony of girls, Cornell’s birds envelope an entire composition, imploring the viewer to navigate through space and to create associations. Juxtaposing Darger’s \textit{Untitled} (girls in landscape) with Cornell’s \textit{Untitled} (avian habitat), one finds miniature worlds—modern detritus and humble castoffs—magically exuding animistic sensibilities and evocative potentials.

Darger’s childlike vision, however, did not form through the same trajectory as Cornell’s. As further chapters reveal, Darger’s perception of childhood emerges from an American, twentieth-century appeal to and investment in the child. Representations of

tomboyish orphans in comic strips, literature, and film; worlds of fancy in the *Wonderful Land of Oz*; sensational tales of historical disaster; the exemplar virtue of Shirley Temple and the Little Flower of Christ create an arena apart from Cornell’s Euro-centric romanticism; mania for nineteenth-century ballerinas; and study of modern child development theory. Issues of class sharply separate these two artists; however, as they worked from opposite ends of society’s spectrum (from Chicago’s poor and New York’s avant-garde), they both ended in a child’s realm.

While Cornell’s boxes cast harmonious sensations of childhood innocence, Darger’s watercolors and collages express discordance and transgression. Darger’s contradictory imaginings of flame and childhood find deeper resonance with the works of Surrealists, who, unlike Cornell, cultivate discrepancies and incongruities in their imagery. Like Darger’s imagery, Dorothea Tanning’s *Children’s Games* (1942) (fig. 1.11) does not accede to conventional childhood representations. Contemporaneous to Darger’s and Cornell’s *Untitled* works, *Children’s Games* rebukes the sweetness of play through an unsettling display of confounding sexual metaphor. Tanning turns girls into menacing creatures, equally as dangerous and vivid as the morphing flame-like paper they eagerly tear. Within an endless hallway, inanimate objects intermingle with girl-bodies forging unruly flux. A smaller, little girl in the foreground pulls a large sheet of wall paper down; her hair flows upwards into a mysterious orifice emerging from the wall. The erotic pulse within her mutable form descends downward, along the full curvature of her spine, culminating in an uncertain exposure of her body (part dress, part flesh). Prostrate legs on the floor, in the immediate foreground, signal this girl’s inert double. Her silent presence momentarily disrupts the manic intensity in the air.
Tanning’s girls sizzle in a savage state. Lean and in-between (little and adolescent, alive and lifeless), their fecund bodies resonate with an inexplicable quality and spirit kindred to Darger’s Vivians. Tanning’s and Darger’s impossible girl-children serve them well, threatening and re-shaping the discourse of the innocent and rational child. Through girls and flame, Darger shares with Tanning a surrealist urge to conjure “limitless expanses” of the mind wherein “desires are made manifest.”

Seeing Through

Elaborating on Surrealism’s search for the marvelous in the everyday, surrealist poet André Breton composed Les Vases communicants (Communicating Vessels) (1932). Taking its name from scientific experimentation concerning the movement (communication) of gas or liquid between forms, Communicating Vessels conveys Breton’s basic premise of Surrealist thought—the correspondences between two different modes:

I hope it [Surrealism] will be considered as having tried nothing better than to cast a conduction wire between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, the assurance of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, and so on.

Weaving together his “vessels” of dreams, love, and (socialist) revolution, Breton’s philosophical vision purports to remake individual lives and the world through imagination,

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56 Poet André Breton uses a window metaphor for expressing surrealist sensibility in the first Manifesto of Surrealism (1924). Breton imagines the barrier between the conscious and the subconscious as a sheet of glass. One needed only to get close enough to it to hear the messages from the “limitless expanses” of the mind wherein “desires are made manifest.” André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) 37.

57 A communicating vessels experiment involves vertical tubes of different shapes conjoined by a single tube at their bases. When water or gas enters one tube, all tubes fill to the same level regardless of their shape. In the study of physics, communicating vessels display a principle of fluid dynamics within interconnecting systems.

58 André Breton, Communicating Vessels trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1990 (1932)) 86.
resolve, and political action. His layers of poetics urge a transformative vision, one that art historian Mary Ann Caws deftly describes as a meditation on looking—a “seeing through the other,” a desire for the meeting of contraries, “spilling all over the place.” 59 Arguing for Surrealism’s continuing viability in artistic vision, Caw couches the movement’s aesthetic and philosophical contributions in terms of active voice—“surrealizing” the real:

Surrealism still looks large from here. Whether we concentrate on its images of communicating vessels and glass houses or on its linguistic and famously visible gestures, they all seem to contain within them a kind of spaciousness, radiating the same spirit. Surrealist discourse expresses and incites to excess. Surrealism causes problems. It disturbs, as it wants to, even now. It calls upon whatever energies we have to reread it. 60

With an eye for moments that *surrealize* and inflame, *Pyre* bridges the *far too distant* worlds of inside and outside, real and unreal, child and adult within Darger’s art. Fire’s reverie becomes the conduction wire bridging sterile splits and disjunctures (gaps that art history’s “outsider artist” forges) to see through Darger’s expansive, inter-connecting systems. The following chapters spill in and out of conversing vessels (warfare, storms, girls, Catholic martyrs), mapping a trajectory of fire-related imagery, metaphor, and meaning.

*Chapter One: Conflagration !!!* unfolds the relationships among Darger’s panoramic landscapes, his fabrication of fictional history, and his representations of “conflagration,” (a term brimming with civil war conflict and fiendish fire). Drawing upon the cultural influences of cycloramic spectacle and the commemorative practices of Chicago’s re-telling of the Great Fire, this chapter plumbs Darger’s verbal and visual discourse of hyperbole, excess, and unreality—a means of expressing what he called, the “indescribable.” This chapters ends with a closer look at the source of the Realms’ civil war conflict, probing the


panoramas of multiplying white, girl-slaves and their production of racial homogenization and superiority.

*Chapter Two: Pure (Pyre)* illuminates the theatrical coupling of the vulnerable child superimposing against flame and finds correspondences between languages of purification and the myriad “little” girl characters that populate the *Realms.* *Pure* traces the “Vivian” polymorphous spirit through romantic childhood, through Little Eva’s (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) stainless precedent, and through the Little Flower of Christ’s (St. Thérèse of Lisieux) childish virtue. Linking Darger’s version of the *hortus conclusus*—blooming kindergartens teeming with flower iconography, expectant faces, and little martyrs-in-waiting—with the pathos of his scrapbook *Pictures of Fires Big or Small,* this chapter reveals the artist’s construction of a rarified and sacred childhood.

*Chapter Three: Desire* whispers the unspoken significance of the alluring and excessive, trans-gendering girl in the *Realms.* Linking her gender-bending ties to tomboyish, orphan-adventurers and to the *virago fortis* (warrior maiden) of Catholic lore, this chapter keeps pace with the metamorphic cadence of the running girl’s erotic poetics. This chapter closes with comparisons of Darger’s and Cornell’s desirous mixtures of religiosity, childhood, and loquacious artistic production.

*Pyre*’s conclusion defers an ending, preferring, instead, to smolder and rekindle by accessing the precocious vitality (the Vivian/Ovidian *vivam!*) in Darger’s progenitive vision. This conclusion compares Darger’s and Andy Warhol’s concurrent interests in Shirley Temple and the ways Temple’s innocent, yet, adult comportment offered each artist an exemplar grammar of appearances for their life and work. Leading to a brief, comparative
analysis of repetitive forms in Warhol’s and Darger’s art, the conclusion entwines notions of childish vision and life-giving force.
Chapter One:
CONFLAGRATION !!!

Anybody's mind could be wrapt in contemplation of the magnitude and completeness of the destruction.

- Henry Darger

Conflagration, an imposing term brimming with destruction and wild tales of a great, disastrous fire, arises again and again in The Realms’ text and image captions. Darger occasionally (mis)spelled it as “Conflargration,” as if emphasizing the inherent violence and intensity deep within the word. In popular usage since the seventeenth century, “conflagration” conveys the burning up or utter consumption of towns and cities. 

Figuratively, conflagration pertains to an impassioned conflict or war, capable of connoting both a tragic, historical incident and an epic event infused with mythic, often apocalyptic proportions. In late nineteenth-century American literature and journalism, “conflagration” served along with other stormy vocabulary to explain the upheavals and destructive forces of the Civil War (1861-65) and Great Chicago Fire (1871). Grand and fiendish, whether in

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3 Civil war correspondents and preachers wielded the term “conflagration” with apocalyptic theatricality. For northerners, the conflagration of the Civil War signified a purgation of the evils of slavery, a form of divine wrath. Conflagration also encompassed the hellish sensations of battle: fervent heat, deafening noises and lingering blackness in the skies. On the use of “conflagration” in Civil War rhetoric see Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Righteous Armies, Holy Cause: Apocalyptic Imagery and the Civil War (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002) 77-80.
form of flame or war, the notion of “conflagration” infused the American consciousness with its sublime, inconceivably immense, and self-sustaining power.

Darger’s “conflagration” emerges from this imaginative and metaphorical context as it interchangeably represents the destructive hunger of both record-breaking blazes and escalating war. One of his first major works, *The Battle of Calverhine* (c. 1929) (fig. 2.1) embodies the raging tides of warfare. In this image of total carnage, Darger projects exponential death upon death, an immensity that exceeds description and comprehension. Spilling beyond the containment of its humble frame, this panoramic scene sprawls through masses of body fragments and soldiers in mid-air. Bullets and shrapnel pepper their forms, leaving some stiff and prostrate. Others march and fight, oblivious to the swirling hell around them. Violence overwhelms the landscape, motting a forest of blackened tree trunks with trails of sanguine contrasting the sickly wash of yellowing, aged varnish. This red filtrates throughout the vista in the coats of troops, flag stripes, thunderous explosions, and blood splatters on the dead.

An aerial vantage point elevates the viewer and offers a slight reprieve from the suffocating compression of hostility and all-out war below. Too much for the viewer’s eyes to take in all-at-once, the scene requires travel from vignette to vignette, between the glare and smoke, propelling a search throughout the battlefield for a heroic character or moment, a rational respite or narrative link, to make sense of it all. Only the recession of forms and figures into a murky background provides a sense of dimensional depth and perceptual footing. Otherwise, one easily submerges into a mesmerizing and confusing whirlwind of hand-to-hand combat, careening cannon balls, and roaring detonations.
The scene’s grim recitation of carnage far overshadows its significance as a documentary illustration. A simple caption, “The Battle of Calverhine,” quietly lingers in the upper left corner, offering little information for deciphering this pictorial record. Despite vacillating coherence and a fictional premise, *The Battle of Calverhine*, nonetheless, exudes a sense of “history” by adhering to various artistic conventions of an event to be remembered. The collage’s instructional, seemingly, disinterested caption connotes a “factual” event while its immense, physical presence (3’ x 10’) suggests a literal re-creation of a momentous military conflict worthy of attention. Absent, though, are the heroic embellishments and allegorical signatures of “grand manner” history painting. *The Battle of Calverhine*, instead, provides an arresting example of Darger’s desires and abilities to achieve a spectacular vision. Although modest in materials, the resulting image delivers a cinematic intensity evoking dramatic battle field illustrations (Civil War, Spanish-American War, WW I) and the palpable, expansive “realism” of cycloramic entertainments. Common in modern American popular culture, battle field illustrations and cycloramas claimed eye-witness vantage points and “truthful” renditions of significant historical events.

Darger emphasized the significance of *The Battle of Calverhine*: he varnished and framed, and then, hung this large collage within constant view for over forty years.4 This large collage becomes important, too, for this critical inquiry; deep within *The Battle of Calverhine*, form and content provide footing for navigating through Darger’s work. They lead to a, thus far, unexplored path—a discussion triangulating forms of visual and literary culture pertaining to the notion of conflagration, with the artist’s panoramic verbal and visual

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4 Darger transported this cumbersome piece several blocks while moving in 1932. It hung at the location of 851 Webster until his death in 1973. Darger created hundreds of works. Rarely did he frame or glaze his art in the same manner as this battle scene. Although its presentation remained unique, *The Battle of Calverhine* arguably models the panoramic formats for Darger’s imagery.
passages from *The Realms of the Unreal*, and with Darger’s penchant for tragic, historic events. These three points converge with personal and cultural discourses of conflagration that emerge within and inform *The Battle of Calverhine*: the points continue in later works as complex, spatial configurations of multiple/multiplying figures and reciprocal gazes. An investigation into these crossing streams of fiery associations and modes of representation reveal that panoramic formats reside in Darger’s art, not as serendipitous accidents or economic features to compress space. Rather, they become integral to his project as modalities for control, pleasure, documentation of “history,” and production of reality (excessively into unreality).

The Chicago Fire Cyclorama (c. 1892-1910) and other similar, concurrent spectacles (during Darger’s childhood) come to the forefront of this discussion as models of historical accuracy, artistic ethos, and visual mediators of the “real.” Likewise, panoramic imagery that Darger culled from material culture suggests an arguable influence on his primary mode of representation and reiterates the various intersections of subject matter within Darger’s *Realms*: civil war, religious sacrifice, approaching storms, and acts of looking. (i.e. reproductions of Jan and Hubert van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432) (fig. 2.2), Martin Johnson Heade’s *Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay* (1868) (fig. 2.3), and magazine illustrations of Civil War battles (c. 1960).5) The Flemish van Eycks’ spectacular altarpiece, also known as the *Adoration of the Lamb* (fig. 2.2), elucidates the liturgical program of the Eucharist. Fully open, the lower tier of this triptych’s compartments boasts converging processions of angels, apostles, pilgrims, virgin martyrs, et al., proceeding towards a central

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5 Except for the Heade image, these reproductions are part of the loose ephemera from Darger’s apartment currently in the collection of the AFAM’s Henry Darger Study Center. The Civil War imagery includes a variety of sources: *Life Magazine*’s “The Civil War: A New Six-Part Series on our Nation’s Bloodiest Drama,” Jan. 6, 1961; *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*, Dec. 3, 1957; *Chicago Daily News*, June 29, 1963; and *Chicago Sun Times*, unknown month, 1962.
altar bearing a bleeding lamb. A verdant, sprawling landscape provides a lush backdrop for gathering hoards of believers and for the mystical Mass they seek. A steady horizon line, dotted with church spires, deciduous trees, and exotic palms, visually coheres each of the five separate panels into one continuous panoramic visage. Darger employs a similar technique in his mature work, connecting horizons and processions of figures through tripartite constructions. Additionally, the altarpiece’s grouping (bubbling) of figures appeals to Darger’s desire to give ample room for faces and reciprocal gazes. Darger’s copies of the Ghent Altarpiece (glossy full-page magazine spreads) offer both open and closed views, as well as, details of individual niches. The American Heade landscape (fig. 2.3) appeared in a February 1945 issue of the Ladies Home Journal announcing an exhibition of Hudson River School paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Darger seamlessly incorporates the Heade reproduction into his art as an exterior view in the image with the caption, At Jennie Richee. 

While sending warning to their father watch night black cloud of coming storm through windows (c. 1945) (fig. 2.4). His unmediated appropriation of the Heade emphasizes the impression which this storm scene made, specifically the scene’s contemplation of future action and unknown potential.

In addition to “conflagration’s” association with representations of historical battles and fires (and, panoramic format), the term parallels another of Darger’s favorite descriptors—the “firestorm”—evocative of controversy, incendiary warfare, and driven flame. Conflagration, though, in Darger’s art, emerges from a particular schema of historical

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6 Darger’s Ghent Altarpiece reproductions appear to be from a magazine article. Judging from their unusually large size, I assume that Darger found these reproductions in Life Magazine. The altarpiece imagery comprises a portion of loose ephemera from Darger’s apartment currently in the collection of the American Folk Art Museum, New York.

7 Bonesteel, 17, 68-69.
reportage endemic to Chicago’s culture. Specifically, this chapter argues that hyperbolic rhetoric and commemorative practices in Chicago’s retelling/re-burning of its Great Fire, the city’s burgeoning industry of “instant” tragic histories, and the city’s journalistic dependence on witnessing (a modality for knowing the unknowable), shape Darger’s notion of historic conflagration. Moreover, panoramic technology (its mechanism of insistent looking) and the theme of conflagration coexist, not just as overlapping elements in Darger’s art, but as interarticulating structures, each providing and building a connective language of hyperbole/excess/unreality—a means of expressing the irrational, the traumatic, or in Darger’s words, the indescribable.

**Reality Production**

Darger went to extraordinary, arguably obsessive, efforts to tell his story in both word and image. Concerned with establishing accuracy in his fictional tale, he created an extensive visual archive by assembling files and scrapbooks of clipped newspaper articles and photographs, daily comics and comic book imagery, coloring books, magazine illustrations, and fashion advertisements. These sources provided “real life” and fantastic images of fires, explosions, cloud formations, soldiers, flora and fauna, architecture, and most importantly, little girls. Along with material on natural and incendiary phenomena, Darger’s conflagration grew from compiling addenda on warfare and imperialistic regalia—hundreds of drawings/collages of flags, soldier’s uniforms, and weaponry—appropriated from popular culture sources and amended by his hand. Newspaper coverage of World War I and II, as well as, reports on the Spanish Civil War and commemorative pieces on the
centennial of the Civil War provided rich sources for historicized militaristic adornment and weaponry.

Previous to and concurrent with *The Battle of Calverhine*, photographs and engravings supplied the material for Darger’s smaller collages. Predominately devoid of children, these hand-colored collages featured appropriated photographs of soldiers and battle scenes. One such piece, *A Host of Calverinians* (fig. 2.5), exemplifies this earlier work, exhibiting multitudes of soldiers that spill beyond the scene’s visual boundary. Even within this confining space, each soldier appears to receive just enough room to be readily seen. Shoulders and faces dot the furthest visual points while resting, full-body, jovial soldiers line the foreground. Several soldiers directly greet the camera’s lens. Although this photojournalistic image only provides posed and static figures, the image lends a greater documentary “realism” to the imaginary Calverinian troops. Darger’s employment of this photograph re-presents the privileged view of the frontline witness, a conduit that “lets the world see” not only the atrocities and battles, but, also, the day-to-day life of war (here, the campsite). A precursor to later compositions of immobile girls turning toward the viewer, this earlier work exploits the rhetoric of immediacy and “truth” inherent in photographs and war illustrations, material already culturally encoded as “factual,” and first-hand.

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8 Quote by President Eisenhower during WWII when he called for photojournalists to depict the atrocities of the Nazis. Darger’s early scenes of encampments are reminiscent of late nineteenth-century engravings in *Harper’s Weekly*. Likewise, as prototypes to war photography, these engravings documented the daily lives of soldiers from an embedded journalist viewpoint. For the Eisenhower quote and a discussion of frontline witnessing and representation see Barbie Zelizer, “From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History and Photography*, ed. Bonnie Brennen and Hannah Hardt (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999) 105.

As Darger’s own documentary facts and visual references—guarantees of the “real”—such readymade ephemeral imagery as cloud formations, marching soldiers, or weaponry enabled Darger to give tangible form to intangible events. Photographs and engravings initially provided a facsimile for shaping and profiling various graphic tableau vivants. Darger treated these pictorial lexicons, along with an array of fictional documents (hand-drawn maps, casualty ledgers, and volumes of military regalia) as objectively in-depth “real” information, thus, instilling a “reality effect” that drove his epic story. He continued to compile many scrapbooks and files in the 1950s and 60s—near the latter part of his life and creative output. These files, scrapbooks, and ledgers appear to follow a central purpose. Perhaps Darger assembled them as a means to compliment and complete his written epic, he writes:

The stories in this volume have been reproduced after most careful patient work and from original battles known in other sections of the great and intolerable war.

All the incidents in this volume are fully intended to give the reader and the others, in a best way as possible a complete and most accurate account of this great conflict as far as the volume goes, describing in entertaining language some more of the strange and sad circumstances that led to the record breaking struggle, the most important battles of that time on land and water, the kind of soldiers on both sides who so fiercely and insanely participated in them and the causes that brought such shameful disasters and down falls of some of the national armies.

The description with the interesting written illustrations will it is hoped bring about a far better knowledge and more correct idea of the fierce and

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10 My use of the phrase “reality effect” stems from the writings of French critic Roland Barthes and his belief that modernity invented its own discursive models of “reality.” Barthes cites 19th century literature’s inclusion of concrete details in fictional texts and assumptions about history manifested in such devices as the private diary, the museum and exhibition hall, and the development of photography, “whose sole pertinent feature is precisely to signify that the event represented has really taken place.” Modern society treats these manifestations as perceptually accurate and “authentic.” See Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 145-147.

11 It is not known whether or not the scrapbooks and files dating from the 1950s-602 are the only ones Darger made. Considering the longevity of his artistic production, other ephemeral materials could have been lost, discarded, or damaged during the artist’s lifetime or afterwards. Some of Darger’s books show fire damage; a Bible, in particular, is charred beyond use.
sanguinary progress of the Abbieannian Intercine war than volume One first presented to the public.

Neither trouble or expense has been spared to make this volume perfectly reliable in every way. Editors of great experience will be in due time allowed to go over the whole work most carefully and verify every date of incidents, disasters, battles and great adventures so as to prevent the possibility of error.\textsuperscript{12}

In order to turn his story into a war history, Darger needed “accurate” and available facts. He manufactured them in the form of ledgers, maps, and pictorial lexicons. Ledgers enumerated soldiers, providing name, rank and casualty statistics.\textsuperscript{13} Maps created a sense of place through fabrication of countries and topographies. As another embodiment of imaginary travel, maps also offered an opportunity to re-trace journeys and the progress of invading armies. Even though presenting a fictitious history, Darger’s words assure his reader (and himself) that all “facts” are solid and have proper documentation.\textsuperscript{14} Forming a back-up system, this idiosyncratic form of constructing “reality” also enriches visual works in the earlier Calverhine collages.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{13} MacGregor estimates that Darger’s listing of soldiers runs up to into the tens of thousands. MacGregor, 107.

\textsuperscript{14} This concern for “facts” echoes Darger’s school-boy frustrations over the inconsistencies in Civil War histories. In his autobiography he writes, “I once told my teacher, but the one, Mrs. Dewey at the Skinner school, that I believed no one truthfully knew the losses in the battles of wars (including our Civil war), because each history told different losses, and I had the histories and other stories to prove it.” Darger, \textit{History of My Life}, 19-20.

\textsuperscript{15} Darger’s visual oeuvre includes hundreds of hand-colored photographs, small collaged pieces (possibly studies, some bust-style portraits), penciled “additions” in books and coloring books (drawn tongues, hair braids, eyes), small traced drawings, large-scale works like \textit{The Battle of Calverhine}, and approximately 300 double-sided, horizontal, collaged and watercolor-drawings dedicated to \textit{The Realms of the Unreal}, ranging from 2’ up to over 9’ in length. His collections of clipped images, what I refer to as his pictorial lexicon also deserve mention. Extensive and aesthetically striking, these scrapbooks contain strange juxtapositions of imagery, arrays of brilliant color, and written marginalia (often instructions about image use).
Seeing All

With so much visual and textual information to offer, Darger turned toward a panoramic vision to articulate his opus. Readily available in mass media since the mid-nineteenth century, the panoramic format served as a popular visual standard for illustrating battles, ruins, and majestic landscapes. The various battles scenes that Darger clipped from magazines and incorporated into his own visual work demonstrate his familiarity with this convention. While the *Battle of Calverhine* reveals Darger’s attraction to active elements and “known” experiences, his employment of Heade’s *Thunderstorm on Narragansett Bay* (fig. 2.3) suggests his penchant for panoramas awash with possibility and contemplation.

Although many scholars would argue that Heade’s intimate landscape rebuffs conventional panoramic schematics (a massive, all-encompassing compaction of surveyable space), nonetheless, this intimate painting skillfully manipulates spatial dynamics and blends portentous mood. One becomes immediately aware of its strong, horizontal composition, infinite space extending beyond the frame, and a slight aerial vantage point. Far less action-packed than most of Darger’s other appropriated panoramas (replete with bodily movement, explosions and distorting faces)¹⁶ Heade’s image registers a quiet, emergent and latent force. A detailed foreground of rocky shoreline and reflective water infuses the scene with tangible, knowable realism, while from the distant horizon, an amorphous line of black clouds ushers in an unknown, potentially destructive power. The storm enters via the horizon, a mysterious site signifying endless space and incalculable measurement. This conflation of the known and unknown—which the scene compresses and miniaturizes—sustains a palpable tension, the presence of danger, slowing building, and becoming.

¹⁶ Most of Darger’s panoramic clippings illustrate intense American battles. A scene from the Alamo, in particular, emphasizes conflict through grimacing faces and contorting bodies.
Presenting *Thunderstorm on Narraganett Bay* as a window to the exterior world in *At Jennie Richee*…, (fig. 2.4) Darger dually affirms this painting’s realistic, atmospheric power and artifice. Two other windows accompany *Thunderstorm*. Each crackles with the simple depiction of white-hot lightning strikes against stark, black backgrounds. A rippling hedge of greenery below provides a semblance of tree tops or, perhaps, a horizon line. These two lightning bolts pull their electric fingers downward near the heads of little girls, who, safe within the interior, stand awestruck and motionless. Girls (and a soldier) converge around these magnetically-charged windows. *Thunderstorm*, conversely, remains completely visible. Darger invites the viewer to contemplate the painting’s capricious clouds. The *mise-en-scène* of girls before windows, watching and waiting, informs the viewer’s perspective exposing Darger’s theatrical staging of picturing a picture, re-presenting a representation.

Soldiers and storms within *At Jennie Richee* … remind the viewer that the Realms are at war. Although static, Heade’s atmospheric scene yields a pregnant moment—a hyperbolic trope of threatening darkness, sweeping torrents, raging fury, and clearing skies. Art historians argue that representations of approaching storms, especially those by Heade and his mid-to-late nineteenth-century contemporaries, bear anxieties concerning the Civil War. Through stormy imagery, Americans confronted the “helplessness of humanity before uncontrollable natural forces,” effecting a “devastating realization: “the precariousness of civilization in a world in which traditional meanings are jeopardized.”¹⁷ Storm imagery also unleashes apocalyptic affirmations, simultaneously signaling destruction and hope. Such moment-to-moment temporality and sense of divine purpose equally sets the tempo of Darger’s work as thunder- and fire-storms usher in and out of his rolling landscapes. In his

Realms narrative, a raging storm precedes the onslaught of child-slavery into edenic Calverinia. From this moment on—until the final Christian victory—the fate of little Christian girls hangs in the balance as they risk their lives (and innocence) battling blood-thirsty foes and disastrous storms.

Heade’s brooding thunderstorm additionally parallels the atmospheric forebodings of Darger’s weather journals. The words “unsettled” and “threatening” frequently line his daily entries: “Saturday, August 23, 1958. Partly cloudy to threatening in the afternoon. A few drops of rain,” or “Two unsettled thunderstorms pass by without hitting, July 13, 1958.”

His ten-year ritual of watching and recording weather suggests a residual undercurrent of expectation and disappointment keeping Darger’s eyes on the skies.

Suspenseful anticipation aligns with infinite horizons in Darger’s panoramic schema as a means, to fabricate not only a space (an image, a world, a vision) big enough to hold a tremendous amount of detail, but, also, to build a sensate expanse refusing containment with expectancy, implying movement, substitution, and metamorphosis. Consider for example, this passage from the Realms:

There was probably no one in the world who ever had the opportunity to gaze upon such a grand and magnificent scene as which was spread out before the vision from the summite (sic) of Gautamula ridge that bright early June day, 1913. Where ever you could look, from front, to rear, from left to right, the valleys stretched away in expanses of beautifully colored fields, and orchard and groves, and forests. And the very air was laden with the perfumes of all various spring flowers and of grasses, fresh pine and of fruits and with the incense of burning of dry dead leaves.

Far above one could see large fleecy clouds floating athwart the blue expanse of sky, intercepting here and there the bright sunshine, and mottling the very landscape with alternate patches of light and shadow which chased each other from field to field, across hillock and stream. And through this fine setting of scenery in Northern Angelinia state passed an unusually

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18 Henry Darger, *Book of Weather Reports on Temperatures, Fair, Cloudy to Clear Skies, Snow, Rain, or Summer Storms, and Winter Storms, and Big Blizzards. Also the “low” Temperatures of Severe Cold Winter, and Hot Spell of Summer.* unpublished journal, unpaginated, collection of the American Folk Art Museum.
magnificent panorama. If one looked down from the heights he could observe something long and gray following like the long windings of a snake, the meanderings of numerous roads, and thither to left and right up hill, and down dale, in sunshine and shadow, and this long line of gray, was tipped with shining steel, and threaded its way, a long serpent one reads of in fairy stories of old, here and there borne by a mounted orderly, a yellow gudion (sic) inscribed with the familiar devices belonging to the general headquarters, spoke the presence of a supreme chief general and his staff of general and other officers, followed by their retainers.\textsuperscript{19}

Note the suggestive motion of a panorama “passing” through Northern Angelinia, as well as, the manner by which Darger describes the whole valley while weaving back and forth between the expanse and the detail, the general and the particular. Waxing poetically, Darger stuffs the scene full with palpable descriptions: incense of burning leaves, perfume-laden air, fresh pine, fleecy clouds, mottled sunshine, shadows, snaking movement, and shining steel. From this fluid narrative, a troop of soldiers emerge, first appearing in the distance like a giant serpent, and, then, slowly turning into marching lines of gray-garbed men, their steel weaponry glinting in the sunlight. Darger explores an indefatigable view, boundless and expansive, gradually offering a plethora of sights, textures, and smells. More than just fodder for a mental image, the descriptions explicitly lay a framework of factual and “real” experiences from which his “unreality”\textsuperscript{20} can then continually metamorphose. Here, Darger extends his storytelling device, the panorama, beyond historic representation by utilizing panoramic flow as a schema for imagining. Diverging from the common perception of history as a “neutral” recording of events, exterior to both the historian and the listener/reader, Darger re-inserts the bodily and attempts to (re)place the viewer (and himself)

\textsuperscript{19} Darger, \textit{The Realms of the Unreal}, Book IV, Chapter 59, 914.

\textsuperscript{20} My interpretation of unreality in Darger’s art is not just fantasy, more succinctly it is pushing beyond, exceeding, excessiveness; also an orientation towards incalculability, infinity, sublimity, imaginary immensity – conditions synonymous to the his use of the word, “indescribable.”
within the narrative. He strives to provide enough detail and phenomenological sensation to alter the perception and position of a viewer/reader, in order to eliminate the distance between artist’s vision and spectator. Again, Darger prepares the reader for a spectacular journey in the Realms’ introductory statements:

But the reader, if he so wills, may keep his eye on all scenes that follow each other on and along the Aronburgs Run and its valley, for the final drama of the war will occur at or on the banks of the Aronburgs Run where the final ending of the hopes of successes for Glandelina will ensue … Let the reader follow battle after battle with the others, let him follow every event and adventure in the volume and then he can if he sets his mind and heart on it take on as if he himself was an actual participator.

The Battle of Calverhine also demonstrates this “following” effect as Darger never allows one’s imagination to rest. He molds the viewer/reader into a persistent, surveying eye with his instructive commentary and visual prose. Through word and image, Darger’s art speaks the vivid language of panoramic entertainments, the cycloramas of Darger’s childhood. The cyclorama, a late 19th century variation of the panorama, turned the panorama into a visual experience so complete that one confused the simulation with reality. A proto-cinematic experience, cycloramas involved a rotunda setting where

21 Not only does Darger position himself as a war correspondent, someone witnessing events, but also as particular characters in the story. In the Introduction of Volume IV of the Realms, he states: “The author writes the scenes in this volume as if he often had experienced them himself, as if at one time he is on the side of the foe, at other on that of the Christians, then again he is with Penrod, and his friends, or with Violet, and her sisters, or with the Christian generals. Some times he writes as if he was actually one of the surviving victims of either flood, fire, or explosion disaster, or fights in battles from one side or another.” MacGregor, 184.

22 Darger, The Realms of the Unreal, Volume IV unnumbered first page.

23 The term cyclorama was used in Australia and the United States in the 1880s and 90s to distinguish circular panoramas from low-tech, moving panoramas (scrolling images). This differentiation signaled distinctions of shape and simulation quality. Cycloramas specifically were known for their dramatic atmospheric effects – changing sunsets/sunrise, rain storms, fog, and in the case of the Chicago Fire production, the appearance of red-tinted smoke. See Mimi Colligan, Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

spectators stood on a platform within a dim space and took in a well-lit, circular, long, horizontal image, large enough to absorb peripheral vision. An elevation of perspective combining with extreme detail in the panoramic view simultaneously produced a telescopic effect heightening this sensation of “all-seeing-ness.” The panoramic demands for encyclopedic totalization (showing all, all-at-once) forced spectators to employ an active eye that constantly consumed manageable portions of the canvas at a time. Perception and decipherment activated the panoramic spectator as he/she made viewing choices and constructed his/her own narratives. Obscured by the euphoric, pleasurable feeling of viewing a world in miniature, this mental activity happened seamlessly and was heightened through techniques of intentional optic control within the panoramic rotunda.

Without the conventions of compositional framing devices or an outer physical frame, the spectator’s scan found visual footing on the horizon line and immersed into the dimensional illusionism produced by strategic alignment and an endless vista. As a result, without the boundaries between reality and illusion, the spectator experienced a sense of immediate relocation into the scene. Often, piped-in sounds and smells, thematically embellished viewing platforms, and diorama-style, foregrounded objects multiplied this feeling of systemically being there. According to cultural historian Alison Griffiths, “The spectator was thus enveloped in an artificial reality in which all boundaries delimiting the real from the synthetic had been putatively eliminated.”

Believed to be more real than

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reality, the panoramic experience was sometimes so intense that spectators became
disoriented, a condition known as sehkrankheit or “see-sickness.”

With information more akin to a newspaper article than an academic-style painting,
panoramic exhibitions claimed to be as much educational as entertaining. To aid in their
didactic function, most panoramas included written panels, guides, maps, and live narrators
to explain events and point out salient features. These elements concurrently served to
confirm the panorama’s “authenticity” and “truth.” Along with these elements, panoramas
included statements and affidavits by the artists confirming on-site artist studies and
conversations with eye-witnesses. Consequently, witnessing upgraded the certification of
truthfulness for panoramas. Cultural historian Bernard Comment argues that panoramas,
“functioned not as a representation whose accuracy needed to be corroborated, but as a
source of truth, a guarantee of reality.” Thus, panoramas operated as spectacle replacing,
rather than repeating, an experience. Panoramas with their enchanting mixture of art,
science, and commerce (often, with a tinge of gore) projected an educational role, a valid,
“authentic,” simulated experience. Viewing from a distance, the spectator acquired

26 This mention of panoramic vertigo appears in Comment, 24 and Alan Wallach, “Making a Picture of the
View from Mount Holyoke” in American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature
(New Haven: Yale Univ. Press) 83.

27 According to Griffiths, panoramas were a proto-newsreel, featuring realistic scenes and political events that
would have interested the average newspaper reader. See Griffiths, 10.

28 Comment, 130.

29 According to theorist Guy Debord, the spectacle utilizes abstractions and illusions as surrogate experiences
for concrete “reality.” Aligning with this concept, the panorama literally and conceptually distanced viewers
from depicted events by replacing knowledge with highly mediated social and physiological experiences. See

30 Griffiths suggests that the panorama’s perceived didacticism may have allowed a different standard of moral
propriety than other entertainments (theater, vaudeville) when it came to displaying graphic, bloody images.
Griffiths, 32.
knowledge about a fierce battle or foreign land through various degrees of phenomenological
immersion, conjuring an immediate sense of transporting elsewhere.

For turn-of-the century Americans, spectacles of sublime topographies, battles, and
natural disasters placated arm-chair traveling urges and the desires to imagine events too
traumatic and immense to comprehend. During Darger’s childhood, five cycloramas
reigned in downtown Chicago: The Great Chicago Fire, The Battles of Gettysburg and
Shiloh, The Confrontation of the Monitor and the Merrimac, Jerusalem and the Crucifixion,
and The Siege of Paris.31 The Great Chicago Fire spectacle, in particular, ushered in the
height of the city’s cycloramic enthusiasm in 1892 and marked its demise in 1913. Located
downtown, in a large rotunda at Michigan Avenue between Madison and Monroe, this
blazing canvas spanned a massive 50’ by 20,000’, delighting throngs of residents and visitors
alike. Promoters Howard H. Gross and Isaac Newton Reed opened this exhibit shortly before
the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 with the intentions of opportunistically feeding
off the exposition’s tourism and later traffic. Their strategy proved successful throughout the
decade as the 1898 publication Bird’s Eye Views and Guide to Chicago by Rand McNally
reported that 144,000 people attended the Chicago Fire Cyclorama annually.32 Interest in
this cyclorama waned soon after; the rotunda closed within the next decade. Owners stored

31 Chicago was a major stop on a national circuit of thirty cycloramas through the 1880s to the early 1900s.
Most from this series originated in Milwaukee where a large group of cyclorama artists resided. See Perry R.
The Chicago Historical Society notes that in addition to the five spectacles mentioned above, another concurrent
fire cyclorama ran in downtown Chicago, making the total six during the mid to late 1890s. See “Fanning the
Flames,” The Great Chicago Fire and Web of Memory, Chicago Historical Society, accessed November 12,

32 See the Chicago Historical Society’s website for information about the fire panoramas/cycloramas from 1878
and the late 1890s. Ibid.
the enormous cyclorama canvas in a warehouse on South Indiana Avenue before selling the cycloramic canvas to a junk dealer for a mere two dollars in 1913.33

Darger was 21 years old in 1913. Despite the decline of cycloramic entertainments, the effects of their sensationalizing rhetoric and boundless “real” artifice continued to thrive in Darger’s art. Written passages from the Realms disclose a yearning to construct a replacement akin to panoramas—a sensation of travel through both details and expansive, all-encompassing views, so intense that the sensation causes physiological disorientation (for Darger, “being there” as a participant). Works such as The Battle of Calverhine (c. 1929) (fig. 2.1) underscore this mutual vocabulary. Beyond the collage’s conventionally panoramic viewpoint, Calverhine’s ambitious (cycloramic) content takes us closer to the heat of the battle through dramatic feeling of violence.

Floating above Calverine’s vista, the viewer additionally experiences a sense of his/her privileged and powerful gaze, above and distant from the battle below. Theorist Michel Foucault affiliates this kind of panoramic phenomena with Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon design (1791). Featuring a central tower surrounded by a circular prison, Bentham’s panopticon (all-seeing) enabled 360° surveillance. Within the tower, one, or a few individuals could view all inmates in complete anonymity. Foucault argues that the panoptic model informs the panorama’s elevating perspective, coupling a sense of visual totality with modern methods of surveillance and discipline.34 Furthering these thoughts, Jonathan Crary asserts that the panorama and other modern optical technologies operate like an engine of sight, hiding their manner of production, and creating, not just spectacles, but,

33 Ibid.

also, active, disembodied observers. Darger’s desire to shape the viewer/reader into a floating and consuming eye follows along this notion, conflating optics and power. Abundantly apparent in his address to the reader, control also manifests in the ways that Darger miniaturizes the *Realms*, compressing simultaneous and expansive views into a single, privileged vantage point. In Darger’s *Realms*, nothing escapes his gaze (and the viewer’s). Hovering above in momentary sovereignty, the experience of viewing Darger’s world vacillates between feeling like a secular version of God’s all-seeing eye, monitoring a battle between good and evil, and a gleeful child flying over a playful land available for exploration.

In discussing this issue of optical control, it is important to note the degree to which institutionalized practices of surveillance governed Darger’s formative years. From the ages of six to seventeen he experienced a succession of expulsions and relocations, partially due to his inability to conform to rigid social codes of behavior. This journey took him from parochial school, to orphanage and public school, to an asylum for the “feeble-minded”, and eventually, as an escapee, back to Chicago. One might assume that Darger, the student, and, then, inmate presenting under a diagnosis of “masturbation,” felt a judgmental pierce: the authoritative gaze of educators, disciplinarians, clergy, and psychiatrists. Moreover, as a devout Catholic, did Darger feel the weight of God’s omniscient eye? The autocratic stance that Darger develops in his art (as documentarian, war correspondent, constant surveyor, creator) suggests that *the Realms* offered him a means to regain order and control

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36 In regards to his diagnosis, Darger recounts his doctor’s comment that his (Darger’s) “heart was not in the right place.” Darger, *History of My Life*, 41-42.
over a history of ongoing exchanges between public and personal environments. Perhaps his art served, not as a vehicle of passive escapism, but, as a means to mediate and question social structures, providing a surrogate control that allowed a different, privileged way to relate to society and regulate his own thoughts and desires. Thus, his art produced not only an effect of physical re-placement, but also one of sociological and psychological reevaluation. Interaction with the *Realms* would have been a re-inventive, cathartic, even pleasurable, experience for Darger.

Overlaying Darger’s work with panoramic discourse, does not suggest that his imagery fully participates in “pure perception,” as a bodiless art disassociating the visual from the tactile. Originally, the *Realms*’ imagery existed in book form. Binding three volumes of like-sized pages, Darger meant for the reader to hold, flip through, and, even though cumbersome (with individual pieces unfolding up to 9’ in length), handle each sprawling landscape. One can only guess today how the images, intrinsically informed by the book format, might read differently within a sequential, intimate venue. Most certainly, we would view the works flat, not hanging on the wall (with the exception of *The Battle of Calverhine* created before the bound volumes). Would an eighteen foot spread entice fingers, as well as eyes, to follow/read each landscape? Would flatness imply that we should feel actual imagery (not just book covers), and would Darger’s manifestations of touching

37 John MacGregor contends that Darger’s art is all escapism into an alternative world. He writes, “With words and images, and the accumulation of detail, not subdued to the task of communication, a different function is revealed: the creation of an alternative reality, a means of living for a lifetime in another world.” MacGregor, *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*, 24.

38 My thoughts here are shaped by Comments assertions that the panorama mediates social experience among urban individuals. Namely, panoramic experiences allow one to contextualize his/her existence within the spectacle’s aura of history and immense geography. See Comment, 19.

39 In *Techniques of the Observer*, Crary argues that modern forms of optics deny tactility and the physical participation of the viewer.
(tracing marks, captions, and penciled-in embellishments) appear more prominent, more immediate, and, perhaps, more meaningful? And, finally, considering the highly private confines of a book, should we wonder if Darger ever meant for us to touch these images? Should someone other than the artist look at them? Accordingly, Darger’s “reader” may simply be an oratory convention and/or a more complicated, psychic companion, an additional witness in his story and to his life-long task. As these considerations remain beyond the current state of available documentation on Darger, they leave many questions regarding the effects of tactility on Darger’s art.

Finally, when considering the trajectory of cycloramic formats and Darger’s earlier writings and pictorial work, one finds resonance in photographs of the artist with friend, Whillem Schloeder. (fig. 2.6) The photographs rely on similar optical principles of trompe l’oeil technology and reality production—the theatrics of staging a caboose tableau and the perception of documentary “truth,” respectively. The train motif, additionally participates in a production of false reality. Reinvigorated as an iconic image in the American imagination through cinematic technology, the train shares an intimate link with early motion pictures featuring the vicarious thrill of movement through close proximity to or views from a speeding locomotive. Within this liminal space of reality/unreality in the caboose photographs Darger performs bourgeois affluence as a gentleman traveler in suit and hat, “documenting” his faux voyage to far-off, San Francisco. Aided by various props referencing the “real” and mobility, Darger transports himself to places he can only imagine, accessing “first-hand” experiences of the middle class and the romance of travel and the

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40 Film theorists note that many early films featured train sequences. In fact, the first moving picture by the Lumiére brothers in 1895 was entitled “Arrivée d’un train.”
West. 41 This photograph of the young Darger, concurrent with early Realms production, suggests another means by which he desired for the imaginary sensation of physical travel, or re-placement. The photographs brim with childish fancy—a souvenir from an adventurous tale, yet to be told.

**Beyond Words**

Correspondences between panoramic entertainments and Darger’s work resonant as well in their mutual artistic ethos. For example, the Great Chicago Fire cyclorama’s claims to “factual” information and didactic purpose rest within the pages of its pamphlet. Aside from the main narrative of the Great Fire recounted by clergyman, Rev. David Swing, the pamphlet praises the artist and offers an argument for the importance of visual images in the telling of history. This deviation from the story elevates the visual above the written word, while also grounding this particular spectacle in both the arenas of fashionable, popular entertainment and education. In regards to the artists, their steadfast character, not their biographies receives the most attention. Noble and committed historians, they,

became so enraptured with the work that they seemed to live in and become a part of it. Some of them at times became so oblivious to all, except some especially thrilling scene they were then working out, that time, place, and situation was lost to them; the hours would come and go unnoticed, until aroused by a comrade and informed that the day was done, and then only would they realize the demand of nature for food and rest. 42

The polite passage reads of inspired duty, inferring a socially relevant art, rather than, one of private obsession through hints of professionalism, affluence, and purpose in both word and

41 Darger left the city of Chicago once (not by choice) to reside in the feeble-minded asylum of Lincoln, Illinois (central Illinois). He did not travel or vacation as an adult.

42 Promoters Reed and Gross claimed that the ten men crew of artists spent approximately twenty years of labor painting the Chicago Fire canvas. See the accompanying pamphlet for the Chicago Fire Cyclorama; Rev. David Swing, *A Story of the Chicago Fire* [Chicago: Reed & Gross, 1892] 37.
accompanying artists’ portraits. Taking away the suits, manicured mustaches, and class
distinctions of “Mr. Austin or Mr. Grover” (of London and the Art Institute of Chicago,
respectively), we find artists paralleling (but not close to equaling) the intense productivity of
Darger. Although we may stretch to wonder if Darger saw the artist/cycloramist as some
kind of mentor, nonetheless, they both pursued historical accuracy, similar subject matter,
and tedious, decade-long artistic projects monumentalizing tragic events. A juxtaposition of
Darger and the cycloramist does not reveal their distinct connection, but, instead, a larger
cultural dialogue in which Darger participates concerning representation, history and tragedy.
Returning to Swing’s essay, this dialogue begins with his praises for the artist as an integral
figure in “completing” history. Using the Civil War as an exemplary achievement in archival
greatness, he asserts:

The present is, of all ages, the most fond of history. As it was taught
by the inductive philosophy to extract wisdom from facts, it asks each day to
report its series of facts. The Civil War, which swept over this land for four
years, is now stored away in the most complete history ever made of any war
upon earth. To the text of an army of writers was added the art of picturing
each incident. The fall of each officer, the armies on the march, the hosts in
battle, the camp-fire, the hospital, the troops crossing a stream, the pickets on
duty, the gun-boats, the negro contrabands, the victories, the defeats, are all
stored away, not only in the text of the historian, but also in the portfolio of
the artist.43

His essay continues by stating that while visual records complement the written word, thus,
completing history, the superlative nature of the cycloramic experience shifts the visual into a
higher arena of obtaining “truth”: “The great canvas, with its superb setting, tells the
immortal story of the burning of Chicago more faithfully, eloquently, and truthfully than

43 Swing. 4. This forty-page pamphlet includes pen & ink drawings (character types, portraits of promoters and
artists), reproductions of the cyclorama and written descriptions, Rev. Swing’s Chicago Fire narrative,
cyclorama facts and figures, and advertisements.

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could be done by a whole library of books."44 The cyclorama tickets further accentuate the ability of the spectacle to surpass conventional written and pictorial modes of documentation by claiming, “No words can describe the matchless grandeur of the scene!”45 This language, common in the cycloramic industry, attempted to elevate the role of the visual in the popular consciousness. Cycloramas claimed to capture what mere illustration and words could not. They claimed sublime experiences, triggered by, yet transcendent of, visual artistry.

This cognizance, apparently, was not lost to Darger. Insisting on the extreme difficulty of fully describing the Realms in words, he heroically claimed his best effort:

I have written as far as I was able, in unusually long details to make the scenes more striking, but even then even I have not succeeded in accomplishing what should have been done, as it is IMPOSSIBLE to describe them as they really are.46

He ends by comparing his efforts to the aesthetic endeavors of “the poet, the painter and the artist,” who, “could not have accomplished any more.”47 Elsewhere, he laments, “…how can the weak pen and appalled, thrilled, and excited imaginations of the best and most learned of all writers and story tellers ever perform the task? Not even the very human heart can merely feel what language will never be able to express.”48 These sentiments, coupled with the fact that Darger executed visual pieces after writing the bulk of the Realms, suggest that his imagery was not only a means to complement (and complete) his historical opus, but, also, to achieve something much greater. He believed in the unique, provocative quality of the visual to shape awareness in the viewer, even an awareness which was not fully translatable into

44 Swing, 29.
45 Chicago Fire Cyclorama ticket, collection of the Chicago Historical Society
47 Ibid.
48 Quoted by MacGregor, 99.
words. Thus, he attempted to achieve *visionary* (rather than visual potential) capable of evoking highly subjective, experiential responses in the viewer. With evocative potentials, his visual work surpasses the merely illustrative, giving way to a less logical, more projective mode of representation.

He writes:

> As observed here, the desolation of the war in every incomprehensible way is everywhere stretched out, roaring into abuses of child slaves, increasing wicked wrongs, redoubling distresses, and bringing the attention of the world to the horrors of disasters that were never heard of in real experiences and history, thus bringing the sympathies of the world to the lowly child slaves, and Abbieannia’s cause.49

Darger’s choice of words: *increasing, stretching, and redoubling* accentuates his will (and compulsion) to push beyond reality. To see all in Darger’s world is to also see (endure) again (and again).50 And, what we re-visit are not just ordinary events, but predominately extreme experiences—crimes, genocide, “horrors of disaster” and countervailing martyrdoms, miracles, and resurrections—acts and deeds that by their very heinous or revelatory nature insist that we move beyond passive seeing into an active and more emotive modality of witnessing. By surpassing the “real,” inflating the horrors to degrees of unbelievable proportions, his art enters into his imaginary realms of the *unreal*—the incomprehensible and *never heard of in real history*. Here, a paradoxical problem emerges in Darger’s art—describing the unknowable. As his imagery spirals off into an exponentially mounting panoramic vision of unreality, Darger clings to his *impossible* task of rendering the *indescribable*—the utter horror of relentless catastrophic experience that he cannot put into


50 Darger often repeats figures within the same composition. Similar descriptions of battles, fires, etc. also recur with little variation throughout the story.
words. While this undertaking directly addresses his personalized, highly inventive project, his work also draws upon language and representational strategies that Darger employed in the (re)telling of conflagration and historical tragedy, including, but, not limited to, cycloramic spectacle, within his immediate cultural milieu.

Shifting into a discussion of this interarticulation, my inquiry outlines the ways by which Darger’s words and images re-configure panoramic spectatorship into a different modality of knowing—a “witnessed modality,” allowing him to mediate subjects that resist representation.

**History is what hurts**

Volume IV of the *Realms* opens with a list of tragedies following the title, “Disasters of War that could surely Make History … !!!!!!! Occurring During and After the Battle of Jennie Turner.” (Jennie Turner, is both a place, as well as, a friend of the Vivian Girls. She emerges later as a gender-bending character in Darger’s story and as the “wildcat” girl from Darger’s asylum days.) Fires, floods, storms, and other natural forces of disorder shape and define this lengthy annal of great catastrophes. Darger infers then, what today (in a post-9/11, post-Hurricane Katrina culture) we know well—great loss produces history. The presence of imminent death, coupling with a latent desire to moralize tragedy simultaneously mark loss as both incomprehensible and meaningful. Darger’s *Realms*, a running narrative

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51 Literary theorist Lea Wernick Fridman employs this phrase to describe a literary genre in which the voice of the witness mediates the difficulties of representing events deemed so traumatic that they cannot be put into words. Lea Wernick Fridman, “History, Fantasy, Horror” in Words and Witness: Narrative and Aesthetic Strategies in the Representation of the Holocaust (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2000) 5-32.


53 Theorist Hayden White argues that it is the content that distinguishes historical from fictional accounts rather than their form. Both share narrative structures that are culturally specific, orient toward moralizing, and strive
that gives coherence to an enormous list of tragedies, acknowledges and attempts to employ this relationship. His words and imagery connect with a sentiment Susan Sontag eloquently described when she wrote, “We admire, in the name of truthfulness, an art that exhibits the maximum amount of trauma, violence, physical indignity … For us, the significant moment is one that disturbs us most.” However, Darger’s redoubling distresses and horror of disasters, with exponentially building tragedies, often disturb scholars too much, leading some to diminish the narrative’s potential moralistic concerns. Even within Darger’s conventional literary schema of good versus evil, the amount of gratuitous violence and correlating, voluminous descriptions arguably favors interpretations of hedonistic pleasure and psychological imbalances over discussions of significance or ethical pertinence.

Darger’s continuous pursuit of the elusive indescribable fuels his unreality, a vision beyond rational description and known collective real experience, often, at the expense of diffusing a message.

Making the indescribable palpable posed a qualitative problem that Darger tackled with extreme quantitative measures—over 15,000 pages of text, facts and figures in the hundreds of thousands, and superfluous visual details. His hyperbolic prose and highly detailed, often, bloody descriptions suggest that Darger modeled his own bombastic language from Chicago’s industry of disaster histories. Appropriating their style, Darger also acquired (knowingly or unknowingly) their idiomatic use of witnessing as a device for conveying events beyond description. As literary historian Lea Wernick Fridman suggests,

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55 John MacGregor suggests that violence in Darger’s art signals a potentially bi-polar, murderous instability on Darger’s behalf when he states: “From a psychological standpoint, the split-off ‘Glandelinian’ portion of Darger’s psyche is arguably the mind of a serial killer made visible.” MacGregor, 23.
“Catastrophe, by its nature, exceeds the ability of the mind to grasp it.”56 Narratives of catastrophe, what she refers to as “historical horror,” present the unique problem of “representing events that insist that they cannot be put into words even as they insist upon the need for transmission.”57 The testimony of a witness, whose telling equates with truth, offers another means of knowing when “traumatic fact cannot articulate itself credibly.”58

Chicago’s own particular journalistic phenomenon of historical tragedies and witnessed tales emerged days after the Great Fire of 1871 and remained popular until 1915. According to historian Perry R. Duis, inexpensive publications, which he dubs “instant histories,” dominated the city’s disaster-memorabilia industry, a fast-paced business of street-peddled books, sheet music, post cards, and other somber souvenirs commemorating calamity. Backed by Chicago’s burgeoning printing district, tales of assassinations, fires, floods, train wrecks and boat sinkings appeared “instantly,” originating as dummy copies advertising lurid accounts with sensational, grand titles, cursory tables of content, and a few pages of text from telegraphed facts and figures. Outfitted with thrilling images, these tempting previews were marketed through subscriptions. In the case of large events, such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, one could find up to one hundred different versions available for the public.59

Four of the most comprehensive instant histories of Chicago’s own Great Fire initiate the city’s cultural investment in fire commemoration60 and establish a discourse of lengthy,

56 Fridman, 15.
57 Ibid., 6.
58 Ibid.
aggrandized language and apocalyptic metaphor shaping conflagration tales to the present day. These histories (publications written within months of the fire) include: E.J. Goodspeed’s *The Great Fires in Chicago and the West* (677 pages), Elias Colbert’s and Everett Chamberlin’s *Chicago and the Great Conflagration* (528 pages), James W. Sheahan’s and George P. Upton’s *The Great Conflagration* (458 pages) and Frank Luzerne’s *Through the Flames and Beyond or Chicago as it Was and as it Is* (316 pages). Eye-witness testimonials, accompanying maps, and dramatic illustrations drove the momentum of these publications. All share an attempt to assess the fire’s significance, often, through the lens of biblical overtones questioning the moralistic nature of urban life. Spiritual prose intersperses the rhetoric purporting the city’s secular resurrection in which good overcame evil. For example, in Colbert and Chamberlain’s *Chicago and the Great Conflagration*, select chapters read: “The Resurrection,” “Good out of Evil: Some Wholesome Effects of Adversity,” and “The New Chicago.”61 Providential interpretations claimed that the Great Fire cleansed Chicago’s thriving underworld of political corruption, prostitution, bars, and gambling halls. Similarly the Great Fire also roused affluent citizens from an equally sinful gilded vice—razing theaters, “banquets of flesh and spirit,”62 shopping districts, and opulent mansions. This conflagration, a great “moral salvage” purified the city in one democratizing sweep, bringing all “low with the lowly themselves—all chastened and humbled together.”63

60 Chicagoans recognize the Great Fire as a watershed event. The fire marks the city’s rebirth into a modern era of skyscrapers and renewed commerce.


63 Quoted phrases from Colbert and Chamberlain, pages 450 and 215.
Extreme levels of devastation led many eye-witnesses to characterize the event as “indescribable,” ironically resulting in a swell of rhetoric attempting to capture a traumatic image as elusive and terrible as flickering flame. In *Through the Flames and Beyond* (1872), Frank Luzerne explains that “the detailed history of the Chicago Fire will never be written because there is an almost inconceivable mass of details that can never be gathered … and even if it could be readily obtained, their voluminousness would prevent publication in any but a book of the most extraordinary size.”

This quote gives one pause to think about Darger’s own war history—the epitome of “voluminousness,”—15,145 single-spaced pages, full of endless details and descriptions. Likewise, the favorable and idiomatic *indescribable* frequents Darger’s writings along with other echoes of instant history rhetoric.

In Volume IV, Darger writes,

> One big line of fire, occupying the width of the Mississippi River, was pouring across the southern part of the Sunbeam Creek with *indescribable* fury … Other small lakes of fire has swelled it to an immense sea roaring with rage, sweeping toward the besieged Christian lines with seemingly irresistible fury, catching many human beings in its path … But nothing could resist the fierce conflagration and fire typhoon, and millions of trees were thrown down by the second only to be enveloped in tongues of seething flame that at once leaped to the height of three hundred feet …

Compare Darger’s passage with this example from Luzerne’s popular post-fire account:

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64 Luzerne’s claim to voluminous details begins with his title page: *The Lost City! Drama of the Fire-Fiend! Chicago, as It was, and as It is! And its Glorious Future! A Vivid and Truthful Picture of All of Interest Connected with the Destruction of Chicago and the Terrible Fires of the Great North-West. Startling, Thrilling Incidents, Frightful Scenes, Hair-Breadth Escapes, Individual Heroism, Self-Sacrifices, Personal Anecdotes & Together with a History of Chicago from Its Origin, Statistics of the Great Fires of the World*. Quote from Frank Luzerne, *Through the Flames and Beyond: Chicago as It was and as It is.* (New York: Wells & Co., 1872) 66.

65 The word, “indescribable,” also figures prominently in “A Story of the Chicago Fire”—the pamphlet accompanying the Great Chicago Fire Cyclorama. For example, “the surging flames are sweeping through the north division with indescribable fury,” and the fire created “indescribable confusion.” Rev. David Swing, “A Story of the Chicago Fire” (Chicago: H.H. Gross, 1892) 28-29.

The torrent of flame swept over a space of five to seven miles in length, averaging a mile in width, and no building, probably in any city in the world could have withstood the typhoon of flame and fire combined ... its waves of barbed tongues, rolling and darting hither and thither, spangled with phosphoric tints, and gleaming against the sky like a surging sea of flame.67

In both accounts, the conflagration is a fluid, demonic substance that undulates like water, licks about with fiendish tongues, and surges with typhoon strength winds. While Luzerne’s account supplies a numeric approximation of the fire’s size, Darger’s prose conjures a mythic presence (the width of the Mississippi) with excessive statistics (millions of trees thrown down, flames leaping three hundred feet). Darger’s mention of the Mississippi River, in particular, projects additional layers of imaginary immensity signifying a divisionary marker that contextualizes national space (east or west of the Mississippi) and a beloved symbol of Americana, the tales of Mark Twain made familiar. The imaginary spatial dimensions of the Mississippi, unfurling into panoramic view, like the amplitude of the Great Chicago Fire, stages a versatile backdrop for great storytelling.

At the inception of Darger’s own Realms project, a fire-laden epic war where Good triumphs over Evil, Chicago was still actively mythologizing its own victory and phoenix-like rise from the ashes. The city still celebrated fire in dualistic form of hellish force and purifying agent—fanning the flames in order to re-burn the many tales of heroic struggle and redemption. The early anniversaries of those fateful days of October 8th and 9th, “Chicago Day,” typically included parades, pageants, public readings of eye-witness accounts, and the display of vintage and modern fire equipment. Newspapers featured special souvenir sections with then-and-now stories proclaiming the wonders and horrors of the conflagration. Large public celebrations followed for the fiftieth (1921) and seventy-fifth anniversaries.

67 Luzerne, 89 and 61.
supporting this historic continuum of hyperbolic description, a resonate language circulating and reinvigorating throughout the media.

One such commemorative souvenir, a book of eyewitness accounts by the Chicago Historical Society (1946), resided in Darger’s personal library. Featuring a simple, yet dramatic cover with a set of hands cupped in prayer against a barbed flaming backdrop of red, the publication promises a “human account,” through the personal correspondences of eye-witnesses. (fig. 2.7) The publication includes woodcuts along with stereoscopic views of ruins to lend additional layers of drama and documentary truth to the personal experiences in letter form. Although individualized, these letters repeat idiomatic descriptions inherent in the (re)telling of the Great Chicago Fire. The “fiery fiend” appears as a “sea of fire,” whose “long tongues of flame” dart out over the street and “lap it up clean.” Comparisons to hurricanes abound along with the biblical analogy to the burning Sodom & Gomorrah. Again, the testimony of the witness prevails as “no words can give an idea of the horrors” that could “never be described or imagined.”

Historical horror drove, and continues to drive a self-mythologizing, tough-talking consciousness of Chicago (nicknamed the “windy” city. Numerous post-fire accounts and


69 George Howland’s letter dated October 14, 1871 from Angle, 36.

70 The tarred streets and wooden construction of Chicago’s downtown provided self-propagating tinder for Chicago’s Great Fire. A self-feeding firestorm effect produced convection winds similar to rotational tornadoes.

71 Anna E. Higginson’s letter dated November 10, 1871 from Angle, 48.

72 Although Chicago’s moniker, “the windy city” could literally relate to its Lake Michigan exposure and the dynamic effects of wind whipping around skyscrapers, historians remind us that the moniker originally carried metaphoric connotations. Declaring itself the “Metropolis of the West,” Chicago claims a rich history of self-promotional boosterism and loquacious politicians. The nickname may have been given by other urban centers as a pejorative response to the proud city. Reference to Chicago as the “windy city” first appeared in
instant histories retold through newspapers and commemorative memorabilia offered a compelling, readily available model for Darger’s *thrilling* journalistic rhetoric. Not surprisingly, this grandiose language and witnessing modality also suited the spectacular nature and didactic claims of cycloramic entertainments. Drawing from these precedents, Darger honed a self-perpetuating dynamic in his art—to articulate the *indescribable*, an always already impossible, thus, failing task. With excessive, inflammatory speech and grandiose imagery to wrap around the imagination, Darger continually fed his desire to capture an unattainable visage in all its wonder and horror.

**About Face**

Long, horizontal, panoramic-style formats prevail throughout Darger’s mature work (c. 1930-70): approximately three hundred watercolors with collage and tracings comprise the bound volumes of *The Realms of the Unreal*. As the conflagration of wars and deadly fires continues to roll through this make-believe terrain—changing in appearance and building in extremes—the panoramic format and inhabitants, likewise, morph and continue to address our gaze and issues of representation in complex ways. Little girls, for example, take center stage in his visual work. Following the child-focused narrative of his text, *the lowly child slaves, and Abbieannia’s cause*, Darger creates a vast array of characters—seven Vivian princesses and millions of indigenous, enslaved girls—initially from hand-colored photographs. Soon after, Darger appropriates their form from popular illustrations of modern childhood: fashion advertisements, coloring books, and daily comics.73 The little girls

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exhibit similar characteristics: mostly blonde-headed with ponytails, some page-boy brunettes—all in dresses with mid-thigh hemlines, short socks, and patent-leather “mary jane” shoes. Together, this group of ephemera provided the visual “facts” of Darger’s girlhood—sweet, round-faced “little” girls with gender, age (7-12 years old), and class distinctions revealed through the nuances of clothing styles. Images of soldiers and cowboys in comic/coloring book form, also readily available, likewise replaced their photographic equivalents.

Concurrent with this clear shift of materials, Darger also turned from collaging to tracing as his technique of preference. His scenes started to register clearer, stylized versions of girls and men. More akin to comic strip illustration than photography, their bodies’ outlines allowed for larger areas of coloration and greater ease of graphic manipulation. The sweethearts of daily comics and advertisements, such as Little Annie Rooney or the Morton Salt Girl magically replicate and move with articulating limbs and interchangeable outfits. Some appeared with slight transformations—the startled Miss Muffet, sans spider—or abruptly de-familiarized—a prepubescent Sears Roebuck model, defrocked and (mis)sexed with dangling penis (fig. 2.8).

At Cederine. She witnesses a frightful slaughter of officers (fig. 2.9 a&b) illustrates this shift of materials from photographs to popular graphics along with a re-configuration of panoramic space and thematic focus. Unlike its predecessor, The Battle of Calverhine, At Cederine ... presents warfare in an orderly panoramic space. Troops illustrate clear

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divisions—on the left, Glandelinians in blue, and to the right, Christian armies clad in a purplish-gray and gold.\textsuperscript{74} Fanning across the vista in loose linear patterns, the intense blues and golds of their uniforms pop in syncopating rhythms, emanating in diagonals from an imaginary point—our perspective—front and center. Careful spacing of soldiers and distinct planes of fore-, mid-, and background in this sweeping panorama allow us to easily distinguish figure from figure, land from sky, and, as we hover close to the scene, even read facial expressions. Firing muskets, reloading gestures, bursting gunpowder, and the carrying of wounded signify the intensity of battle, but, with lack luster drama. The intense \textit{inflamed feeling} of warfare that pervades the earlier \textit{The Battle of Calverhine} no longer resonates within this later battle scene. Comics and coloring book soldiers, of playtime and childhood memory, deaden and impede the impact of violence. Even though engaged in deadly acts, their toy-like bodies retain a film of innocence and nostalgia—a coolness that supersedes their heated circumstance. With precision, each soldier is visible and tallied like the detached accountancy of casualty ledgers. Curiously, Darger now negates emotive potential and embraces lack of affect. Additionally, contrived placement and patterning suggest that Darger replaces derivative conventions of panoramic illustration with an idiosyncratic, self-conscious artifice—Darger’s mature style.

A lone, little girl and a caption (both in the third quadrant, fig. 2.8) reference a pivotal moment in the evolution of Darger’s work, yet, overlooking both occurs easily in the clutter of this scene. The caption, \textit{At Cederine She witnesses a frightful slaughter of officers}

\textsuperscript{74} In Darger’s intercine war, the Glandelinians practice girl-slavery and the Angelinian/Abbieannian/Christian armies fight for its abolition. Based off of the American Civil War, the troops in this image wear similar, though inversed colors associated with the Union and the Confederacy.
contradicts a bloodless, emotionless battle. War, a story of maximizing and universalizing violence, is now displaced from the actual battlefield and told through the face of the girl, or more precisely, through the viewer’s empathy with the child. The drama of this scene surfaces here, at the point where the viewer’s gaze pauses, arrested by the presence of this child, so horribly vulnerable. The little girl, Darger’s orphan-child, a refugee, signifies the casualties of war. She rises behind a sitting soldier who partially shields her body from Glandelinian fire with his own. Her head sticks brazenly above his and although quarter-turned, one fully reads her slightly troubled expression. The girl’s nearly stoic reaction and relation to her surroundings implies disengagement. Given the circumstances, her reaction appears quite ambiguous. The viewer looks to her to offer more, to allow one’s imagination to interpret the scene through her, because she, as the caption reads, witnesses the fight. Orienting towards the viewer’s space, looking out into the foreground, she serves as a subtle reflection of our spectatorship. She reminds us that we watch also. And, like her, we are witnesses in position before the Realms’ endless sequence of events, a running narrative that rarely rests long enough to give in depth consideration to the meaning of the story’s violent and voluminous content. This girl and many others like her in different situations play important roles as conduits for expressing the intensity and significance of events. Unpredictable creatures, their reactions can punctuate the depiction of a moment or ambiguously deflate that moment’s emotive potential. Admittedly, they coyly play with the viewer’s imaginative and sympathetic capacities. One watches their eyes to see where they are looking. One notices the changes of their mouth—a pout, a smile, or an oval-shaped scream—to guide one’s response. Their protruding tongues (from strangling) tell when death may be near. Their closed eyes announce that death has come.

75 Part of this work’s dryness may also stem from its washy, matte coloration and lightly drawn forms.
In works such as *At Cederine* ... Darger’s imagery starts to operate as grandiose surface treatment, an affectless spectacle of facts and figures, names, places, curls, sweet faces, naked bodies, raging fires, and battles. In spite of his detached, comic book aesthetic, Darger’s focal point—the little girl—defies neutral engagement. Indeed, little girls bear the burden of the story’s unrelenting violence and indignities. With each corporeal degradation—mauling, evisceration, crucifixion, burning, or shooting, as well as stripping naked, incarcerating, shackling, or endlessly chasing—the girls appear to be in harms way at every turn. As Darger’s story intensifies, conflict, “heat” or emotion does not emerge from his “cool” pictorial compositions or the façade of his hyperbolic prose. The power of Darger’s work, instead, resonates in a counter narrative developing separately from, yet, intimately linking with his immediate imagery and text—a contradictory and complex story that the viewer begins to co-author, writing on the child’s body.

This child, the girl, triggers a wealth of responses, from the pleasure of recognizing her (a Sears Roebuck model or Morton Salt Girl) to spotting her recycling in different scenarios, to the discomfort, even, disgust, when later witnessing a Glandelinian strangling her. Even though she, as all of Darger’s little girls, manifests in a comic book style—doll-like and soul-less—one cannot divorce one’s feelings and fears from her culturally-constructed texts. She draws upon, re-formulates, and transgresses notions of innocence, purity, and vulnerability inherent in images of children. The girl, entangling within multiple narratives—colonized by Glandelinians, Darger’s gaze and the viewer’s—distinctly reconstitutes a sense of spectacle in Darger’s art. She somehow transcends her artifice long enough to shock and disturb one’s sensibilities. Her presence alone shifts the tenor of

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76 I will further discuss many of these issues in regards to the Vivian Girls in Chapters Two and Three, *Pure (Pyre)* and *Desire*, respectively.
Darger’s art from cool detachment to hot engagement simply by her mutable and seductive image.

In *The Realms of the Unreal*, a conflagration ignites over the captivity of little girl bodies. While their corporeality remains central to the narrative of Darger’s story, the visual signification of their faces enigmatically relates to their panoramic surroundings. This phenomenon begins to surface in *At Cederine* and comes into fruition in later pieces such as *Untitled (idyllic landscape with children)* (fig. 1.7). Like the stoic visage of the lone girl at Cederine, the multiple faces in *Untitled*, now total twenty-nine, and although mute, beg to tell a story. This story, though, hides within the scene. In fact, *Untitled* resists narrative associations. Darger does not offer a caption. Nothing appears to be happening. *Untitled* dwells on a static display of little girls that crowd the foreground of an Edenic landscape. A horizon line, rising slightly above each of their heads, reiterates the flowing pitch of their collective heights. Just as the arrangement of girls swells into a soft mound of doubling cuties (one on top of the other), so, too, the horizon ascends, encompassing the girls within verdant space. Deciduous trees and palms, along with an occasional quaint cottage, dot the skyline. Below, varieties of posies, pansies, roses, tulips, cone flowers, and cacti propagate along the front edge of the scene, orienting towards the little girls as if the glow of their childish radiance nourishes them. Giant flowers playfully commingle with the girl assortment while other, smaller floral versions tuck behind girls’ ears or decorate their sundresses.77 Within this bountiful scene, nature acts as a safe haven for the girls, enveloping them within its manicured beauty.

Only the mounting, finger-like projections of distant clouds, far, far away, detract from the overall exuberant fecundity of this idyllic scene. Their capricious peaks indicate the

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77 See *Chapter Two: Pure(Pyre)* for a discussion of floral symbolism in this image.
sharp updrafts of heat and turbulent air, an approaching escalation of forces. Here, Darger gestures towards the expectancy and eloquence of Heade’s *Thunderstorm on Narragansett Bay* (fig. 2.3). Perhaps a growing thunderstorm or the foreboding trail of a raging fire, Darger’s atmospheric formations signal conflict and violence simmering beneath the frivolous façade of the immediate scene. Framing this scene within the notion of “conflagration,” war and peace exist along an inseparable flaming spectrum: on one end, erupting violence, on the other, a pastoral bliss in precarious proximity to latent dangers. Both ends foster a self-sustaining burn capable of flaring or simmering for extended periods.

The uncertain space of the horizon holds this tension between a building unknown and a transitory peacefulness. It demarcates these two concurrent narratives as well as the compositional planes of upper and lower registers. The horizontal axis organizes space, participating in panoramic all-seeing-ness, even while contradictorily denoting the natural limits of sight. Darger capitalizes on this stretching format to achieve the orderly display of each figure, from head-to-toe. Even little girls standing behind the main group receive three quarter length depiction as they appear to stand or sit upon the shoulders of those in front. While space extends into a deep perspective, such girl-on-girl juxtapositions counteract this effect and flatten out the composition.

A linear display of the girls’ bodies, especially the full frontal and turning arrangement of faces, evokes a panopticism, enabling the viewer’s gaze to survey all girls at once. Repetitive groupings of similar girls, some in sets of two and three, and others, as large as eight, slow the gait of one’s roving eye. Most girls stand side-by-side and gesture or slightly turn towards each another; others brandish cowboy boots or stir the contents of

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78 These two extremes characterize the majority of his later images from *The Realms*: little girls enjoying moments of pastoral bliss and men butchering little girls.
mixing bowls. Their stances betray their commercial provenance from Wieboldt and Sears clothing advertisements and the specific gender-role illustrations of children’s coloring books.

A particular cluster of duplicate girls, near the center of the scene, breaks up this singular alignment. (fig. 2.10) They spring forth from the ground, mimicking the growth patterns of nearby flowers with their rise and spread from an imaginary central core. Each girl-body fans out far enough to receive adequate visibility; some sit on a fence shoulder-high behind others. Polka dots hover above the flat planes of their dresses producing a striking hallucinatory effect. Their consistent and vibrating dot patterns reiterate the replicating appearance of the girls themselves, each a banana curled doppelgänger of the next—multiples seemingly multiplying in a girlish clump.

This figural grouping *en masse* with its acute attention to the visibility of faces evokes the tight assemblies of angels flanking Christ in Van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*. (fig. 2.11), one of the many reproductions in Darger’s collection of clipped imagery.\(^79\) The angels, like Darger’s girls, duplicate one after another. And additionally, they visually and physically cluster together displaying similar clothing, hair styles and facial expressions. Each set of angels’ eyes remains visible to the viewer due to strategic head turning and the slight elevation of body behind body. A similar approach to figural placement continues in the altarpiece’s lower register featuring a panoramic arcadia\(^80\) with multitudes of warriors,

\(^{79}\) Unfortunately, previous scholarship overlooks these reproductions, perhaps, because Darger’s possession of fine art images complicates aspects of his supposed “outsider” status.

\(^{80}\) Van Eyck’s scene includes a lush meadow sustaining varieties of flowers and trees indigenous to different parts of Europe. Palms stand next to cypresses and towers dot the horizon. Darger’s vision of a secular paradise parallels Van Eyck’s diverse and incongruous array of botanical species along a strong horizontal axis.
pilgrims, prophets and clergy. Pressing together, each participant also reveals their face and thus, articulates his/her individual act of witnessing the Lamb of God bleeding before them.

Like those in the altarpiece, many of Darger’s later works exhibit similar clusters of uniform individuals that replicate and elevate above each other resulting in ample visibility of the face. 81 This innovative, “girl wall” effect, also in Untitled (We will slam them with our wings) (fig. 2.12), beckons the viewer’s attention. Art historian Alois Riegl referred to a related phenomenon in seventeenth century Dutch painting as “corporate portraiture:” a group of autonomous individuals (not family) with a shared purpose. Looking out from the painting, the figures’ attentive gazes perform a relationship with the viewer, what Riegl called an “external coherence”—a unification of the work of art with the viewer. 82

Darger’s little girls stare back at us, acknowledging our presence and assuring us with their calm demeanor that our gaze is not intrusive, in fact, our gaze is consensual. Unifying facial direction towards the viewer (frontal, quarter-turned, or veering over the shoulder), intensifies their immobile bodies and penetrative gazes. Blackened either by pigment or graphite, their eyes resemble holes, hollow and haunting. As their stare multiplies with multiplying bodies, one finds their eyes (or lack of) strangely disturbing, as if their emptiness signals violence—a punitive act by the artist denying sight. Or, on the contrary, could their eyes magnify sight as the graphite produces a sheen and reflection of light—creating a flicker of life? 83 Are the eyes blank or are they big, fully dilating pupils that take in everything?

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81 Darger may have been attracted also to the Ghent Altarpiece’s intense realism, particularly the painting’s fusing of heavenly and earthly realms, and its spectacle of religious suffering.

Darger appears to render the eyes with ambivalence as if he illustrates his crisis of representing the *indescribable* through their insistent, yet, potentially ineffectual stare.

What once felt like panopticism—a privileged view from which one can see all, a powerful, yet, distant, anonymous position—turns into reciprocal looking. Collectively, the girls look at the viewer; some, even with an unspecified focus, look through the viewer. This image becomes an encounter, face-to-face, if you will, that acknowledges and implies the viewer’s presence. This reciprocal looking emerges in several other concurrent collages of no relation to the narrative of *the Realms*. These collages of heads from newspaper and magazine clippings stare out into the viewer’s space. One *Untitled* collage (fig. 2.13) exemplifies the characteristics of these heterogeneous groupings and strange juxtapositions.

A wide-eyed and content infant with black dot eyes floats on a blank background (an obvious coloring book image) near a photo of a light-haired and smiling girl. A caption bearing the title “Waiting for Hers” accompanies the girl’s facial shot. To her right, a photograph of Joe Namath in uniform, looking over his shoulder overlaps a larger image of a child of Asian extraction with the text “In Times Like These” near his/her head. This child, in turn, overlaps a female model, defiantly looking at the camera.

Darger manipulates these images into a pinwheel-like composition, each demanding attention. Round-faced children, perhaps orphans or refugees, look directly out seemingly asking for help. The coloring book baby waves as if saying “pick me up” or “play with me.”

The model’s stare acknowledges and amplifies her role as sexual object. Namath’s bust

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83 Darger penciled-in the eyes on many little girl images, some of which hung on the walls of his apartment. Commenting on this phenomenon, MacGregor writes, “in the halflight of his room they (the eyes) would appear to glow and sparkle in a manner that is unnervingly lifelike.” MacGregor, 121.
evokes heroic, celebrity status and awaits veneration. Collectively, these faces appear to reside in a state of expectation, ready and waiting for a viewer’s eyes. Their chance combination of insistent looks evokes the surrealist état d’attente—an encounter with potential unknowns and others, erotically charged by its myriad possibilities and openness to unpredictability.

Returning to the clumping “girl wall” of Untitled (fig. 2.10) this sense of expectation, (turning faces looking at and through us) becomes ever more palpable. Even the faces of flowers near the girls open towards the front of the image as if in an attentive state. One becomes increasingly aware of the changing conditions along the horizon line in close proximity to the girls’ faces. One’s gaze splits between looking at them (a distant gaze) and looking with them (a coherence of waiting/potentially witnessing). But, looking is not always seeing. While Darger succeeds in capturing a charging atmosphere of implied witnessing and of consensual looks, comprehension of this scene’s meaning remains elusive.

Invisible meanings (desire, metaphor) wait for theirs.

Recalling Darger’s initial directive to sympathize with the child slaves, the viewer suddenly realizes that his “girl wall” conflating with notions of “conflagration” and Civil War tropes builds upon inconspicuous racial signifiers. Indeed, an unspoken erasure of difference, as a homogenizing white-ness, propagates across this landscape with each multiplying girl. Juxtaposing Darger’s white “girl wall” next to a comparable group of black bodies, Michael Ray Charles’ Study (2004) (fig. 2.14), exposes the Realms’ “invisible,” white standard. Study exhibits a similar compositional cluster, fanning-out from a central core and displaying ample faces and reciprocal looks. Race, intentionally bearing codes of

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84 “Broadway Joe” Namath’s inclusion in this collage dates it at approximately 1968-69, the apex of his career on the New York Jets. Besides his quarterback talents, Namath drew fame from his flamboyant fur coats and cross-dressing panty hose commercials.
minstrel “black face,” confronts the viewer. Bulging eyes, wide red grins (evoking both red lips and watermelon slices), white gloves (ala Mickey Mouse), and a solid, impenetrable black-ness (conjuring burnt cork paste) mark these jubilant figures as degenerate abstractions.

Placing Darger’s and Charles’ clustering bodies side-by-side, one notices a parallel language—racial codes informing ideologies of power and privilege through “white-ness” and “black-ness.” Resembling Shirley Temple (as we will see, an exemplar heroine for Darger), white girls spring forth with blonde curls and pretty, bourgeois outfits. Their bleached-out pallor intertwines with Darger’s exhortations of their purity to embody an American standard—a mainstream, white social body, unmarked and silent.85 Darger reiterates and replicates (infests) his landscapes with what cultural theorists argue is an unspoken and assumed “universal appeal”—the perfect white girl—a Temple look-a-like—“the very sign of whiteness, its privilege and hegemonic power.”86

Darger’s girls and the grinning grotesques of Charles’ Study both present racial (and raced) bodies—fantasy projections that either uphold power or dehumanize and discredit. Held against each other, the fetishized, clearly codified black-face of Charles’ Study reveals a kinship to Darger’s girls of comics and advertising. Both perform visual operations justifying racial and social stratification made “natural” through commodification and sheer repetition.

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85 On whiteness as invisibility, as universal standard, and as the defining logic of “normality,” Richard Dyer’s White (New York: Routledge, 1997) provides a solid introduction. Dyer argues that white identity is at once a sort of race and the human race—a compelling paradox of being both an individual and the universal.

As further chapters argue, white-ness as sign of purity, beauty, and redemption underscores Darger’s artistic vision. The artist’s anxiety over maintaining the integrity of white girl-bodies springs forth in their fear of fire, as well as in Darger’s valorization of polarizing white characters from popular plantation narratives—Little Eva (the antonym of Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and the Little Rebel (Shirley Temple’s famous role of 1935). Darger hones his culturally-privileged white girl into an iconic, venerable figure. His representations of white slaves-turned-liberators suggest that he could not imagine freedom and virtue as anything other than Anglo-Saxon.

With each foreboding horizon and child’s stare, the story of Darger’s conflagration simmers or erupts in concordance with the presence and involvement of little, white girls. These intricately linked elements of war, storms, childhood innocence, and desire align as interarticulating structures—communicating vessels—elaborating meaning through each other. Connecting and filling through the fluid concepts of fire, each element emits mutable powers and oppositional forces refusing to abate. Drawing significance from Darger’s images, this chapter concludes discussions on panoramic form and historic representation and begins to examine meanings within Darger’s idiosyncratic iconography. With the following sweet poem in mind, Darger’s girls look expectantly to the skies and await the coming storm:

I’ve come to Abbieannia land where wonderful cities and people dwell, And excellent fruits and flowers and shadowy bowers abound in every dell, Where Christianity is a power and where all receive a surprise, When amazing things take place before my very eyes.

Just roam the world over – sail the seas from coast to coast
Read history upon history, no other
country in creation has fiercer wars
to boast,
And now my rarest expedition has
included those I’ve longed to see,
Emperor Vivian’s daughters, and last
but not least, children brave and
busy as bees.

Henry Darger, excerpts from *The Mexican’s Song*87

Chapter Two:

Pure (Pyre)

“It’s no fun to die in a burning city,”¹ Darger surmises as his Vivians anxiously watch a glowing tower of flame inch towards them. “What could Violet do to comfort May, who was nearly frightened out of her wits? She was not really afraid to die in being strangled or butchered, but of being burned to death.”² Of all the savage, heinous, and humiliating murderous acts Darger inflicts upon little girls in the make-believe Realms, burning holds the morbid distinction of the most fearsome form of death. As Peter Pan boldly declared that “to die would be a great adventure,” Darger, too, in his own tale of eternal childhood, suggests that to die by fire is, perversely for him, a fantasy of adventure. In situation after situation, his plucky Vivians court fiery death, escaping at the last second unscathed and more determined to face their next danger. The flames touch, but never consume Darger’s girls; these virtuous “little ones” revel in fire’s tempestuous mixture of the sacred and the profane.

Through numerous variations and persistent presence in the Realms, fire registers a wealth of rich meanings, possessing a sense of agency—another character in Darger’s tale. Conflagrations and firestorms demonstrate no allegiances, killing thousands of soldiers and girls among both warring Christian and non-Christian parties. Calculating and persistent, fire spews flames and toxic smoke, leaps across forest canopies, creeps silently along distant horizons, or slyly waits, lying latent as smoldering smudge under foot. Grasping at girls with burning hands or licking at their clothing with barbed tongues, Darger’s fire offers a

² Ibid. p. 593.
multiplicity of anthropomorphizing shapes and supernatural apparitions that mutate from and into natural element or atmospheric phenomena. Emerging from Darger’s imagination, this fire crackles with a force that is wildly unexplainable, shape shifting, erotic, and hungry.

In spite of fire’s constant threat, the seven Vivians elude flame’s sinister embrace. Their running game of cat and mouse appears, at first, as a dramatic subplot in Darger’s literal rendering of Realms’ warfare. Looking deeper at this theatrical coupling—the vulnerable child superimposing against flame—a striking correspondence emerges, drawing together in a pleasurable tension these seemingly disparate and incompatible entities. Like this elusive fire, the Vivians remain inextinguishable and mythically regenerative. Always beautiful and whole in body, their pure and stainless physicality reflects an incorruptible childlike innocence and ideal virtue that remains intact even in the most horrific and deadly of circumstances. These little girls signify, much like flame, an essence of hope and triumph of passionate spirit over materiality.

Myriad relationships between fire and the Vivians in this chapter reveal a strange duality of attraction/repulsion, reinforcing their symbiotic, mutual language of vitality, spiritual cleansing, and ascension. Flame, however, also blackens and chars, threatening the artist’s efforts to preserve “pure” and unmarred, white, girl bodies. From specific and significant inter-articulations between the Vivians and flame, etymological ties flow within Darger’s circumscribing arena of imaginary girlhood. This chapter investigates Darger’s devotion to littleness, (an inextricable blend of romantic Victorian childhood, girl saints, and floral Marian tropes) that he gleans from such popular characters as the “Little Rebel,” “Little Eva,” and the “Little Flower of Christ.” Pure engages the artist’s corporeal gaze upon the prepubescent girl body and her role as holy innocent and impassioned martyr.
Ultimately, the Vivian’s fear of fire, while evoking the specter of girl-saint, Joan of Arc, suggests a deeper crisis of representation hinging upon the artist’s anxiety over girl bodies. Darger appropriates characters from American Southern mythology and abolitionist literature; yet, dark-skinned bodies—bodies “blackened” by race—are non-existent in Darger’s sanitary civil war narrative. Like the constant threat of fire’s capacity to burn unmarred skin, racial difference remains latent, yet, palpable in Darger’s teeming masses of homogenous white-ness. Darger’s evasion of racial difference parallels the Vivians’ uncanny ability to elude the blackening and consuming effects of fire’s hand.

**Heroines**

Little girls perform the personas of enslaved victim, warrior, heroine, and redeemer in the *Realms*. Several volumes into his story, Darger makes his case for selecting girls as the main protagonists by acknowledging common misconceptions about girls and endorses his gender choice under the straightforward title, “Why Little Girls are Heroines of this Story”:

> Although, dear readers, in this big story, boys and men play usual and principal parts in the dreadful battles, and during the great war encounter many terrible adventures, by land, sea, fire, water, and so forth, the reason the story runs so much with little girls as the actual heroes in this warfare is because, under most circumstances, women are braver than men. I go to show that by putting little girls in this story as the real heroines, that little girls do and are brave enough, for a fact, to be able to play and show any amount of nerve and courage, full equal or moreso (sic) than boys or men or women who may take part in active warfare. ³

Of course, little girls and women have been seen to be a little nervous about small matters, like being frightened at a mouse or a spider, but not in all cases. I have known women who would, even bare-handed, catch a mouse. Also in the presence of real danger, when shells are bursting in the battlefield and shell fragments flying thickly, they have been known to be standing in the open field, looking for wounded to be brought in. What historian has not written in good and lengthy details of the heroism of the Red Cross Nurses and Sisters and other brave women? How about the

play known as “The Little Rebel?” Was not she braver than the soldiers in that play?

Above all, in patient endurance of pain and suffering and sorrow, all women were and are immeasureably (sic) superior to men, and women always make sacrifices that men would think of in horror."

Moving from “small matters” of mice and spiders to “real dangers” of the battlefield, Darger expounds on the bravery of the female sex. Curiously, in this explanation he includes women, whom he largely omits from the rest of the Realms’ narrative. Few adult women or mothers populate his tale, although, they exemplify superior constitutions over those of men. Within his statement, a subtext addressing motherhood and the pain and dangers of childbirth emerges, particularly in his choice of words such as *endurance*, *suffering*, *patience*, and *sorrow*. Darger’s own mother died shortly after giving birth to his sister, who in turn, was given up by his father for adoption. The orphan child and themes of motherless or broken families run throughout Darger’s collection of children’s literature, in his stories, and in his personal history. His admiration for, and construction of, heroic little girl characters becomes the foundation of a developing personal iconography in which he perceives an inherently virtuous unity in numerous, popular female personas.

Specifically to exemplify female heroism, he draws upon the figure of the Red Cross Nurse, a humanitarian icon of World War I\(^4\) and contemporary of his own newly imagined Vivian Girl. The nurse’s duties included attending to soldiers, to prisoners of war, and to civilians, and, especially to the most vulnerable victims of war—children. Strikingly monumental in World War I posters and heralded as “The Greatest Mother in the World,” the

\(^4\) Founded in 1881, the American Red Cross experienced a period of unprecedented growth after the United States declared war on Germany in 1917. By the end of WWI in late 1918, 20 million adults and 11 million youth joined the Red Cross organization and over 8 million adults served as volunteer workers. Nearly 300 Red Cross nurses died during the war. One of the four main functions of the Red Cross included service to the children of Europe. After WWI, the Red Cross “mothered the world” ministering to victims of drought, fires, flood, and other disasters. See “World War I Accomplishments of the American Red Cross,” *American Red Cross Museum*. American Red Cross, accessed April 3, 2004, [http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/ww1a.asp](http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/ww1a.asp).
nurse’s visage evokes a secular Madonna in heavy drapery, clutching an infant child to her breast before a looming sanguine cross. (fig. 3.1) Visually referencing Mary, this image draws upon the Virgin’s role as the paragon of motherhood and perfect humanity. The Red Cross Nurse, like Mary, symbolically cares for all—allies, enemies, and children alike. Her powerful body, enveloping the meek and dispossessed child, reinforces a universal message of mother-child bonding and healing. The mixture of altruism and Christian love exuding from this wartime icon aligns with the self-sacrificing, pious conception of girlhood in Darger’s other exemplar figure, “The Little Rebel.”

A primal goodness and bouncy exuberance characterizes “The Little Rebel,” the girl heroine of Edward Peple’s play (adapted for silent film in 1914 and later released as a major Hollywood production) “The Littlest Rebel” (1935) (fig. 3.2) starring Shirley Temple. The narrative focuses on the baby belle of a Confederate officer, Miss Virgie, epitomizing the wholesome, Christian child who never lies, finds solace in prayer, and appears always cheerful no matter what circumstance. While the Civil War rages, Virginia’s family plantation succumbs to Yankee invasion. Behind enemy lines and, frequently, visited by Virginia’s father, (a scout for the Confederacy) the family finds themselves in constant danger. Nonetheless, Miss Virgie remains strong, shooting harsh looks and her slingshot at Union officers while remembering her mother’s bout with illness and eventual death as beautiful. Suddenly forced into a position of autonomy, motherless, and temporarily orphaned by the imprisonment of her father, the “Little Rebel” takes matters into her own

5 Characterization of Miss Virgie derived from the 1935 MGM version of “The Littlest Rebel,” directed by David Butler.
hands. In the story’s climax, she appeals to General Grant for both the release of her father and a sympathetic Union officer who attempted to help her southern family. The six year old Miss Virgie, as pure as the white dresses she dons, emerges in this story as an effective maternal figure. Mediating the release of her father and the Union officer, Virgie orchestrates a healing communion for all—Yankees, Confederates, and slaves gathered around the child in an embodiment of Christian forgiveness.

Darger’s heroic examples of the Red Cross Nurse and “The Little Rebel” reflect an emerging pattern of virtuous, self-sacrificing, surrogate maternal figures that inform his re-conception of girlhood. Darger’s little girls, particularly the Vivians, betray his veneration of “little” saints popular in Catholicism and of orphan girls in children’s literature from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Virginal and virtuous in thought, word, and deed, these types suffer perilous journeys full of multiple trials, tragedies, and deaths testing their moral resolve. The devout Christian girls of these tales resign themselves to their suffering, even when suffering concludes in their own death: they emerge victorious and pure, made and making whole through unification with God and family. Darger’s fascination with this theme of child redeemers and martyrs appears throughout his literary and visual source material and becomes increasingly magnified in his artistic creations.

So Sweet a Temper: Making and Re-making the Vivian Girl

Although singular, “Vivian” favors the plural, possessing an amalgam of secular looks and a polymorphous spirit that fuses with Catholic beliefs and practices. An early

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6 In the 1935 movie version, Virgie coquettishly sits on the lap of Abraham Lincoln and negotiates her father’s release.
collage, one of Darger’s first attempts to picture the Vivians, offers insight into the development of his own heroic girls with eight appropriated, hand-colored reproductions. (fig. 3.3) Seven of the eight reproductions feature portraits from 18th and 19th century fine art sources, the most outwardly pious being the supplicant boy, *The Infant Samuel Praying* (1778) by Sir Joshua Reynolds (fig. 3.4). Captions underneath the portraits illuminate each girl’s character and deeds: this composite of imagery and text fashions an abbreviated saintly *vita* for each girl. For example, under Catherine Vivian, the caption reads:

> Catherine Vivian was reported killed several times, but she was not. Yet some time during the early part of the Glandeco-Abbieannian War, her reported death was much disputed and found to be untrue as some else person was killed instead. Some at first said Abbieannians shot her to death by mistake, but in reality Glandelinians often tried to do it, but did not succeed. *She is still very much alive.*

No caption or explanation graces the eighth image. (fig. 3.5) Unlike the other portraits, this picture displays a bedroom scene where a young girl, with covers pulled up past her chin, turns towards an adult woman, leaning over her pillow. This scenario, initially charming, reads with some ambiguity—the difficulty to ascertain if the child sleeps or awakes startled. The girl responds to the woman, not by reaching out to her, but by grasping at her covers, pulling them tightly to her body. Darger accentuates the outline of this gesture by encasing the girls’ head and shoulders with an intense yellow-washed pillow propped before a red headboard. The woman, in contrast, smiles and gazes lovingly down on the child. Her right hand, perhaps cupping the pillow’s back, remains largely hidden while her left one resides at her side. Darger highlights the top of her head and shoulders with another watery coat of yellow. While the child grounds herself within the heaviness of the bed, the

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7 MacGregor, 146-147.

8 Catherine Vivian caption quoted in MacGregor, 146.
woman touches nothing, appearing to hover like a weightless entity. Whether asleep or
awake, the child resides in a separate physical space from the woman. She may be dreaming
of the woman (a mother?) or awakened by her presence (a vision?). The image vacillates
between readings of comfort and vulnerability. The bed scene’s inclusion among the
Vivians’ portrayals and the scene’s emphasis on the woman’s smile offer clues to its
contextual meaning. To elaborate further on this arcane addition to the Vivian portraits and
to the other portraits themselves, some themes must first be evaluated.

From this early work several governing leitmotifs and ambiguities surface which
continue throughout Darger’s representation of the Vivians: their close proximity to death,
their innocent nature, their ambiguous gender, and their iconic status. First, death, in
particular a sacrificial death that confirms life, lies not in Darger’s narrative, but, prior to his
tale, in the selection of the name “Vivian.” The etymology of “Vivian” stems from the prefix
vivi- meaning to enliven or animate. Figuratively suggestive of Darger’s overall project—
forcing the indescribable into description—the girls come to life, become vivid, perceptible
or realistic. Their passionate virtue and influence vivifies others, especially those fighting
against evil. A deeper significance for “Vivian” lies in its Latin derivation vivam, literally “I
shall live,”9 evoking an inextinguishable vitality that characterizes the Vivian Girls’
demeanor and proclivity for motion. Vivam resembles a cry of resistance. Moreover, vivam
resounds with a message of Christian resurrection and redemption embodied by the Vivian
Girls in Darger’s story. Although Darger does not state the source of Vivian, the possibility
of this name’s connection to etymological meaning and the chances of Darger’s becoming

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9 Marina Warner cites the English translation of vivam in Fantastic Metamorphosis: Other Worlds: Ways of
derivatives also at the University of Notre Dame’s “Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid,” ed. Kevin Cawley,
familiar with *vivam*, *vivum*, *vivus*, or derivatives, *vivo*, and *vividus* through Catholic Mass (which he attended daily, sometimes thrice) seem likely.\(^{10}\)

Additionally, *Vivian* figures surface in early twentieth-century popular literature and lore, they, like Darger’s Vivians, bear the suffering of loss, specifically those of mothers and orphaned children. Concurrent with Darger’s invention of Vivian girlhood, the Arthurian Vivien (also known as Nineve, Nimue, Niniane) received renewed attention in the work of several poets.\(^{11}\) Early twentieth-century poetry re-positions Vivien as an ambiguous figure, shedding Tennyson’s earlier description as a femme fatale. She became a less malevolent, fair maiden possessing an ethereal beauty and bewitching men (among them Merlin). Haunting and erotic, Vivien evokes wild nature, sought by men who “find her not … But wake that night, lost, by some woodland mere, powdered with stars and rimmed with silent trees.”\(^{12}\) Transient, mysterious, and beautiful, she, like Darger’s Vivians, is also an orphan, a life marked by death:

My father died in battle against the king,  
My mother on his corpse in open field;  
She bore me there, for born from death was I.\(^{13}\)

Likewise, a “Vivian” trajectory of vitality, endurance, and dispossession echoes with a redundant declaration of persistent life within the name of Vivia Perpetua,\(^{14}\) the Catholic

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\(^{10}\) Catholic Mass retains a Latin delivery until the Second Vatican Council of 1964.


\(^{12}\) Passage from Alan Seeger, “Vivien” (1916), www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/seeger.htm.

\(^{13}\) Passage from Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King*, www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/idyl-m&v.htm.
patron saint of orphaned children and mothers. Prayers for her feast day further frame a Vivian/Vivia elegiac tone: “Let us pray today for mothers separated from their families and children, especially through injustice and violence.”

Martyred by Romans in 203 AD, St. Perpetua left behind an infant and a self-documented Passion detailing, not only her torments, but, also, her visions. Venerated for her desire to suffer for the love of Christ, St. Perpetua holds the distinction of being one of seven women in the Eucharist prayer of the Mass. She possesses another, more peculiar acclaim, as one of a few female saints performing a transcendence of her sex. Before the night of her martyrdom, Perpetua dreamt that she wrestled with an Egyptian and physically transformed. Her journal reads, “Then came out an Egyptian against me, of vicious appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me … My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man.”

Darger’s Vivians, likewise, sprout male genitalia during vulnerable situations. Perhaps more than a coincidence, their Vivian name and their Vivia bodies radiate similar redemptive forces in saintly proportions as they transform and transgender throughout the Realms’ narrative. Their mysterious sexual ambiguity—betwixt and between that of a prepubescent girl and boy—continually reinforces through a web of enchanting and subversive signifiers involving Vivian construction, meaning, and reception.

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14 “Vivia” also appears as “Vibia” in some hagiographies.


16 Ibid. Perpetua’s trans-gendering will be further plumbed in context with the Vivian Girls in the following chapter, Desire.

17 My use of transgender as a verb, although grammatically incorrect, functions as a deliberate rhetorical device signaling the active and meaningful dimensions of gender metamorphosis in Darger’s art.
Emerging in its potential namesake, Vivia Perpetua, a sacred androgyny integrates further in associations with another young female saint who similarly appropriated a trans-gendered image to emulate the fortitude and grace of Christ. Darger specifically conjures this warrior maiden, Joan of Arc, when he declares that the Angelinians, spiritually empowered by the Vivians, fought “as if not only led by the spirit of the Maid of Orleans herself, but as if led by Christ and His Heavenly host of angels and Saints.” She returns more emphatically as a glowing visage in Darger’s *At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck. The result after Violet saves a priest and his sacred monstrance from being shot.* (fig. 3.6) St. Joan looms in the background—a holy card image that Darger traces and re-invents as a large painting. Nearby, a drawn sculpture of a crucified Christ serves as a pendant piece to the supplicant maiden; their strategic placement behind the Vivians clearly situates the brave girls among (and between) a male and female lineage of divine redemptive figures. Additionally, as this unfolding discussion will affirm, St. Joan’s hagiography (including her inflamed passion and demise by fire) supplies implicit typology and symbolic patterns that continuously inform Darger’s concept of the Vivian.

Androgyny equally evolves from Darger’s initial selection of fine art portraits in the early untitled collage representing the Vivians. One portrait in particular, Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Infant Samuel Praying* (c. 1776) (fig. 3.4) reflects its male gender in title, however, the image retains a sexual ambiguity characteristic of what Anne Higonnet calls the

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“romantic child.” Sensuously portrayed with rosy cheeks, dimpled hands, wide eyes, and flowing hair, Samuel exudes angelic innocence and embodies an ideological Victorian construct of the “child.” Formulated in the 18th century writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth, this developing concept of childhood valorized child innocence and celebrated the wisdom of self-directed natural growth and play. Circumventing sexuality and social inequality, the “child” represented a lost state separate from adulthood, a state that the child could restore in the hearts of adults. According to Higonnet, “an older concept of a child born in Original sin, correctible through rigid discipline, hard work, and corporal punishment, gave way to a concept of the child born innocent of adult faults, social evils and sexuality.”

In the context of Darger’s collage, The Infant Samuel Praying (Samuel) displays an ambiguous gender. His shoulder length hair and white gown replicates with some variation on the other seven (including the bed scene) “girls.” Samuel’s soulful expression and gentle manner reiterates looks and deportments of the other children. Little boy or little girl, does not matter in this Vivian collage, as long as these portraits sustain the codes of innocence and sentiment that flavor Victorian childhood. Darger treats their images accordingly, like small treasures within a keepsake box; he isolates and savors them, one by one, in little cut-out rectangles. Varnish, now a fragile yellowing crackle, protects these jewels. Like Samuel in

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22 Higonnet, 26.
his old fashioned gown from centuries past, the collage’s aging patina magically preserves a distant childhood, far removed from Darger’s present.

Darger continues to further mull (to heat and sweeten) the Vivian essence of sacred childhood in this collage by referencing the infamous Penelope Boothby. Directly below the Infant Samuel Praying rests a mob-capped girl in white, her face turned to the viewer’s left. She is an obvious variation on Reynolds’ portrait of Penelope Boothby (1788) (fig. 3.7), a picture drenched in sentimentality and the pathos of a short but holy childhood. Dying at age six, Penelope’s death generated aesthetic tributes in poetry, fine art painting, and a funerary monument commission.23 Critics commented that the marble sculpture of Penelope’s prostrate, dead body appeared, “not dead but alive and sleeping … the theme of Innocence is exploited to the full.”24 Images of Penelope and Samuel provide evidence that notions of purity and innocence come to this Vivian collage ready-made and willing, replete with familiar visual codes and ripe with sweetness, nostalgia, and lamentation.

Paintings of the “romantic child” proliferated throughout Europe and the United States well into the twentieth century, finding renewal in engravings and book illustrations. Some, like the Infant Samuel Praying, even re-circulated in other art works, emblematic of Innocence in the wake of encroaching sexuality, as in the genre painting, Making a Train (1867) by Seymour Guy.25 Darger’s introduction to the “romantic child,” in all probability,

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23 The English sculptor, Thomas Banks (1735-1805) executed Boothby’s monument. Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), likewise, responded to Boothby’s death with an apotheosis-style painting.

24 This full exploitation of Innocence, in all probability, included erotic arousal. In eighteenth-century art, images of sleeping women and little girls allured onlookers with vacillations of sexual gratification and paternal feelings. The veil of sleep allowed the subject to remain oblivious of and detached from sexuality. For a discussion of eroticism in sleep see Philip Stewart, Desire, Eros, Image and Text in the French Eighteenth Century (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992) 175-98. Critic’s quote from Higonnet, 29.
came from his edition of *Wheeler’s Graded Readers: A First Reader* (1901) and *A Second Reader* (1903). Although Darger would have been too old (nine) and advanced to have studied these readers by the time of their publications, my argument for their “introductory education” on the concept of childhood gravitates towards the symbolic and the pictorial. These readers offer an authoritative network of images working in tandem with text that configures and disseminates culture’s broader ideological values. In short, learning to read in these primers goes hand in hand with learning how to see. For example, the image *Butterflies* (fig. 3.8) correlates with its companion prose: “Dear little butterfly comes and goes, And I let him do what he likes the best. He swings and swings upon my toes, And then he gets on a rose to rest.” A blonde-headed girl gleefully swinging against a forest of trees points her bare toes towards a descending butterfly. Expressing healthy child bodies, happiness, imaginative and carefree play, and kinship with nature, *Butterflies* consequently illustrates and reinforces the era’s social and cultural construction of romantic childhood.

Many scholars note that such sentimental and sweet images of childhood also fetishize innocence. Filled with ambiguous erotic potential, girl imagery from this era performs a complex mixture of sensuality and innocence, intertwining “the physical and the emotional, and power and powerlessness.”26 *Butterflies* openly participates in such flirtatious paradox. While in the forward thrust of the swing’s motion, the girl’s blouse slips off her right shoulder exposing the creamy skin of her flat, androgynous chest and a partial nipple.27 This reveal confirms her prepubescent age and, more importantly, positions this

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26 David Lubin, 225.
representation within a formulaic model that theorist James Kincaid refers to as “the perfect erotic child:”

genderless, blond, vacant, wide-eyed (unsuspecting), and secretive (mischievous)... these children pay little explicit attention to their bodies, are so far from vain that they are very nearly unaware that we are watching and certainly don’t notice if a shirttail is out, some underwear provocatively flashing, skin exposed. When the figure is nominally female, it is made exceptionally active, even aggressive; when male, more passive, even sneaky; the females are given short hair, distinctive features; the males long hair and soft, hazy features – all merging toward (though not duplicating exactly) an androgynous oneness, the perfect erotic child.28

Darger visually responds to Butterflies in a manner that is aggressively violent, disturbing, and, clearly, attune to the erotic side of innocence. (fig. 3.9) With pencil, he embellishes and modifies the physiognomy of the child, indelibly changing its charming tenor; wide eyes resemble empty sockets and a conspicuously large and arching tongue juts from her mouth. In a matter of seconds, Darger’s hand transforms this embodiment of beauty and innocence into one of grotesque deformity and sexual provocation. His bewildering renderings likewise single out the organs of seeing and speaking, of language and witnessing. The significance of this peculiar drawing will be plumbed in a future chapter, but, for now, Butterflies call, and Darger’s response serves as a striking example of the “romantic child’s” allure and the artist’s attentiveness to its double-edged power.

Returning to the aforementioned Vivian collage, replete with culturally-coded innocence, one senses the flow of nostalgic reverie unencumbered by the adult world. This flow ends abruptly when the visual collides with the “knowing” violence of written text

27 Due to her attire- a sunflower speckled dress and diaphanous white blouse- I assume that the figure in Butterflies is a little girl. Her face and hair seem very similar to that of any girl or boy “Vivian” in Darger’s collage.

heralding the Vivians’ “warstorm” tales. Within this series of short paragraphs, Darger simultaneously transgresses and heightens the collage’s significance as an artifact of holy childhood. Bourgeois, clean, and quiet appearances clash with captions of deadly exploits and engagements with blood-thirsty Glandelinians. The grim descriptions, even though incredulous, underscore a need to protect childhood and an elegiac tone inherent within individual pictures and the display as a whole. His fictional Vivian *vitas* function as small holy card icons, providing solitary figures and descriptive lives resembling the passion and resolution of saints. Instead of defining attributes, Darger equips his Vivians with powerful codes of feminine virtue: meekness, vulnerability, self-abnegation, and virginity.

These simple Vivian portrayals contribute to Darger’s own heterodoxical religious formation and what theorist David Morgan terms as “visual piety:” “practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred.”

For Darger, this assortment of girl/boy types serves as a source of veneration, embodying social concerns, Catholic ideals, and, perhaps, even personal memory. Following the formal conventions of iconic display, Darger situates each Vivian portrait as a solitary figure against a nondescript background. Most look out at the viewer, reciprocating attentive gazes with their large, soft eyes. Theoretically, this collage resided on Darger’s “mimic altar” (1912) a sacred shrine through which Darger petitioned for the return of a misplaced newspaper photograph. This image of five-year-old Elsie Paroubek—an abducted and murdered in Chicago—became a

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30 MacGregor theorizes that this particular collage resided on Darger’s mimic altar. He attributes it to Darger’s early work due to the type of imagery, collaging methods, and aged appearance. MacGregor, 146-148.

31 Both Bonesteel and MacGregor interpret Darger’s fixation on Elsie Paroubek’s missing photograph as a psychotic break from reality. According to Bonesteel, Darger’s incorporation of his search for this photograph
flashpoint of contention between the artist and his Catholic beliefs. Darger’s anxiety over this dead child also manifests in his art; Paroubek haunts the Realms as its first martyr, reappearing numerous times as a fleeting and beautiful apparition.\textsuperscript{32} Unable to find the clipping, Darger repeatedly prayed for its return through divine intercession, but, without results: “Storming heaven for the petition … Erecting mimic altar to pray before, in order to obtain petition … Sacrifices will be made for the granting of the petition. Making the mimic chapel neat and clean, no matter how much work. Buying materials of all sorts for shrine.”\textsuperscript{33} Recording his frustrations within his journal, Darger indicates that he held high expectations for the intercessory powers of his homemade girl-icons, even though, suggesting their ersatz status as part of a “mimic” altar.

His words imply that Darger assimilated the Vivian collage into his religious practices—the domestic display and worship of private devotional items such as icons and shrine statuettes. Juxtaposing this collage next to documentary photographs of his apartment’s interior, one can envision how these imaginary Vivians call and respond to reciprocating gazes and familial bonds within Darger’s Catholic icons\textsuperscript{34} (holy family chromolithographs and Notre Dame de Lourdes sculptures). (fig. 3.10) The icons prominent placement along walls and the fireplace mantel speak to their authority and centrality in Darger’s spiritual devotion and daily life.

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\textsuperscript{32} According to MacGregor and Bonesteel, Elsie Paroubek materializes in Darger’s Realms as Annie Aronburg, a child rebel leader assassinated by the Glandelinians. MacGregor, 495 and Bonesteel, 11.

\textsuperscript{33} MacGregor, footnotes, Chapter 3, no. 40.

\textsuperscript{34} Darger’s apartment also included several other Catholic images, including a crèche set, a 1955 calendar from May’s Grocery and Delicatessen, Chicago, displaying a crowned infant Christ, and small statuettes of the Virgin.
Through iconic practices, Darger invested his faith in the face of the infant Christ and the maternal body of the Virgin. In return, he hoped for, or expected, a conveyance of petitions and prayers to repay that faith. At times frustrated with God for ignoring his requests, Darger admits to wanting to throw items at his icons.\(^{35}\) The Vivian images on his mimic altar received similar treatment. After several months of petitioning for the lost photograph without results, he writes, “On August 1912 …. Great loss in child pictures … altar thrown down.”\(^{36}\) These child pictures\(^{37}\) attest to Darger’s inclusion of children’s images in his practices of iconic veneration—aesthetic contemplation and petitioning, meticulous display and maintenance, and, even, occasions for violence and iconoclasm.

The Vivian collage’s thematic interplay of death and martyrdom, ambiguous gender, innocent virtue, and iconicity point towards a significant means of communication with divinity through the power of little girl imagery. Expropriating the “romantic child” from a popular culture context, Darger maps this child over analogous figures—fictitious warrior maidens—evocative of existing young women in Catholic hagiography. This mapping allows these two “cultures” to seamlessly correspond and coexist. Intricately weaving the secular and the sacred, text and image, and depiction and belief, Darger magically imbues these portraits with life; he vivifies them. *Still very much alive*, they hold meaning and a powerful presence. Vivian spirit endures not only through this collage and Darger’s writings, but also by the endless visual repetition of little girl figures in his art. Little girl

\(^{35}\) For example, Darger writes in his journal: “Almost about to throw the ball (of twine) at Christ statue. Blame me for my bad luck in things, I’m sorry to say so. I’ll always be this way, always was and I don’t give a damn.” Darger, *History of my Life*, (u.p.) dated Saturday, April 7, 1968.

\(^{36}\) MacGregor, footnotes, Chapter 3, no. 40.

\(^{37}\) Due to its damaged appearance, MacGregor suggests that the Vivian collage may be the same “child pictures” that withstood Darger’s violent outburst. MacGregor, 147.
after little girl replicate specific types and gestures, as if his practice of collaging and tracing, a ritual act, fortifies belief through over abundant presence. Thus, Darger delves into a seemingly unlimited supply of venerable imagery fed and reinforced by intertwining arenas of popular culture, Catholic lore, and his imaginary and lengthy tale of little girl Passions and Catholic victory. Each arena reinforces and expands the other, contributing to this artist’s heterodoxical amalgam of artistic and spiritual expression.

Following this line of thought, that the Vivian collage represents not just pretty pictures of girls, but, an inspired seeing, a means to commune with the Divine, a context for the eighth picture (the bedroom scene) emerges. (fig. 3.5) Offering another sacred dimension to the Vivian collage, this image references the life of St. Thérèse of Liseux (1873-1897, canonized 1925),38 a French “girl” saint and self-proclaimed “Little Flower of Christ.” Widely known and adored due to her girlish innocence and humble inspirations (coined the little way and published in 1925 as part of an autobiography), Thérèse rose to sainthood through a life of self-abnegation, virgin virtue, devotion to Christ, and visionary episodes. Darger illustrates a defining moment in her vita with the uncaptioned eighth image of the Vivian college—Thérèse’s miraculous visionary cure which the saint described as a resurrection, “born again to life.”39 At age ten, the Little Flower fell ill on Easter Sunday (March 25, 1883) with mysterious fever and convulsions. On Pentecost Sunday (May 13, 1883), she claimed a miraculous cure after seeing a vision of a smiling Virgin Mary in her bedroom. A beautiful, youthful, and smiling representation of the Virgin typifies many

38 Immensely popular and important in the Catholic Church during the early twentieth-century, the figure of Thérèse of Lisieux rode a fast track to sainthood even before her death in 1897. Declared venerable in 1906, she was beatified (1923) and canonized (1925) and much later also made “Doctor of the Church” in 1997. Thousands of churches named after her around the world attest to her continued popularity.

visionary episodes that girls experienced in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Smiling, a comforting response for children, also represents the Virgin’s fulfillment in her role as mother in popular Marian iconography from this period.\(^{40}\) This “Virgin of the Smile” (fig. 3.11) marks not only Thérèse’s journey into sainthood, but, also, for this motherless child, the beginning of devotional writings in which her love of Christ overlays her love and longing for her deceased mother. She writes, “Oh! no, the absence of Mama didn’t cause me any sorrow on the day of my First Communion. Wasn’t Heaven itself in my soul, and hadn’t Mama taken her place there a long time ago? Thus in receiving Jesus’ visit, I receive also Mama’s.”\(^{41}\) Opening her heart to the Holy Spirit (ritualized through baptism and communion) Thérèse welcomes adoption into a divine family where “visits” and visions of Christ and Mary respectively exchange and intermix with comforting thoughts of Mama.

The writings of the “Little Flower,” in comparison to Darger’s descriptions of the Vivians, reads with a similar, highly sentimental, sticky sweet rhetoric\(^{42}\) (including an overuse of the adjective “little”), a moralizing tone modeled in female virtue, and an adolescent passion for Christ. Thérèse’s autobiography, *Histoire d’une Ame* (*Story of a Soul*, published 1898, translated into twenty languages by 1925) chronicles her life and letters. As a postulant, she took the name “Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face.” Later she


\(^{41}\) Frohlich, 48.

\(^{42}\) St. Thérèse often elicits both admiration and loathing for her childish obedience and incessant desire for sainthood. One biographer, Vita Sackville-West described her manner as naïsérice, or “sugariness.” Another biographer, Monica Furlong, refers to her own fascination with the Little Flower as “embarrassing.” See Vita Sackville-West, *The Eagle and the Dove* (London: Michael Joseph, 1943) and Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Virago Press, 1987).
added the self-effacing title, “The Little Flower of Christ.” The flower and the little way, St. Thérèse’s call to figuratively stay unassuming and humble like little children, resonates throughout her writings as metaphors for loving Jesus and embracing martyrdom:

Jesus has not said to us: “I am the flower of the gardens, the cultivated rose,” but He tells us: “I am the flower of the fields and the Lily of the valleys.”43 Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature, I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the Lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with the little wild flowers.

And so it is in the world of souls, Jesus’ garden, He willed to create great souls comparable to Lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God’s glances when He looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be.” 44

Flower symbolism expands throughout her writings to speak of endurance: “And now, like a flower strengthened by the storm …,” purity: “It was He who had her [Thérèse] born in a holy soil, impregnated with a virginal perfume …” and even her “miraculous cure” describing the Virgin of the Smile as her Sun, that Thérèse “turned her petals toward.”45 St. Thérèse, referring to her written philosophy as the little way, forms a generative language of simple metaphors evocative of purity and holiness.46 Nurturing the ethereal radiance of her visionary episode with the Virgin of the Smile, she describes her “resurrection” or re-birth as

43 Frohlich 72.
44 Ibid., 34-35.
45 Ibid., 45.
46 St. Thérèse also speaks of herself as a little bird. She writes, “I look upon myself as a weak little bird, with only a light down as covering I look upon myself as a weak little bird, with only a light down as covering. I am not an eagle, but I have only an eagle’s EYES AND HEART. In spite of my extreme littleness I still dare to gaze upon the Divine Sun, the Sun of Love, and my heart feels within it all the aspirations of an Eagle. Ibid., 144-145.
transfiguration—“born in holy soil, impregnated with virginal perfume.”

Her own mythologizing actively incorporates aspects of Catholic dogma pertaining to the Holy Spirit and Immaculate Conception and to the infant and adult Christ. She adopts this new family, embracing the smiling Virgin as her all-encompassing mother. The Little Flower conventionally equates Mary’s body with nature’s fecundity as the soil and sun, while, also, cleverly referencing the Virgin’s role as intercessor between the celestial heavens and earth.

St. Thérèse’s flower metaphor urges one to remain little or childlike in order to please Christ and retain immunity from adult corruptive forces. Dying in a convent at the young age 22, her short and holy life represents what she espoused—an eternal spirit of girlhood describing dogmatic concepts in simple, childish terms of sunshine, blooming flowers, and smiling Madonnas. Theologians, however, argue that St. Thérèse’s writings should not be dismissed as “Peter Pantheism,” or a refusal to grow up. Instead, her concepts express a practical dogma of re-creation and dependence upon God, the Father, (often called “Papa” by St. Thérèse). This “divine adoption” commences at Baptism and continues forever, reinforced through the Sacraments. Remaining humble and childlike enables one to open his/her heart “to the transfiguring action of the Holy Spirit.” The little way confirms Christ’s message in Matthew 18:3-4: “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever

47 Ibid., 45.
49 Saward posits that the Little Way is a guide to applying the state of baptismal grace, re-birth by water and the Holy Spirit as a child of God, to everyday life. Adult sins strip away this state while Sacraments rejuvenate spiritual childhood. See Saward, 28-30.
therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Theologian John Saward contextualizes the message of the little way within a larger spiritual crisis in modern, turn-of-the-century France. He cites essayist and philosopher Charles Péguy (1873-1914) and author Georges Bernanos (1888-1948) as kindred intellects with Thérèse, fighting nihilism, pessimism, and atheism from the 1890s through World War I. Like Thérèse, both men exalted the concept of spiritual childhood. Péguy writes:

You children imitate Jesus.
No, you don’t imitate Him. You are Child-Jesuses …
Man, any man, the greatest saint, any saint knows
he’s infinitely far from Jesus.
In his imitation.
Irreparable loss, descent, fall, inevitable wasting of life.
Such is existence, life, aging.
In our childhood we are joined to Jesus.
As we grow up we are disjoined from Him,
we disjoin ourselves
from Him our whole life long.
You are hopes as the Child Jesus was a hope.
You really are Child-Jesuses.

More than sentimental musings, Peguy’s prose signals a primary doctrine and mystery of Christian faith—the incarnation of a child savior, who stayed obedient and humble throughout his adult years. Thus, since Jesus came to this earth as an ordinary child, not fully adult like Adam, childhood signifies the Word made flesh.

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51 Péguy attacked the spiritual aridity of modern rationalism in his writings. He returned to the subject of spiritual childhood, again and again, in his essays on Joan of Arc: Jeanne d’Arc (1897), Le Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d’Arc (1910), and La Tapisserie de Sainte Geneviève et de Jeanne d’Arc (1913). Passage quoted in Saward, 68-69 from Charles Péguy, Oeuvres poétiques completes (Paris, 1954) 554. Georges Bernanos also positioned St. Joan as a figure of spiritual redemption in his biography, Jeanne d’Arc (1929). Interestingly, he married Jeanne Talbert d’Arc who claimed to be a descendent of Joan of Arc’s brother.
Darger reinforces his belief in spiritual childhood while demonstrating an awareness of the Little Flower’s message and exemplar role by including St. Thérèse’s actual presence in *At Angelina Agatha*. (figs. 3.12-3.14). He re-interprets her holy card as a large hanging painting. The card exhibits attributes of St. Thérèse: nun habit, a bouquet of roses held around a crucifix, and the presence of the Christ child. Thérèse’s ample, doe-like eyes gaze upon a floating Christ-child apparition who, in turn, reciprocates her attention. Seraphim, too, watch this encounter magnifying the loving, childlike exchange between the Little Flower and her Christ.

Thérèse’s image frames the upper left corner of Darger’s composition, fortifying a *little way* subtext with its companion piece—a holy card of Christ. Reading clearly as a conventional “heart of Jesus” motif, Christ opens his tunic to reveal a flaming and thorn-bound heart radiating light. Signifying passion and sacrifice, this glowing emblem serves as a prominent, Catholic iconographic element in both Jesus and Mary imagery. In *At Angelina Agatha* the holy cards of Christ and St. Thérèse flank the artist’s hand-drawn rendition of a large crucifix; together this trio illustrates Christian self-sacrifice and passion through exemplars of male and female redemptive figures. Residing over the Vivian story unfolding before and beneath them, this powerful backdrop underscores the message of *little girl* virtue within the composition’s full caption: *At Angelina Agatha. Jennie in vain offers her sight lost in an accident for the conversion of John Manley her worst enemy. Instead her sight suddenly came back.*

Offering up her ability to see for the good of the Christian cause, Jennie Vivian performs an act in accordance with those of confessor saints like St. Thérèse, desiring to give of herself in order to cleanse the sins of others. Sitting in church pews, the Vivians pray.
With tear-stained cheeks and closed eyes, their faces reflect either calm acceptance or a slight frowning distress. Most wear wide-brim, yellow hats with red trim and red dots accents. Each brim encircles their heads like a girlish variation of the flat disk-shape halo surrounding Christ’s in the holy card directly above and behind them. Only the open eyes of St. Thérèse and Christ engage those of the viewer, reinforcing their protective watch over the Vivians (and perhaps, over the viewer).

The Little Flower’s inclusion in *At Angelina Agatha* and Darger’s Vivian collage lends for erudite followers of Catholic faith a support structure of Christian virtue, self-sacrifice, and hope. St. Thérèse’s presence contextualizes the Vivians within the *little way* of girl sainthood and popular philosophical belief exalting childhood as a redemptive force exemplified within the life of Christ. Her image also evokes familiar nineteenth-century storylines of children witnessing visions of the Virgin, underscoring the child’s uncorrupt and truthful nature. In this context, Darger’s art responds, in part, to the tenor of the times, perhaps even to Pope Pius X declaration that “There will be saints among children!”

**Plucking Daisies and Violets**

Two of the seven Vivian Girls have floral names: Violet Vivian and Daisy Vivian—the very humble flowers that St. Thérèse celebrates, those “destined to give joy to God’s glances.” During St. Thérèse’s and Darger’s lifetimes, violets and daisies held special significance in Victorian popular culture and in Catholic lore as emblems in “Mary Gardens.” Whether secular or mystical, the symbolic content of gardens affirmed society’s designation

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52 Bernadette and her visions at Lourdes (February 1858-July 1858) remain one of the most famous examples of child visionary experiences from the nineteenth century. The Church declared Bernadette a saint in 1933.

53 Quoted in Saward 77. During Pope Pius X’s short tenure (1903-1914) he reinstated communion to children as young as seven and beatified Joan of Arc (1909).
of gardens as feminine spaces and sites of domesticity. Accordingly, flowers provided
abundant source material for expressing gender characteristics and qualities upheld in
bourgeois culture, deifying motherly nurture and feminine virtues attributed to the Virgin
Mary. Originating in Medieval tapestries and illuminated manuscripts, enclosed gardens,
replete with fountains, flowers, and beasts, evolved as Marian iconography, expressing the
life cycle of the Virgin or, specifically, serving as pictorial analogues to garden
Annunciations. At times incorporating unicorns and phoenixes, these fantastic scenes served
as poetic devices that mixed exotic metaphors and Biblical details into a compressed litany of
praise. Interpretations of these images often cite the sensuous rhetoric of the Old
Testament’s Song of Solomon 4:12 celebrating pre-nuptial virginity and fidelity: “A garden
enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”

Violets and daisies frequent the enclosed garden motif, as well as Annunciation and
Nativity scenes. Standing for faithfulness, humility, and chastity, violets appropriately
capture Mary’s humble acceptance of her role. The daisy’s sweet simplicity symbolizes
the innocence of the Christ Child and, according to legend, its star-like shape graced the
entrance to the manger pointing the wise men towards the Nativity. Both daisies and violets

54 Song of Solomon 4:12, The Holy Bible, King James version, 641.

55 See the entry for “violet” in Jennifer Speake, The Dent Dictionary of Symbols in Christian Art (London: J.M. Dent, Ltd., 1994) 151. Violets are visible in the foreground of Hugo van der Goes Portinari Altarpiece. According to legend, wild violets carpet the nearly desolate site of Montserrat near Barcelona where the faithful come to worship the Virgin Mary. Pilgrims acknowledge the violets as a physical sign and mystic message of Mary’s power over fertility. Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex, 273.

sprout up beneath the feet of the Virgin within the enclosed garden. St. Thérèse’s little way, extolling the value of these common flowers, presents a microcosm of Mary’s Garden, a miniaturization of the enclosed space—even smaller and humbler in significance—and its metaphors of virginity, motherhood, and submission. As Thérèse capitalizes on these associations, Darger, likewise, draws from floral symbolism to underscore Violet Vivian’s goodness as she explains her nickname Susan and real name, Violet:

I so often go after the flowers called Black eye Susans they are so pretty on a Church Altar. I love all flowers but more so the beautiful Violets and Forget me nots … I always had the joy of finding huge clusters of the fragrant sweet smelling violets hidden away under the hedges of a Country lane, and using them for to decorate my room or for the Altars which of course brought me to have the real name of Violet, for Violet is a meaning of humility.57

Guiding the Vivians through perilous situations and adventures, Violet Vivian embodies the Christian ideal of meek and humble leadership. Daisy Vivian, in comparison, abounds with energy, a “wildcat” who “wins renown by doing dangerous stunts, and giving tit for tat …”58 Her rambunctious nature contrasts with her floral association as Mary’s Star and tailors to Darger’s favorite “Little Rebel.” Even before the 1911 play, “The Little Rebel,” poet Joseph Ashby-Sterry (1837-1895) celebrated this tomboyish girl:

Princess of pretty pets
Tomboy in trouserettes
Eyes are like violets,
Gleefully dancing!
Skin like an otter sleek,
Nose like a baby Greek,
Sweet little dimple-cheek,
Merrily dancing!
Naughty but the best of girls,
Through life she gaily twirls,

57 Darger, Vol. 11, 463.
58 From Darger’s poem “The Mexican’s Song” quoted in Bonesteel, 50.
Shaking her sunny curls,  
Careless and joyful.  
Ev’ry one on her dotes,  
Carolling merry notes,  
Pet in short petticoats,  
Truly tomboyful!  

The association between Daisy and precocious, rebellious girls is, perhaps, not coincidental on Darger’s part. Juliette Gordon Low (1860-1927) (affectionately known as “Daisy”) achieved notoriety as founder of the Girl Scouts of America in 1912, the same year that Darger fabricated his “mimic altar.” Biographers, noting that Daisy Low was the daughter of a Confederate officer, nickname her “The Little Rebel.” Self-reliant and resourceful, Low exemplified qualities she espoused to young girls eager for outdoor experiences and skills previously taught to young boys. In addition to gender-specific homemaking lessons, early Girl Scout manuals provided information on shooting guns, riding horses, and surviving in the wild. With these associations in mind, Daisy and Violet, the courageous tomboy and the patient leader, respectively, define Vivian Girl temperaments and values. They adequately frame Darger’s imaginary childhood as aesthetic ideals exhibiting a sacred virtue and subversive female independence.

Untitled (fig. 1.7), one of Darger’s later, numerous kindergarten scenes, conflates little bodies and floral symbolism with vigor, as if the artist engages his own visual vocabulary in dialogue with St. Thérèse’s Marian tropes and ideology. Kindergarten, literally translates in this context to “children within a garden.” Because of the prevalence of

59 Excerpt from first and last stanza of Joseph Ashby-Sterry’s “The Little Rebel” (1895), complete poem at Edmund Clarence Stedman, A Victorian Anthology (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903) 48.

60 Like the fictional “Miss Virgie,” Daisy Low was also a daughter of a Confederate officer.

similar kindergarten scenes in Darger’s mature work (from 1944 on), this discussion treats them as a type or particular motif. Kindergarten scenes share distinct characteristics: pastoral settings, frontal depiction of girls, attentive eye contact, exuberant decoration and patterning (flowers, polka dots, flocking birds), lack of movement, and no obvious visual narrative cues or captions. Messages of metaphoric blooming and innocence arise in kindergarten scenes with their clumping replication of girls, emphasis on facial visibility, and over abundance of flora.

In *Untitled*, flower after flower willingly open their petals, exposing dainty internal centers; they orient these multiple faces, like those of the girls, towards the foreground and the viewer’s gaze. Their centers, small and round, echo the shape and scale of polka dots, assorted buttons, hat embellishments, and black hole eyes that punctuate girls’ bodies. These elements merge into one densely packed, mesmerizing and reverberating pattern of girlish energy throughout the composition. This lush compaction exudes a collective effervescence, a fecund bliss, available, waiting, and attentive to the beholder.

A corresponding portraiture between bloom and little girl emerges with greater emphasis from the middle of this composition. (fig. 3.15) Three repeating girls, each holding either a cowboy boot or rose, twist their bodies in an unnatural contrapossto allowing adequate display of both their faces and the rhythmic motif of pansy-passion flower-pansy on their skirts. Standing out as the only collaged elements among a mass of traced imagery, these pansy-passion flower motifs present a single bloom—some with the addition of a leaf or two, full and frontal. The pansy, in particular, multiplies the significance of adorable faces (and faces for adoration) through association with the human face. Girl faces and

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62 Only two other girls in this composition wear similar pansy skirts. They stand at either end.
flower faces align at consistent heights like points along a rectangular schema directing one’s
gaze in a loop of upper body to lower body connect-the-dots. In composing this work,
Darger wrought a frenzied loop of clustering, overlapping, and polka-dotting bodies; he
slows the composition down within this loop offering a contemplative space for formal and
metaphoric comparison between flower and face.

The relevance of the pansy and passion flower duo figuratively expands in this
seemingly disparate juxtaposition. Both flowers hold prominence in Catholic iconography
regarding the life of Christ. Of the two, the passion flower retains more notoriety as
symbolic of Christ’s sacrifice while the pansy’s inner trefoil patch of contrasting color
evokes the Trinity. Additionally, the placement of these flowers on the girls’ skirts
conveys more than just decorative fashion. Each, noticeably, covers the little girl’s genital
region and, thus, symbolically overlays the sacrificial martyrdom of Christ (passion flower)
and the purity of the Immaculate Conception (pansy) on the virginal girl body. In this
pulsing loop of face-bloom-sanctity-virginity, Darger declares and constructs a sacred
maidenhead.

Floral tropes and religious overtones continually inscribe the Vivians’ bodies with
similar loops of face-bloom in related kindergarten scenes. (fig. 3.16) Pansies cover genital
areas while clumping daisies, black-eyed Susans, lilies, and roses additionally wrap around
the little girls’ legs and torsos. Those flowers, appearing much larger than the girls, reinforce
their diminutive littleness while providing an imaginative sense of childish scale. Likewise,
in Darger’s text, flowers and Vivians intertwine. One passage for instance, links them

63 In Victorian symbolism, the pansy represents the memory of friends evoking the face of loved ones as if a
miniature portrait. See Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the
64 See Seaton, 176-177 for the iconography of the pansy.
through olfactory exuberance. Transfiguring after surviving a mine explosion, the Vivians emit a scent akin to St. Thérèse’s “virginal perfume.” Apparently, divinity smells like flowers. Darger writes:

As he (Jack Evans) proceeded on, he saw sitting on the porch four fair little girls, really ten times more beautiful than the Vivian girls could ever have been … Then he paused in overpowering emotion and awe, for from these pretty children a strange fragrance as of the most sweetest flowers, a strange odor that was completely divine, that filled the air, and as he gazed at them, he discovered that they were ethereally (sic) beautiful and wore the most beautiful white guasy (sic) dresses, whiter than the most great whiteness could ever be dreamed of, while the strong moonlight surrounded them with a soft radiance …’Oh, Evans dear, you have come back! … We are your beautiful friends called the ‘Vivian Girls,’ and we have recovered from the mine explosion, and are not disfigured, blind, or crippled ….

Within this language of flowers, in particular when speaking of blooms, one also whispers inevitable “death.” Transient beauty and fragility underscore the flower’s precious appeal, making the flower ever so sweet and wistful. An adept metaphor for “the child” or St. Thérèse’s spiritual littleness, the flower emits a simultaneous beauty and vulnerability, which, although lowly and insignificant, conjures desire and eroticizes speech in potent ways. Even St. Thérèse’s rhetoric cannot escape this duality:

Jesus and the angels who, like the vigilant bees, know how to gather the honey contained within the mysterious and multiple calyces that represent souls or rather the children of the virginal little flower …. when a flower has blossomed, we have only to pluck it, but when and how will Jesus pluck His little flower? … Perhaps the pink color of its corolla indicates that this will be by means of martyrdom! … Yes, I feel my desires are reborn. Perhaps after having asked us love for love, so to speak, Jesus will want to ask us blood for blood, life for life …

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65 Darger, Volume XII, 202a-202b, also numbered 2484-2485. MacGregor notes that this passage is under a section entitled, “Were Violet and her sisters rewarded for their patient suffering for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?”

66 Frohlich, 64-65.
“Plucking” the flower-virgins and gathering honey from “mysterious calyxes” reads precariously like euphemisms for sexual intercourse. Marina Warner eloquently relays these fluid correspondences between flowers, virginity, and martyrdom in her history of Joan of Arc. She traces the specific name Joan adopted, “Jehanne la Pucelle,” through its etymology of *pucelle*, meaning a particular shade of “virgin” ambiguously defined by both innocence and nubility, to the Middle Age’s *despulceler*, “to deflower.”

67 *Pucelle*, Warner argues, connotes a transitional state, ripe with promise and sexual becoming.

68 Like St. Joan, the Little Flower anticipates her martyrdom and subsequent metaphoric defloration or ascension as Christ’s bride into heaven.

69 She humbly waits, signaling her receptivity by becoming pink for her divine Sun:

…their pink corollas are turned in the direction of the dawn, they are awaiting the rising of the sun; as soon as this radiant star has sent toward them its warm rays, the timid little flowers open up their calyces, and their dainty leaves form a sort of crown which, uncovering their little yellow hearts … Throughout the whole day, the daisies do not cease gazing on the sun, and they turn like it until the evening … Jesus is the divine Sun, and the daisies are His spouses, the virgins …

70 Perhaps, in the evening of its life, the daisy will offer the divine Spouse its corolla, become pink.

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69 The Little Flower, a devotee to Joan of Arc, penned two plays about the warrior maiden’s life and spiritual calling.

70 The calyx is an outer whorl of tiny leaves that protects the inner bud. Most calyces bear a green color except for the lily, passion flower, and orchid. In regards to these three flowers, scientists believe that their colorful calyces help to attract pollinators.

71 Frohlich, 66

The Little Flower’s floral metaphors and desires ring familiar with narratives of similar pious virgins in Catholic lore, pining for Christ and their heavenly nuptial chambers. Imagining herself as a crown daisy, like the many beneath the Virgin’s feet in Mary Garden imagery (fig. 3.17), this little flower awaits her spiritual bridegroom. Her chaste body exists in a state of expectancy; a matrix of desires and denials mapping across her allegorical form. In her childish little way, the color pink—the baby of red—replaces the sanguinary symbolism of martyr’s blood and, instead, inadvertently references a coquettish, warm blush on the flower-virgin face. Given their virtuous demeanor and narrative role as martyrs (either slaves or participants in the slave rebellion), the girls in Darger’s kindergarten imagery play into Catholic conventions of virgin martyrs as they wait for martyrdom, turning their faces in accordance with other “little flowers” in Jesus’ wake.

The inherent innocence and virtue of a child’s perspective coupled with religious overtones displaces eroticism in the writings of the Little Flower. Darger shares a similar talent for description that teasingly evades, yet, also invites sexuality. Perhaps because his words, like his images, construct a protective coating of littleness correlating with authoritative secular and religious models, he seems unaware of its sensual power. Or, on the other hand, he revels within its sensual power for littleness offers a safe space capable of regulating his fantasies. Nonetheless, his words insist that the Vivians remain unquestionably pure, as if their excessive girlishness defies all corruption and corrosion. He describes them in glowing terms:

73 Karen Winstead and Margaret Miles provide thorough backgrounds on the narrative conventions of Catholic virgin martyrs. See Winstead’s introduction, “Generic Virgin Martyr” 5 -18 and Miles, 53 – 77.

74 “The best virgin, it seems, is always a dead virgin,” according to Medieval scholar Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. In Catholic lore, these heroines of chastity long to be tortured, dismembered, and eventually killed in a glorious and loyal passion for Christ. See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 24-42. (quote page 24)
Every one of the Vivian Girls has so sweet a temper, and ways more charming than their beauty, that they were the greatest pleasure to all the nation … No artist could paint them correctly. They had soft fine golden hair which could curl up beautifully, or which they could wear in any fashion they chose; they had big blue eyes and long eyelashes, and the most darling little faces. They were strong and sturdy for their ages, and were such expert horseback riders that they could do all the stunts observed at a circus on horseback. Their manners were so good that it was like a heavenly delight to make their acquaintance. They felt that everyone was their friend, and when anyone spoke to them, they would give the stranger one serious sweet look with their blue eyes, and then follow it with a lovely and most friendly kind of smile. … when dressed as boys, yet still retaining their golden curls, they looked like seven beautiful Little Lord Fauntleroys, with a wealth of naturally curly hair of eighteen-carat-gold shade.

Yet, despite all their beauty and equal goodness, they had often proved to the persecuting Glandelinians that they were more than a match for them.75

Elsewhere, the Vivians receive similar praise by Jack Evans, a Christian soldier and chaperone of the girls:

Indeed for my part, human language is utterly inadequate to express the beauty of the Vivian Girls. The supreme loveliness of the celestial spirits, as it seems to me, is nothing compared with the Vivian Girls, who far surpass everything that is pleasing to our mortal eyes. How exquisitely beautiful are the blue vaulted heavens, when it is studded with so many stars like so many sparkling gems. All natural beauty and grandeur grows dim when compared to the charm and magnificence of the starry heavens on a tranquil summer night. Beautiful is the sun, which because of its wonderful splendor and radiance, was adored as a divine being by so many pagan nations. But more beautiful is the form of the Vivian Girls. When I accompanied them through the streets of the Abbieannian towns, the little girls were so attractive that people flocked around to gaze at their lovely features, and the mere sight of them turned mere sadness into joy and love.76

In both of these descriptions, the Vivians exceed even the beauty of the heavens yet, exhibit conventional markers of Victorian bourgeois child prettiness – curly blonde hair and blue eyes. Caught in a slippage between flirtatious, innocent types (Shirley Temple) and celestial creatures (angels and cherubs), the Vivian descriptions tease with claims of an

75 Darger, In the Realms of the Unreal, Volume IV, p. 380.

76 Cited in Bonesteel, p. 130, as a handwritten draft in Darger’s journal.
inadequacy to capture their visage while expounding with sensuous elaborations on hair and features that beg the reader to imagine their mesmerizing beauty in familiar terms. All the while, these exaltations of physical enchantment intermix with a tomboyish androgyny underscoring the Vivians’ toughness, strength and sweet temper.

For Darger, these Vivian attributes transfer effortlessly through visual culture. His little girls originate in 18th century child portraits and re-configure in imagery he culls from modern-day comic strips, fashion illustration, and coloring books (c. 1915-1970). These plucky, girl types replace the “romantic child” of early collages taking on a revisionist modern girlhood—boisterous, parent-less, physical and adventuresome. Still blonde-haired, blue-eyed and prepubescent, these new Vivians animate their name through bodily language and actions; they run, ride horses and shoot guns. Very little differentiation exists in their appearances, and for that matter, between them and the other girls populating the Realms. Some wear pigtails; others sport pageboy haircuts or shoulder length bobs. Sometimes two or three Vivians look younger – plumper and shorter – than the group. Led by Violet Mary Vivian, age 9 ½, this group of seven sisters - Joice, age 10; Jennie, age 10; Evangeline (sometimes Angeline), age 9; Daisy, age 7; Hettie, age 8; and Catherine, age 7 - visually mimic each other, just as their girl counterparts appear to replicate in Darger’s art. Only the Vivians’ cohesive uniforms, blonde hair, tendency to grouping, and number (totaling seven) distinguish them from girl slaves. Repetitions of exact or similar looking girls (Caucasian, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed) swell throughout Darger’s images and text like incantations. Belaboring their attributes of conventional beauty, he attempts to enchant the reader/viewer with reiteration and reinforcement of an ideal, middle class appearance. Although drawing

77 Other girls like Annie Aronburg or Jennie Turmer visually blend in with the Vivians. They, as all girls in Darger’s vision, become martyrs for the Christian cause.
from narratives of the Civil War and U.S. slavery, Darger neglects to include race and class as issues in his art. The Vivians and their little girl compatriots remain decidedly white and bourgeois. So too, as white, they emulate dominate portrayals of Christian saints, Jesus, and Mary. Divinity and pop culture weave together inextricably in Darger’s conception of heroic girlhood—well-dressed, self-motivated, devout, pure—maidens plucked for service, destined to transfigure into martyrs and transcend into spiritual victory.

Dying Little, Returning Home

*Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me*

Proverbs 9:4

Darger’s devotion to *littleness* expands beyond the *little way*’s many virtues and metaphors that St. Thérèse extols. Little characters proliferate his collection of children’s literature and exemplify his standard for heroines (little Virgie of the “Little Rebel” play miniaturized through the “Littlest Rebel” motion picture). “The Little Rebel” type follows in the footsteps of a burgeoning genre of juvenile war literature during and following the American Civil War. These adventure war novels invited children to imagine themselves within the ranks of spies, scouts, and drum corps. Child protagonists stepped outside of their normative roles due to disruptions in their family structure and home life. As the war placed more demands upon the home front, these stories allowed children to vicariously become involved, connecting the notions of broken family with broken nation. In many tales, the

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child served to bridge political and racial gaps, bringing together adults separated by conflict. Girls were not exempt from these patriotic and outwardly Christian texts that promoted individual virtue and character.\textsuperscript{79} Often portrayed as orphans, thus, justifying their decision to leave home, girls and young women, like the protagonist of the “Little Rebel,” exhibit a potentially subversive persona—a powerful female child/youth outside the family structure, a tomboyish adventurer rebelling against social and gendered norms.\textsuperscript{80} These children’s adventure stories of the early to mid 1860s preceded a wave of turn-of-the-century novels involving child protagonists. Darger’s collection of literature included many famous examples of child adventurers from mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, including: L. Frank Baum’s \textit{Wizard of Oz} series, Johanna Spyri’s \textit{Heidi}, Robert Louis Stevenson’s \textit{Kidnapped}, J.M. Barrie’s \textit{Peter Pan}, Charles Dicken’s \textit{The Old Curiosity Shop} and \textit{Oliver Twist}, and Mark Twain’s \textit{The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn}.

Diminutive ones held special, even venerated status in most of these mid and turn-of-the-century novels. Perhaps too pure for earthly existence, many little characters died tragically, their highly sentimental deathbed scenes connecting with readers through shared emotions of suffering and loss. Death selfishly clings to this cult of littleness, yet, holds only a temporary power akin to suspended animation, as with Dickens’ Little Nell who on her passing “seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life.”\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} Examples of wartime adventures for girls include “Dora Darling, the Daughter of the Regiment” by Jane Goodwin Austin and \textit{The Boys and Girls Stories of the War} containing “Helen Norcross, or the Two Friends.” See Alice Fahs “A Boys’ and Girls’ War” in \textit{The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865} (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001) 256-286.

\textsuperscript{80} Idolized by the troops of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Tennessee regiment, eighteen year old Sarah Taylor is called the “second Joan of Arc” in Metta V. Victor’s \textit{The Unionist’s Daughter: A Tale of the Rebellion in Tennessee}, 1862. Fahs, 238.
The dead child cannot retain inertia for long, or so it seemed in Victorian culture. Also, apparent in the reaction to Penelope Boothby’s monument and the popular appeal of child post mortem photography in this era, adult imaginations longed for continuing child life, even if in the form of sleep. The Vivian, conceptualized by Darger within a visual culture celebrating and longing for children, declares “I shall live,” as a form of resistance, a powerful figure that both follows and transgresses norms, and, at times, transcends them.

Perhaps no other little girl figure of nineteenth-century culture dies so well and with such saintly aplomb as Little Eva (Evangeline St. Clare) of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852). The importance of this abolitionist novel and Stowe’s girl protagonist permeates Darger’s *Realms* narrative and construction of the Vivians. Darger openly appropriates the novel’s religious rhetoric, attitudes towards slavery, and character typology. He greatly favors Little Eva who he uses as a measuring stick for Christian love and morality in descriptions of his own Vivians. In this passage from Volume I, Darger compares the Vivians’ piety with that of Eva St. Clare. He also acknowledges the Vivians’ father-daughter relationship equating them with Little Eva’s paternal bond (reminiscent of the familial ties in *The Little Rebel*, and similar patterns of girl-adult male dyads running through *Heidi*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Wizard of Oz*). Preoccupied with this string of little girl comparisons, Darger abruptly changes his focus to a cousin of the Vivians, also bearing the name of Violet.

Robert Vivian himself was the father of seven little Vivian Girls whose beauty could never be painted had they been seen for real. Of Violet, Joice, Jennie and Evangeline, their beauty could never be described, but their nature and ways of goodness and soul was still more pretty and spotless. And no Evangeline St. Clare could beat them in their kind loving ways, and their

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love for God. They were always willing to do as they were told, keeping away from bad company and going to Mass and Holy Communion every day, and living the lives of little saints. The watchfulness of their parents made them what they were. They were Abbieannians by birth, but their parents, dreading the great Abbieannian storms, had left Abbieannia and first went to Angelinia. Hanson Vivian, who lost his wife and daughter, was their uncle and as pious as their father.

Way before Robert Vivian’s children were born, Hanson had a pretty daughter by the name of Violet Vivian. She herself was a regular Eva St. Clare and also died at the same age as Little Eva did. She was killed by the great typhoon which swept Abbieannia...  

Little Eva performs as Stowe’s Christ-like girl-child, a blonde-headed, blue-eyed innocent, famous for comforting her slave, Uncle Tom, with flower necklaces, tender caresses, and readings from the New Testament. Her steadfast Christian faith and charity moves her father to confront his own apathetic racism and heals the damaged soul of the incorrigible slave girl, Topsy. Darger’s high esteem for the moral character of Little Eva, and for the religious appeal of Stowe’s novel is apparent throughout the Realms. Revised appropriations of whole paragraphs and significant phrases from Uncle Tom’s Cabin disseminate his Realms...
text, one of the more compelling examples being Simon Legree’s retort to Uncle Tom, “An’t yer mine, now, body and soul?” revisited in Darger’s text as Jack Evans’ question “Ain’t those little girls mine to protect, body and soul?” Both questions suggest possession and power, although Darger’s version inverts the entitlement of slave ownership Stowe’s evil protagonist expresses, turning Darger’s revision into a statement of protection by abolitionist and Christian soldier, Jack Evans.

Little Eva’s death and her life, as well as her beauty symbolize spiritual perfection. Stowe illuminates Little Eva as an object of veneration, describing her as “Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow through all sorts of places, without contracting spot or stain.” This euphemism of cleanliness pertains to Eva’s moral purity. She is without sin. Although a Calvinist, Stowe aligns Little Eva’s early death within that of Catholic girl saints, symbolically acting out a particular martyrdom of maidens—the preservation of her virginity. Dying in a prepubescent state, Little Eva retains an extreme purity untouched by sexuality and the suffering of menstruation. Her body models the look and spirit of the Vivians—white, blonde, blue-eyed (sometimes wide eyed and pupils dilated)—signifying affluence and a prelapsarian state of grace.

Additionally, Little Eva shares heavy religious overtones as “Eva,” a name playing on “Eve,” the mother of all and Ave, the angelic salutation (as in Ave Maria, or, Hail Mary).

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85 Stowe, 406; Cited in MacGregor, 274 from Darger’s reference journal, 429.

86 Stowe, 166.

87 Similarly, Marina Warner argues that Joan of Arc’s legendary amenorrhea underscores her state of purity and denies clear sexual identification of her body with the adult female world. Warner, Joan of Arc, 139-158.

spoken by Gabriel during the Annunciation. Resolutely without sin, Eva aligns more so with the Virgin Mary, whom Roman Catholics celebrate as the second Eve, embodying the immaculate birth of a new world order. Lastly, Eva, short for Evangeline, cements this bond with Mary, evoking the good news of redemption from the Fall through the birth of Jesus Christ. Perceiving this theological exercise in Stowe’s novel, Darger also participates in his own naming game with Evangeline Vivian and Jack Evans, both exemplars of Christian love and compassion in the Realms.89

Little Eva, in fact, serves as such a strong analogue for the Vivians that Darger actually resurrects her character. He writes in Volume I:

’Who are you little girl?’ asked general Roswell Buster Johnston. ‘What do you want in our lines?’ The child looked reproachfully at the generals, and said, ‘My name is Evangeline St. Clare, I have just escaped from the Glandelinians . . . ’ . . . ’Sure you must have come from heaven.’ Said general Hanson. Did you not die from consumption?’ ‘I nearly did, though the story about me says I did. I did not die, but fainted when the sickness got at its worse (BEG PARDON TO THE WRITER OF UNCLE TOM’S CABIN).’90

In a sense, Darger vivifies Little Eva. Eva shall live. Regardless of his revision and apology to Stowe, Eva’s death still lingers in the Realms. Her death surfaces, first, in his story as the aforementioned remark equating her death with the demise of Violet Vivian, and secondly, as a paradigm for child death, suggesting the fading child’s potential as a liminal space through which the reader vicariously experiences and visualizes heaven. The deathbed scene of Little Eva marks this Christian apex in Stowe’s novel:

On the face of the child, however, there was no ghastly imprint, only a high and almost sublime expression, the overshadowing presence of spiritual

89 The name “Evangeline,” like “Vivian” reveals its own history of virtuous and immutable, young, Catholic women. On the 1850 frontispiece of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Evangeline (1847), a lone female figure stands surrounded by the phrases, “Sorrow and Silence are Strong, Patient endurance is Godlike.” Longfellow’s Catholic heroine embodied the ideal Romantic woman.

natures, the dawning of immortal life in that childish soul … A bright, a
glorious smile passed over her face, and she said, brokenly, ‘O! love, - joy, -
peace!’ gave one sigh and passed from death unto life! Farewell, beloved
child! the bright eternal doors have closed after thee…”91

In their final moments, Darger’s little girls also forgo their earthly bodies and gaze
upon heaven. Severely mangled by storm wreckage, little Jennie Turmer tells the Vivians,
“I’m going to Jesus, and mama in heaven now, and I hope you my dear friends to stay good
so that we will see each other again in heaven.” Jennie, after embracing them all, emits a cry
of “heavenly joy, long to be remembered, ‘OH, I SEE GOD’”92 And, a few pages later in the
same volume, Darger recounts a gruesome martyrdom of an anonymous girl slave:

A little girl was first brought out of the line of children, and was cruelly cut by
awful knives. Her life blood trickled gently but in streams, from her sliced
body, and then she bowed her head, and her pretty curls fell forward. Then
the murderers ripped her body open, and she threw up her bloody arms and
with a cry of, “I SEE GOD,” fell limply backward dead but an unearthly
happiness overspread her face and she seemed transfigured.93

Both passages exploit the symbolic power of littleness, using this privileged physical
state, always already pure and destined for heaven, to compound martyred suffering.

Darger’s production of littleness operates in a similar manner to theorist, Susan Stewart’s
notion of the miniature—a metaphoric embodiment of a world “limited in physical scope yet
fantastic in its content.”94 Through the diminutive, effusively theatrical little girl body,

91 Stowe,335 and 337.
93 Ibid., Vol. 3, 829.
94 Stewart argues that in the description of miniatures, like writing itself, displays a “world not necessarily
known through the senses, or lived experience. The child continually enters here as a metaphor, perhaps not
simply because the child is in some physical sense a miniature of the adult, but also because the world of
childhood, limited in physical scope yet fantastic in its content, presents in some way a miniature and fictive
chapter in each life history…We imagine childhood as if it were at the other end of a tunnel—distanced,
diminutive, and clearly framed.” Stewart, 44.
Darger claims accessibility to mystic, secret realms. The horror of severing the mother-child bond, a driving abolitionist message and empathy-producing device in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, comes forth with graphic intensity as bodily trauma and dismemberment to girl slaves in Darger’s spectacles of martyrdom. Wounds spill forth messages of mother-child rupture and irrevocable familial damage while simultaneously evoking the ecstatic penetrations of visionary experiences and forthcoming healing. “Going to Jesus and Mama” the orphan-child Jennie returns “home,” making her divine adoption complete. She, like the Little Flower, finds Mama in Jesus, and, accordingly, reassurance that they all will become one, again. Dismembered bodies (families) transfigure whole. The brutally murdered child slave with streaming blood and fallen curls, like the Paschal Lamb, resigns herself to her sacrificial role. “Seeing God” she also returns to the fold.

To go home, one must follow the *little way* of saintly sacrifice. For Little Eva her expression of saintliness manifests in confession - yearning to be like Christ:

…when I saw those poor creatures on the boat … some had lost their mothers, and some their husbands, and some mothers cried for their little children … I’ve felt that I would be glad to die, if my dying could stop all this misery. I *would die* for them, Tom, if I could...  

Darger’s girls, in extreme contrast, physically perform their imitation of Christ through the body, illuminating their physical suffering by mimicking his Passion compounding it with the Passions of every saint that has ever been eviscerated, bound, blinded, or scourged. Affirming the visual power of the broken body, these modern-looking girls slip into Medieval conventions of saintly acts. Darger’s anachronistic method of depicting little girl sanctity heavily favors somatic evidence of suffering as a prelude to miracles or Resurrection. Wearing their *passio* and signs of sainthood on the body, his girls display the

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95 Stowe, 313.
heinous acts and sins of others—*horrors upon horrors*—taken to and beyond limits of hagiographic conventions, exceeding visual comfort levels and description.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Darger’s grotesque fantasies of martyrdom, where seeing the little girl body becomes even more crucial. Here, again, Darger courts the *indescribable* resorting to appalling spectacles hinging on conventions of Catholic hagiography. Extreme crucifixions, disembowelments, and gore become necessary in his quest to articulate the intensity of spiritual release. In such works as *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee. Vivian girls witness childrens (sic) bowels and other entrails torn out by infuriated Glandelinians. The result after the massacre. Only a few of the murdered children are shown here.* (fig. 3.18), children essentially turn into specimens for dissection. Such gratuitous violence overwhelms any sense of meaning or spiritual elevation. In so many of Darger’s bloody massacre scenes, visceral gore interferes with one’s ability to locate a sense of quiet transfiguration on the faces of dead children.

Numerous other martyrdom scenes, engrossing the viewer/reader in grand scales of violence exponentially intensify this heavy, corporeal gaze. Most scholars, unsurprisingly, find this repetition of horrific death unnerving. Some even use it to suggest evidence of psychosis, claiming that Darger’s art springs “from the mind of a serial killer.” Sporadic additions of male genitalia on living and martyred “girls” further complicate readings of such scenes and additionally urge calls for psychotic interpretations. Few scholars, if any, trace these entwining and ongoing themes of “becoming male” and desire for death back to Vivian correspondences with Medieval female hagiography—Vivia Perpetua’s vision and ensuing

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96 Many museums, perhaps to evade accusations of indecency, censure and downplay the importance these horrific scenes by not exhibiting them in their public venues.

death being one of the prime examples. Darger’s art of excessive little girl bodies reconfigures martyrdom by fearlessly trans-gendering the little female body to combat socio-political constructs and (over) exposing their flesh as raw, visceral sacrifice to the precarious extent of becoming profane, meaningless carnage. Excessive bodily representation slips along an axis of sacred and prurient possibilities.

Whether or not viewers consider Darger’s child martyrdoms pointless, obscene, or even pornographic, and whether or not their desiring nature holds an erotic charge for the artist, these images, nevertheless, are relevant to the manner in which he constructs holiness and wholeness. Little girls’ bodies display Christian sacrifice viscerally, inferring through their inherent purity that they, like Christ, suffer the sins of others. Created concurrently with the blooming kindergarten works, these explicit martyrdom scenes convey similar messages with divergent visual means. One provides brutal evidence of violent suffering while the other allegorizes martyrdom through symbolic little ways—miniature Marian gardens full of expectant blooms and virginal sacrifice. Each plays off the other in an entangling map of Christian ideals: Marian conventions, little girl sainthood, and imitatio Christi.

Other Christs: White Redemption

Above all, Darger envisions holy childhood as white. Whiteness runs rampant in his exaltations of creamy-skinned, blonde-curled, and wide, blue-eyed beauty—the Little Rebel, 98

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Little Eva, St. Thérèse, the Red Cross Nurse—all white, obliging, and embodying virtue. *Kindergarten* scenes crawl with whiteness as white girl upon white girl multiply and infest every available space along the horizon. At times pervasive and abundantly apparent, whiteness also silently affirms in Eucharistic tropes of universal understanding as white sacrifice:

If this story were true, these, also probably among victims of massacre, disasters and dying child-slaves would be chosen bands in heaven, so like the Holy Innocents, *First Flowers of Christ’s coming, yet so different*, who would be terrible witnesses against all things recorded already in these many volumes so far…The beauteous bands who either in reality, or in this story, *followers of the Lamb* withersoever he goeth would have been made up of Dear Children, who might evidently after death, been changed into other Christs, by early communion, and brought our Blessed Lord’s intercession in behalf of Abbieannia and her Holy states, and bring such a downfall of a wicked nation like Glandelinia, that Babylon, Rome, or other wicked countries never experienced, and in a way that would flabbergast the world and astonish all historians, and writers, and all college professors including, I the author.99 (bold my emphasis)

Darger vivifies white girlhood as a holy, privileged state, a pliable and liquid embodiment full of ambivalent (yet so different) evocations of Holy Spirit, resurrection (*first flowers*100), and sacrifice (*followers of the Lamb*). From death, children re-emerge transformed and victorious as other Christs through acts of intercession by the Lord. Darger additionally applies this super-fluid statement of faith to the world outside of his art, either in reality, or this story. This aside, however small, points towards the existence of Darger’s spiritual beliefs beyond the sphere of his Realms narrative. In particular, his idiosyncratic

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100 The context of “First flowers” as signs of Christ’s coming may refer to the “first fruits,” the first redemption paid for in the crucifixion and a renewal of purpose felt by the Apostles after being anointed by the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Galatians 5:22-23 reads “But the first fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” Galatians 5:22-23, *Holy Bible*, King James version, 1072. Like flowers, fruits figure prominently in re-creation rhetoric of scripture. Focusing on martyrdom, spiritual ascension, transfiguration, and intercession, this paragraph as a whole encompasses the work of the Holy Spirit.
faith prevails in his fire scrapbook—a collection of images and newspaper articles in which “reality” and tropes of holy childhood continue to inextricably bond. Within the pages of this scrapbook, fire threatens whiteness, exposing another level of Darger’s anxiety about the child body, and potentially, explaining the reason why the Vivians fear fire the most of all.

The macabre scrapbook, *Pictures of Fires Big and Small in which Persons or Firemen Lose Their Lives* (fig. 3.19) merges journalistic narrations of fatal fires and newspaper photographs of burning homes or child victims against a ground of conventional imagery depicting light-hearted child’s play. By pasting newspaper articles from 1953, 1962-64, 1968, and 1970 into coloring books, Darger overlays tragic stories onto the buoyant bodies of boys and girls. Disparate worlds collide as news headlines read, “SECONDS BEFORE DEATH” while below a caption announces, “Dick speeds along on his home-made scooter car.” (fig. 1.1)

The articles relay mostly Chicago incidents: some from the cities of Philadelphia and Los Angeles; all from local Chicago newspapers. Flipping through the scrapbook, one becomes aware of its repetition - story upon story of children and women perishing in flame. Darger’s hand-written marginalia emotionally disengages from these tragedies, focusing instead on statistics—“this fire causes 39 lives to be lost” or reminding himself not to cover up a particular coloring book page featuring a sweet girl waiting for her suitor—“no cartoons please.”(fig. 3.20) The scrapbook appears to be a random array of mortality, obscenely sweetened with a prurient abundance of innocence entertaining death.

A page coupling a crying Bo Peep with a 1968 newspaper article on the Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903 contradicts the seemingly arbitrary format of the scrapbook.
This coupling exposes not only a conflation of whiteness with holy childhood but, also, fire’s threat to the perfection of whiteness in Darger’s worldview. The relatively small article commemorates the 65th anniversary of a tragic fire that shocked Chicago. The article’s size confirms the event’s forgotten status, lost within Chicago’s recent violent history of gangsters, racial strife and Vietnam War protests. Darger clipped the article and its single photographic image from the back pages of the daily news, resurrecting the infamous “death trap”—a fatal fire killing 603 women and children during a matinee at a new playhouse. The article recounts the “scream-filled inferno” of this blaze that razed a building revered for its so-called fire-proof structure. The press portrayed the hundreds of dead children as “martyrs.” Many died inside the building, asphyxiated and/or crushed by waves of confused patrons trying to escape through a maze of unfamiliar corridors and locked emergency exits. Witnesses watched in horror as burning bodies ran out into the streets. Of the few that did escape, most died immediately or within hours at makeshift triage units set up at neighboring restaurants. Days later, charred corpses still littered the streets. One reporter from the Chicago Sun described the grisly scene as “a mass of crisped humanity: arms and legs and headless trunks.”

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102 Quote from Antonio Frosolono, Iroquois Theater fire survivor and former director. From Chicago Daily News article pasted in Darger’s fire scrapbook, December 30, 1968.

103 The theater opened on November 23, 1903. For histories on this blaze and its effect on Chicago see Brandt, *Chicago Death Trap*; Jonathan J. Keyes “The Forgotten Fire.” *Chicago History* 26 (Fall 1997) 52-65; and Bishop Samuel Fallows, *Lest We Forget: Chicago’s Awful Theater Horror* (Chicago: Memorial Publishing, 1904).

104 Quote from Sun reporter, Katherine Kennay Brookes, in Brandt, 78.
At the time of this tragedy, Darger was ten, a breath away from nine, the median age of many who perished. Living in Chicago at Our Lady Mission (known as the News Boys Home), he surely saw the newspaper photographs recording Chicago’s “greatest horror” and the hundreds of white funerary carriages (carrying small white coffins) backed-up along the streets of Chicago—a spectacle of processions attempting to reach suburban cemeteries by road or train. These child martyrs were real. The circumstances of their deaths seemed, however, unfathomable or unreal.

The death toll was legendary, exceeding casualties of the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, and even today, ranks as one of our nation’s worst urban fires. The Iroquois Theater Fire affected the minds and hearts of the entire city, spawning memorials for the deceased, new fire codes, a lengthy indictment of corrupt building inspectors, and months of ensuing newspaper coverage. Chicago continued to mourn for decades, commemorating December 30th as “Mercy Day” until the early 1960s. Sixty-five years later, this horrific event materializes as a rather innocuous little article in Darger’s scrapbook. Easy to overlook, the article follows a string of other stories, other fires, and other fatalities.

Although no different from other scrapbook pages—a fire article pasted over a coloring book image—this scrapbook page’s outward appearance should not preclude its potency as a conveyance of holy childhood. Pairing this horrific, true story of child “martyrs” with a crying Bo Peep, a girl who “lost her sheep,” Darger conflates the little girl with the typology of Christ-as-Good-Shepherd and through analogy, Christ as Sacrificial

105 Our Lady Mission partially supported itself by employing its residents as newspaper boys on street corners. Besides being “newsies” the residents also wrote and printed their own magazine. Darger does not mention these activities or much of any adolescent experience at the mission in his autobiography. See MacGregor, 40-45.

106 Performed by the Iroquois Memorial Association, this ceremony and memorial services at the Chicago Public Library continued until the association disbanded in the early 1960s. See Brandt, 145.
Lamb. His chain of direct, childlike signifiers rely on familiar Catholic iconography and the transparency of childhood innocence in a visual language similar to that of the Little Flower’s. Darger’s twist substitutes a little girl, his other Christ, as both the Shepherd and the martyred lamb.

The pasted article sits to the left of Little Bo Peep, obscuring only a small part of her defining attribute—a harp-shaped staff. The placement of the article allows for nearly a full profile of Bo Peep displaying her sorrow with a single tear and raised handkerchief. Her distress is clear and, although no visible, coloring-book caption accompanies her image, her nursery rhyme narrative speaks for her loss. In Darger’s affect-less visual vocabulary, this simple linear construction displaying grief as a single shed tear is as emotional as it gets.

Bo Peep functions as a trigger or vector, much like Catholic icons. Her form traces a symbolic body that springs forth an inner system of interconnecting streams of secular, religious, and libidinous importance. Darger betrays a visual detachment to his subject, Bo Peep and other little girl types, by this deep involvement with their inter-connections and significance. His imagining of little girls expands with polymorphous desire and intent. One can easily connect the Bo Peep/fire martyrdom combination tangentially to St. Joan of Arc, a young maiden also performing the role of timid shepherdess and burning holy victim. Little Eva, too, ties to this image, with a destiny to die young, a “dear, little, blessed lamb!”


Stowe, 314.
In his *Realms* story, or reality, Darger’s conception of childhood remains vital, changing, and boundless. In some ways highly idiosyncratic, Darger’s childhood conflation with lambs and Jesus also relies on cultural associations well before his juxtaposition of Bo Peep and martyred souls. Take, for example, the Romantic poetry of William Blake: “The Lamb” from *Songs of Innocence*:

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Little Lamb, I’ll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and He is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.  

Small and vulnerable, the lamb signifies a fundamental pattern of Christian sacrifice centering on the death of the innocent. As a symbolic body, the lamb is always already marked for death and accordingly, serves as metonymic replacement for Christ, destined for rebirth and glory. The lamb, too, signifies *littleness* as the quintessential symbol of innocence and purity during the 18th century Romantic era, pairing with the young child in Jean-Baptiste Grueze’s *Innocence* (c. 1790) (fig. 3.22) or identifying with the child narrator and Christ child in Blake’s poem. Meaning within this triangulation of child-Christ-lamb centers around great loss and sacrifice. Dying young, dying for the sake of others, dying innocent—all create meaning as sacrifice or the production of sacred things.

Arguably the most notable visualization of lamb symbolism rests within one of Darger’s images from popular culture—*The Ghent Altarpiece* (1432) (fig. 2.2), also known

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110 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “sacrifice” derives from the Latin sacrificium, which means “producing something sacred.” www.oed.com
as *The Adoration of the Lamb*. The painting’s intense mixture of realism and symbolism captures the cosmogony of Christian faith as original Sin (Adam and Eve), the Annunciation (Mary as Second Eve), and the Resurrection (Lamb as Eucharist-Christ-Second Adam) culminating in the apocalyptic vision of St. John (Revelations 7:9-17). At the altarpiece’s epicenter, the lamb’s Eucharistic symbolism unmistakably emanates from the creature’s form, a white host bleeding into a chalice. Showing, thus proclaiming its redemptive mystery, the lamb resurrects.

With these connotations in mind, Darger’s interchanging and interarticulating positions of lamb-Iroquois Theater martyrs and Bo Peep-Christ figure-holy innocent divulge a significant aspect of *Pictures of Fires Big and Small*... Particularly, this scrapbook under the aegis of fire, merges “reality” (news stories, lived events, memory) with Darger’s construct of sacred childhood and devotion to little girl iconography. Carrying the message of resurrection and redemption, the child’s body easily assimilates with these articles from a city re-born in fire, as both tell corresponding stories of vulnerability and a legendary ability to persevere through tragedy and death. Simple coloring-book figures (vacuous and mute) absorb tragic stories in a manner not so different from Darger’s Vivians. Like Bo Peep, Darger’s little girls embody a nostalgic longing for innocence, the mysteries of Catholic dogma, and the resolve of hagiographic legend. All evoke the essence of *vivam* through polymorphous circuits of renewing life.

While newspaper photographs dwelled upon the physical damage of the Iroquois Theater building—its blackened interior or gutted façade—most written descriptions stirred the reader’s imagination, lingering on the horror of witnessing contorted and burnt bodies. A clergyman conceded:
I have been in wars and upon the bloody battle field, but in all my experience I have never seen anything half so gruesome (sic) as the sight that assailed my eyes when, with the aid of a lantern, I was finally able to penetrate the inky darkness of that balcony. There was a pile of twisted and bleeding bodies, ten feet high, with blackened faces and remnants of charred clothing clinging to them. Some were alive and moaning in their agony. But others – and, oh, by far the greater number, were dead!”

In the aftermath of the Iroquois Theater fire, witnesses chronicled the quantity and nuances of disfigurement. Bodies blackened, charred, dismembered, and distorted by flame peppered the rhetoric of newspaper articles. Most reports featured photographs of victims taken months before the tragedy. Their clean and white faces springing from fashionable outfits exude affluence, happiness and wholeness, providing a stark reminder of what was now dead, lost, and fragmented. Juxtapositions of a documented “before” and a left-to-the-imagination “after,” reiterated the horror of this event in contrasting transformations of white to black. Soft, snow-white cheeks turned into crispy, charred, unidentifiable faces. Perfect blonde curls melted into carbonized masses while tailored suits and frilly, lace skirts dangled in singed strips from indistinct shapes. The warm, laughter-filled theater turned raging inferno eventually waned into a silent, inky darkness. Positioned in opposition to bourgeois whiteness, fire’s destruction—signified by “blackness”—equated to despair, deformity, and utter, unimaginable loss. Blackened bodies became a foil on which whiteness could assert a position as privileged, valued, and silently powerful.

An ideology equating whiteness with beauty clearly resonates in one reporter’s eerie description of a female corpse unblemished by the fire as, “a nude torso like a plaster cast in the ancient Greek rooms of an art museum, silent, white, and beautiful.”

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111 Rev. Samuel Fallows quoted in the Chicago Record-Herald, December 31, 1903, Brandt, 68.

112 The words of Charles Collins from the Chicago Record-Herald describing a dead woman stripped to the waist, quoted in Brandt, 67.
rescuers claimed to see signs of nobility and resignation—“a smile of faith” and “serene countenances”\(^\text{113}\)—on the faces of the dead spared from the blackening effects of flame. Whiteness, even in death, retained its exemplar virtue and perfection. The scrapbook, *Pictures of Fires Big and Small* …, provides arguable evidence that Darger seeks and creates connections between childhood innocence and fiery death. For him, fire was a very real, palpable threat and proven child-killer. His Vivians, dreading fire the most, offer an outlet for his own fears, curiosity, and experiences growing up and old in Chicago. Fire’s capacity to deform and utterly destroy extinguished the radiating whiteness of childhood. Fire took in mass what Darger views as beautiful and sacred, the white bourgeois child’s body by indelibly blackening the body’s form.

The Vivians’ aversion to fire, however, does not merely reflect a biographical and ideological context. Fire consumes the body, becoming ashes incapable of conveying visceral suffering and, thus incapable of showing the same heightening level of sacrifice that representations of evisceration or crucifixion present. It erases the spectacle of violently torn bodies, leaving all to the imagination. In short, a fiery death poses great difficulty in Darger’s art because it denies visual access to the sacred body journeying through suffering and triumphant transfiguration.

The Vivians’ necessary corporeality points towards reasons why they, and by extension all girls in Darger’s art, fear fire. Like Joan of Arc, the Vivians appear invincible, preternatural—except to fire. Flame represents the ultimate consummation of the body, and metaphorically for virgins, threatens the integrity of the soul/body. Even St. Joan still retained some “wholeness” following her martyrdom at a burning stake. According to

\(^{113}\) *Ibid.*, 83.
legend, onlookers sifting through her ashes found her heart intact and full of blood. Highly symbolic of her enduring spirit and devotion to Christ, her unscathed heart also embodied the coexisting notions of steadfast female virginity (its own martyrdom) and victorious resurrection—unconsumed even in the most consuming of circumstances. But, perhaps for Darger, the revelation of a single heart does not reveal enough. His girls must return home, whole and holy. His corporeal gaze must witness their fulfillment of destiny.

Without doubt, little girl bodies carry powerful and complex communications of entwining normative and transgressive notions of childhood, gender, and Catholicism in Darger’s art. Slipping precariously along an axis of idiosyncratic belief, cultural constructions and religious typology, the Vivian-little girl body must be seen in all states of the child’s journey to satisfy the body’s function as vehicle for potent messages. Corporeal verification even becomes necessary to reinforce the immaterial, in particular spiritual transfiguration. Darger draws upon iconographic conventions of the Holy Spirit envisioned as flame, in both covert and exaggerating ways. Girls internalize the Spirit, like Dicken’s deceased Little Nell, *awaiting the breath of life*, and spontaneously reanimate upon their death. Evidence of this appears in *Untitled (Heart of Jesus)* (fig. 3.23) as a revelation of child re-birth and angelic transfiguration into God’s kingdom. An epiphany of clouds circumscribes hovering girl-angels and a monumental heart with affixed cross. This heart, a medical illustration, departs from conventional depictions of a simple, stylized beating mass, aflame, bleeding, and encircled by a crown of thorns.

In the artist’s version, the iconic heart floats like a celestial body without signs of flame. Several admiring angels gravitate around the heart; some engage in playful activities. Their small stature, clothing (jumpers), and nudity mark them as girl-angels. They gleefully
float within a series of striating cloud formations and bask within the radiance of the heart’s
glow. While they levitate, their counterparts, the living Vivians and friends, stand firmly on
the ground, oblivious to the ecstatic vision behind and above them. The Vivian’s lack of
reaction to this resurrection spectacle suggests that the girl-angels and heart are not
physically there; they are a visionary intercessor from another realm that Darger presents for
the viewer.

Juxtapositions between living girl and resurrected girl imply a direct conveyance to
heaven reserved for the elect already in a state of purity. This process seems so direct that
the transfiguring ones retain not only their childlike ways but, also, as a beach ball attests,
their play toys. Darger reiterates in his text, “But in this story where people and children are
so good, angel possessed children, for angel possessed they were, do not die until they go to
heaven alive. They can be killed of course, but do not die naturally… angel possessed
children stay children until they go to heaven and then are most beautiful children ever
imagined.”114 Although confusing, this notion, nonetheless, argues that good children are
angel possessed, pre-destined to transfigure and transcend into another stage of little life. In
short, they shall live. Vivam, the essence of Vivian, in this case, suggests the workings of
the Holy Spirit—an ascension into heaven—and, St. Thérèse’s call to littleness (life long
communion with the Holy Spirit). The image is a curious choice for such a devout Catholic.
Eschewing religious doctrine Darger presents, instead, a secular, Victorian vision—the wide
belief that deceased children become angels, just as playful and innocent as in life.115

Operating under the notion that ordinary, albeit, good girls bypass the cleansing flames of

114 Darger, Vol. 10, 692.

115 “Miss Eva is gone to heaven; she is an angel,” Stowe, 339. Portrayals of children in 19th century visual
culture often took the form of angels or cupids. See Higonnet, 34.
purgatory and ascend, apotheosis-style as the ascension of the Virgin Mary, Darger constructs a controversial, heterodoxical premise.

*Untitled (Heart of Jesus)* provides a metonymic replacement for fire as *vivam* spiritual vitality. The martyred little girls’ existence, like fire, receives its true conclusion by becoming light, (here, as angels, flying), what theorist Gaston Bachelard perceives as ascension “through the agonies of flame … freed of all materiality.” Their martyrdom and ecstatic surrender ignites their spiritually cleansing “pyre” preparing their way for glory. Dying as children before the taint of adulthood, they enter already pure, chaste and humble. Their quick and minimal transfiguration becomes a symbol of freedom and a rebirth, still whole and still spiritually “the child.” In its metaphoric, alchemical, religious, and etymological contexts as purifier, vitality, and transforming agent, fire aptly encompasses the rarified essence of little saintly journeys that informs Darger’s conception of girlhood.

Acknowledging this, one can begin to see the little girl as a powerful multivalent and formulaic abstraction blooming (literally) everywhere in Darger’s art. Modeling his little heroines after a bevy of rebellious, orphaned girls and virtuous female martyrs, Darger understood girlhood as a journey of suffering and self-abnegation. A living *vivam* image of redemption, she represents a sacred body and, as such, must show the marks of sacrifice in her broken and glorious flesh. Given the ambiguous label of *other Christ*, the girl-child adopts a persona both concrete and divine—suggesting the Biblical, privileged form of the Word becoming flesh. As Vivians, little girls align with Catholic lore and practices, and, accordingly, fulfill a didactic function. Along with her deeds, her outer appearance conveys the inner beauty of her girlish soul. Comic- and coloring- book quotations provide her form

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while also reinforcing her humble status as an ordinary and banal child destined to do
wondrous deeds.

Simultaneously familiar and strange, her image as ideal Vivian or little slave girl,
constantly shifts, transfiguring the innocent and vulnerable Victorian-to-modern-child into a
militarized, impassioned Joan of Arc that Darger retrofits in polka dots and patent leather
shoes. Her alluring body performs a circle of life to death to life, a heated existence teeming
with vitality and innocence. Like the rising phoenix, she emerges unconsumed by her
inflamed trials of martyrdom, embodying fire’s potent messages of purification, holiness,
spiritual ascension, and rebirth. Betwixt and between, her liminal, martyred, and
hermaphroditic form animates Darger’s heterodoxical vision driven by a perpetually
ambivalent dialogue between the sacred and the profane. The little girl is Darger’s pious
vessel, a compressing narrative of womb and tomb, a flowing desire, an other Christ. She
remains, still, very much alive.
Chapter Three:  
Desire

All seeing is heated. It must always involve force and desire and intent.  
- James Elkins

On an envelope containing photographic negatives, Darger wrote, “little girl on the run, maybe draw in massacre picture.” Like so many other notations on boxes, scrapbook pages, and bits of random paper, this label served a dual purpose of directing the artist’s attention to contents and to potential use. The negatives inside, from his local drug store, signify an important shift in Darger’s artistic practices. Through photographic enlargement, Darger found a means to enhance the size of his girls, while retaining their proportional integrity. This method allowed him to create modifications in scale and dramatic, perspectival arrangements. Art historians cite and celebrate this particular envelope as evidence of Darger’s ingenuity. Additionally, the stamped drug store receipt within the envelope establishes a ballpark date (post-1944) for later components of Darger’s undated corpus. Scholars, though, overlook the significance of the “girl on the run” motif and his predetermination of her placement in “massacre pictures.” One finds this sprinter, a haunting and powerful liminal figure, in dangerous, action-packed scenarios where waves of girls run, fight, or bravely stand their ground. Within “massacre” pictures—representations of

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2 With the help of these negatives, Darger could enlarge his source material up to 11” x 14”. The American Folk Art Museum in New York lists two hundred and forty-six envelopes containing enlargements in their collection of ephemera from Darger’s apartment.
arbitrary child-butcher and ritualistic martyrdoms—and predatory “natural” occurrences—approaching storms, fires, and tornadoes, she becomes the dominant character traveling the infinite terrain of the war-torn Realms.

The running girl reads as more than just an image of flight, lingering in Darger’s drawings as a mercurial emblem of mobility, (re)combination, and social disruption. Darger frequently elects to depict the running girl naked or with partial clothing, further exposing her little body to potential harm. Her vulnerable, open, and active state permits Darger to selectively add hand-drawn male genitalia between parting and extending little legs. (fig. 2.8) With a few, simple pencil marks, Darger fabricates a complex, fantastic hermaphrodite—a figure of motility and fluid mutability. Her visage becomes a blur of both motion and gender. Ever expansive, as she morphs back and forth between little girl and epicene creature, she additionally embodies metaphysical proportions as a transfiguring child-angel and “other Christ.” Her significant form, sacred, yet, profanely naked and gender-bending, simultaneously reinforces and troubles her little girl sainthood.

Ambiguously gendered, sexed childhood runs like an open secret through Darger’s art. Curiously, the artist does not explain, or even mention, trans-gendering bodies, hermaphrodites, or sexual hybridity in his narrative and captions. His prose, instead, insists upon the beauty, purity, and wholesome integrity of the seven Vivians and the thousands of little girls populating his tale. Additionally, his imagery provides no indication that gender-morphing disrupts these traits or that hybridity equates in any manner to corruption, sin, or vice. Morphing, rather, conforms to the Vivian “naturally”—without need for explanation or great spectacle in itself. Given the frequency of trans-gendering situations, thus an

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3 See a discussion of the Vivian’s sacred dimensions in Chapter Two: Pure (Pyre).
important role in representing the girl body, one must assume that this in-between gender morphology signifies meaning, aligning with Vivian traits of purity and virtue. However, as James Elkins aptly asserts, “all seeing is heated,” and consciously or not, Darger’s penciled-in additions literally draw attention to sexual organs and erotically charge her body. As such, this strangely-sexed “girl” renders a voyeuristic, puerile reading in current scholarship, precluding other interpretations. Practicing a form of “deflective seeing,” few, if any, scholars scrutinize this running and morphing girl with more vigor than psychoanalytic diagnosis. Some even elect to ignore the issue of girls’ nudity and sporadic hermaphroditism altogether. Both approaches selectively deny or downplay the multivalent potential of the Vivian body and her body’s slippage through contingent desires—one of the most dynamic and significant aspects of Darger’s art.

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4 Male genitals on little female bodies, although a strange sight, seem proportionate to their form. Darger does not exaggerate them or blatantly focus on the girls’ pubic region.

5 My use of the phrase “deflective seeing” references Leo Steinberg’s argument concerning art historical modes of evasion in discussions of proto-Renaissance depictions of the Christ child nude with exposed genitals. According to Steinberg critical reaction to this motif demonstrating the humanation of God and Christ’s sacrificial manhood ascribed to general interests in the nude figure as referencing models of antiquity and conveying an enthusiasm for naturalism. These evasive tactics keep any connections of godhead with sexuality in abeyance. Likewise, my thoughts on the deflective seeing in Darger’s art turn towards MacGregor’s concept of “knowing and not knowing” in regards to the physical differences between boys and girls in Darger’s art. MacGregor infantilizes Darger, claiming that his sexuality is stunted and that Darger’s sexuality is in many ways a form of innocence. Returning to a general conception of castration anxiety, MacGregor sums up sexuality in Darger’s art as a sexual regression into infantile complexes rather than “other possibilities too frightening to contemplate.” MacGregor writes, “in such ways as not knowing, the truth has a way of breaking through in disguised form. In Darger’s case knowing and not knowing seem at times to alternate with the rapidity of a child playing peek-a-boo, now you see it now you don’t…one is reminded of another childhood game played by little boys, that of hiding their genitals by tucking them back between their tightly compressed legs…Other explanations accounting for its absence are: ‘It is small now, but it will grow.’ Obviously, other possibilities are too frightening to contemplate. With Darger, the regular appearance and disappearance of the penis in his drawings may reflect an unconscious playing with the levels of reality, a daring approach and retreat from the truth, which he knows and does not know. If so, while this game may have originated in childhood it persisted to the end of his life.” Museums exhibiting Darger’s art elect not to discuss the phenomenon of child hermaphrodites or speak of it in generalities as another “compelling aspect of Darger’s imagery, as another quirky aspect of his work” Leo Steinberg, “The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion.” October 25 (summer 1983): 1-198, 204-222 and MacGregor, 532.
Realizing that this chapter engages a provocative topic of adult desire and of erotic child bodies, I, too, traverse uncertain and hazardous territory. This study of the running/morphing child casts a wide net encompassing: one, James Kincaid’s theoretical concepts on culture’s construction of an erotic child; two, metamorphosis as pleasurable play and narrative vitality; three, correlations between “virile” female saints, divine eros, and the Vivians; and four, comparisons between Joseph Cornell’s “orality” and Darger’s taste for little girls. This discussion tracks desire’s mysterious and mutable pull, embodying the running girl and burning within collective, religious models, as well as, in the idiosyncratic, corporeal gazes of the artist, AND the viewer. Tracing the converging streams of secular and religious models, the chapter argues that the significance of Darger’s coyly ambiguous, trans-gendering child far exceeds current interpretations of her form as a classic Freudian fetish—a manifestation of castration anxiety and sexual perversion.6 By investigating the fluid operations of desire, transmissions between the spaces of artistic production, popular culture, and religious veneration, this chapter rejects the reduction of Darger’s art to mere pathologic production and psycho-biographical explanation. This approach, however distancing (thus, comforting), tidy, and seemingly rational over-simplifies, others Darger, and fashions a sterile split between Darger’s imagined world and the world at large, and

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6 Quoting Ann Freud, MacGregor then argues that Darger’s trans-gendering girl re-enacts the fantasy of a maternal phallus. Carrying the “delusional belief in the existence of female children with male genitals would seem, almost invariably, to involve a curious and ambivalent mental state of knowing and not knowing.” MacGregor takes Darger’s “complex” further stating, “Such a situation would seem to require reinforcement by trauma far in excess of that caused by the simple discovery of the crucial difference which distinguishes the sexes from one another. That trauma, in Darger’s case, could have been supplied by the sudden death of his mother just prior to his fourth birthday. Whatever point he had attained in his psychosexual development, there is sufficient evidence to support a prolonged regression to, and fixation at, the anal-sadistic phase. This shock seems to have contributed to, and maintained, an unconscious awareness of an all powerful and threatening phallic mother, now numinous because she was dead.” MacGregor, 533. Taking Darger’s art as a literal embodiment of his psyche, MacGregor’s “sufficient evidence” is his assumption that “at some level of his reality Darger believed that female children are equipped with male genitals.” MacGregor, 529.
positions his art solely as a manifestation of his psyche. The chapter’s line of inquiry opens the possibilities for further discussion of Darger’s Vivians within a broad-ranging, less pejorative framework. The Vivian Girl’s superabundance enveloping a continuum of female to hermaphrodite defies restraint or definition. She moves from a veiled sexual category of the little girl (the pucelle soon to become woman) into a demonstrative epicene being, a threatening and excessive creature capable of eliciting repulsion and titillating attraction.

Even more, this girl-in-motion troubles the notion of sexual fetish and objectification by paralleling the virago fortis—a potent, gender-bending signifier of female piety and agency, a whirling martyr “becoming male.”

Certainly, during the course of discussing the Vivian Girl, notions of desire and fetish overlay a rhetoric that signals lack, excess, difference, and deviation. Desire, however, as the Surrealists argued, cannot be subservient to the standards of “normalcy” implicit in psychoanalysis. Desire is too mutable and too individual. Unlike the untranslatable and inexplicable qualities of the fetish, desire’s contingent trajectories are too verbose. Desire,

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7 John MacGregor writes, “what he (Darger) has created is an infinitely detailed self-portrait, with every character, every event, each battle and aspect of nature, functioning as a dynamic fragment of his enormously complex and conflicted self.” MacGregor, 115.

8 At an outsider art symposium in November 2005 (NC State University), Norman Girodet, a scholar from Lehigh University in comparative religion, displayed “sublimated masturbation” under a power point slide of Darger’s work featuring nude and trans-gendering girls. He provided little to no explanation on his caption assuming his commentary was universally understood and accepted.

9 In psychoanalytic theory, the fetish object is a symbolic substitution displacing the disavowed maternal penis that the adult fetishist knows does not exist, but due to his reactivated infantile sexual crisis (castration anxiety and Oedipus complex) he believes it nonetheless. Freud described the sexual fetish as an unsuitable substitution replacing the “normal” with the “essential overvaluation of the sexual object” (an inanimate object or non-genital body part). Operations of desire equally suggest an originary sense of “lack.” Following Freud, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued that desire was always the desire for the other (initially the mother) and a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation. For Lacan, desire is insatiable and inextricably bound to the maturation of the infant and of its entry into language. See Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” in The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 250; Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (New York: Routledge, 1997) 37.
for Breton and the Surrealists, is “the great force” integral to life itself. “Profound and invincible” desire “drives all beings to appropriate for themselves...an element of the exterior world, indeed another being.”¹¹ This chapter’s reading of Darger’s running girl follows in surrealism’s embrace of desire as an active, ever-creative force. Accordingly, my preference for “desire” over “fetish” frames my analysis of Darger’s running/morphing girl as a representation—not a reality—driven by intentions difficult to determine, yet suggestive of multi-layering meanings.

Following the incarnations of Darger’s desired Vivian Girl, the chapter suggests that her precocious, contradictorily-sexed body and ambiguous gender speak broadly, and with rich complexity, to culture’s polarizing constructions of child/adult and male/female. As importantly, her permutations illustrate the artist’s desire to play with these polarities and to fabricate an extraordinary “child” beyond nature—capable of defeating bloodthirsty Glandelinians, on one hand, and rebelling against conventional girlhood, on the other. As such, the trans-gendering girl does not culminate into a denial of difference—a succinct end cap determining sexual perversion. She remains a vehicle for libidinally-charged energy sprinting through fantastical possibilities, mystical powers, and erotic poetics. Beneath the surface of Vivian dynamism and metamorphosis, lies this running-girl figure’s metaphoric

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¹⁰ My thoughts on these “mute” qualities of the fetish turn to William Pietz’s writings on fetishism in anthropological discourse as an “ongoing encounter of the value codes of radically different social orders.” “Fetish” has an origin in the earliest confrontations between Europe and Africa. Fetishism occurs when a material object traverses cross-cultural boundaries within a negotiation between value systems. One culture’s worship of an object is deemed as an act of gratuitous, disproportionate over-valuation by the other (dominant) culture. Fetishism is anchored in the space between cultures and is, as a result, an operation of mutual misunderstanding. In short, the fetish does not translate value and meaning, thus appearing mysterious. See William Pietz, “Fetishism and Materialism” in Fetishism as Cultural Discourse, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹¹ For Breton, desire culminates in sexuality but its manifestations are also “innumerable” and “enigmatic.” See Jennifer Lundy “Letters of Desire” in Surrealism: Desire Unbound, ed. Jennifer Lundy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)10-53 for an overview of Breton’s and the Paris-based surrealist group’s thoughts on the operations of desire.
significance and power as movement between concepts (trans-ition, crossing or going beyond) and suspension of time (a little, pre-adolescent girl, embodying the childhood of a romantic past, modernity’s present, and future’s hope). She, the running girl, is a communicating vessel par excellence, a sacred image verging on sacrilege, a slippage between innocence and sexuality—super-fluid and spilling all over the place.

Pursued and Pink

In At Sunbeam Creek ...At Torrington (fig. 4.1) the Vivian Girl operates on pure vivam (a will to live), evading impending doom and awaiting her next surge of energy. A tripartite construction, each scene appears in visual self-containment with the capacity of telling individual stories. Although these three scenes jump from bright day to black forest to blazing firestorm, they flow together under the narrative aegis of a thrilling chase—one in which a predatory fire endangers the lives of little girls. Formally, the story’s momentum and coherence rely on the visual continuum of the horizons within each landscape and on an escalating wave-like pattern of girl bodies.

Emerging (left-to-right) a procession of girls (and ensuing narrative) begins with only minimal movement, a few subtle shifts in posture. (fig. 1.6) Drab, gray attire underscores the girls’ inactivity. From the eighth girl, the procession undulates over a grassy hump. Like the rising knoll, the girls’ bodies awaken, twisting and gesturing, while their clothing responds with colorful shades of rose, periwinkle, and tangerine. Behind them, Sunbeam Creek’s horizon abuts the blue sky of daytime, announcing from the far left corner, the portentous, smoking mass of an advancing firestorm.
Thrust into a different locale and blackened palette in the second panel, the girls—bearing identification as the Vivians (seven blondes in uniform attire)—appear slightly larger in scale and sprint in sharp patterns. (fig. 4.2) The swarthy backdrop of burning Torrington against their bodies produces a chiaroscuro effect dramatizing the girls’ awkward straight-legged gaits, extending arms, and screaming expressions. Bright yellow and red dresses contrast the girls’ soot laden arms, legs, and faces. Like flickering candles, their forms bob up and down, extending fingers and tendrils of golden locks into the night’s air.

The last figure in this second panel, a running girl, conducts momentum and energy into the final scene. (fig. 4.3) Although running to the viewer’s left, her hair, skirt, and right-side appendages point towards the final scene, as if a powerful gust of wind blows against her stride. Her right-turning face and eyes complete this somatic directional gesture, urging the viewer to look beyond her form into the blazing final passage. One’s eyes follow this gesture and encounter another sprinter in the final scene. Subtly mirroring the previous girl, this sprinter also runs with kicking and pumping action, visually bridging the panels by pointing back at the previous scene with flapping braids, a jagged shirt hem, and dainty shoe orienting towards her left. Looking back at the second panel, she runs forward towards the climactic moment of the third—the escape from a fiery death celebrated through the frolicking dance of two girls mid frame. Calf-deep in water, the dancing girls cool down their energetic forms with softer motions and calmer postures. Their bodies’ energy gradually drains from the initial sprinter, to the dancing couple, and, then, to the final trio, almost inert, orienting toward the right. These last three point and direct their gaze beyond the frame of the third and final image. Anticipating the next, off-site and presently invisible danger, they ignore the raging inferno in the background that still menaces them.
The heat in this final passage palpitates. A wall of bright yellow flames with slight orange modeling and rising, faint striations covers the top half of the image. Flaming debris falls from the sky. The sharp contrast of the river’s luminous edge and dark, murky body relays the immense reflection of the fire. The girls, too, against the powerful blaze, cast back the fire’s palette with their all-yellow attire and ruddy, singed skin. The glare of the fire is equally matched by the conspicuous disrobing of the girls – one without a blouse, two bearing shoulders, and four with only tattered pieces hanging from their upper torsos. This latter group, almost completely naked, display penises. These obviously epicene creatures elevate the climactic moment of this scene through surprise and sudden revelation of their sexually-mutable bodies.

Captions from this fiery triad offer little, if any, clues to the mysterious, trans-gendering finale. Darger’s notations follow a chase narrative, fixating on the last image. The episode begins with the first caption: “At Sunbeam Creek. Are with little girl refugees again in peril from forest fires. But escape this also, but half naked and in burned rags.” Curiously, this caption does not narrate the companion scene. Darger’s yearning to arrive at the last inflamed passage surfaces again in the second panel: “At Torrington. Are persued (sic) by a storm of fire but save themselves by jumping into a stream and swim across as seen in the next picture.” Here, again, instead of attending to the immediate image, Darger impatiently pushes on to the final scene. Once there, he reticently divulges what appears before our eyes: “Their red color is caused by glare of flames. At Torrington. They reach the river just in the nick of time.”

Half-naked, marked by sex, pursued, pink – the girl bodies reach an eroticized apex, the other perceptible “heat” in this final scene. Without warning, Darger leaps beyond his
captions and the norms of physiology by visually trans-gendering the little girl-body. Revealing her form’s recombination, Darger moves this child, already in motion, beyond the category of girl into something alien and other. She emerges triumphant in the last panel, playing, dancing and unaffected by her nakedness. Touched by flame, does she still register as a sign of purity, or has Darger’s transformative act stripped her of her innocence?

“Nuded” and Neuter (?)

Little girl “refugees,” wearing next to nothing, flee the firestorm in At Sunbeam Creek ... At Torrington. Naked girls aim and fire rifles (some still in their “Mary Jane” shoes, anklet socks, and wide-brim hats) in Untitled (battle scene during lightning storm) (fig. 1.5) while throngs of naked girls await their fate in At Jennie Richee. They are placed in concentration camp with crowd of child prisoners (fig. 4.4). In these war scenes, and countless others, nakedness conveys multiple and contradictory messages of strength and athletic vigor, bravery, innocence, and powerlessness. Formally, nakedness immediately draws the eye to their snow-white shapes and doll-like physiques. Their bodies register as a void of whiteness, devoid of modeling or further volumetric delineation. A thinly traced line forms their outer silhouette. Reminiscent of dolls with interchangeable hair styles, Darger’s girls perform stop-action poses like articulating toys. The playful transposability of the girl-body and their anatomical abstraction parallels the capricious nature of their interchangeable hermaphroditic biology. In the concentration camp, for example, the dark ground and dirty blue sky contrast against clean, creamy girl-bodies. Their forms pop against this backdrop, beckoning the viewer’s eye to follow each outline, curve, facial expression, hairstyle, gesture, and renegade sex characteristic.
Referring to Darger’s girls as “naked” reflects my own thoughts (and projection) on his unclothed or partially-clothed children. Considering art historian Kenneth Clark’s famous distinction between “naked” and “nude,” I use the term to suggest a state of transition and exposure, deprived of clothing and vulnerable. Darger describes his girls as both “naked” and “nude,” often preferring the term “nuded.” According to Clark, “nude” connotes “no such image of a huddled, defenseless body, but of a balanced prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed.” Darger’s nuded girls reads with a similar assurance, denoting a passive context indicating that somehow, forces (known or unknown) strip girls of their clothing. Nuded happens, and as Darger’s art attests, the girls do not mind, except, of course, when fiery tongues or Glandelinian hands defrock them. Girls frolic in fields, battle foes, and run for the hills in various states of undress. Darger shows them forgoing gestures of modesty, expressing, instead, an Edenic shamelessness, comfortable and quite capable of multiple and dangerous tasks, nuded.

Nudity conventionally signifies a pure, natural state in children’s imagery. Photographs of little girls or boys in bathtubs or stretching out, bare on rugs, trigger nostalgic pangs for childhood as a time of innocence that adults yearn to remember. Society deems these desires acceptable, and, even encourages them, as long as those photographs show your children, or show your childhood. Women who photograph nude children (their own or those of others) or collect sentimental couplings of chubby, bare babies with kitties and ducklings, often receive exemption from questions of exploitation and pedophilia. Men

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12 The term “nuded” appears in captions, for example “At Jennie Richee. Assuming nuded appearance by compulsion race ahead of coming storm to warn their father.” This particular caption associates “nuded” with running and morphing girls.

13 Kenneth Clark argues that, “to be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition.” Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Art* (London: John Murray, 1956) 3-4.
rarely, if ever, receive such a reprieve. Darger’s penchant for images of children in modern clothing and nude and for fabricating nuded and erotic children make him doubly troubling—an easy target for condemnation. His interest in childhood seems so out-of-place.

The little girl undoubtedly operates as Darger’s ideal object of desire. Darger fully projects the instability of her body: her vulnerability to harm and her sacred liminality to its fullest. A small portion of Darger’s magazine and newspaper clippings feature nude children and children in partial dress. The allure of these photographs and illustrations may not necessarily lie in their nudity, but, more specifically, in their androgyny. A bathtub quintet photo displays four prepubescent children in various girlish hairstyles, brunette and blonde, sitting in chest-high water. (fig. 4.5) The fifth child strikes a sensual pose with a body showing stunning androgyny. Her (her?) lean, modeled torso stretches from the tub upward into the right corner of the photo, concluding in this child’s down-turning head and hand-to-face gesture. Thick, wavy, shoulder-length blonde curls crown her head. Shadows along her body create the illusion of a developing boyish musculature. The question of her gender hides behind the head of another, sitting child, strategically placed to cover the standing one’s genital region. This standing, slightly leaning, androgynous child-body rises like a glorious baby Adonis/Venus from the water.

While some scholars refer to Darger’s collection of clippings of nude and partially-dressed children as his “private erotica,”\(^\text{14}\) I wish to point out that these clippings of photographs and advertisements originate from “legitimate” sources—Ladies Home Journal, Life Magazine, and various Chicago newspapers. If anything, they are our erotica. At the risk of positioning Darger as a passive victim caught up within a lurid cultural phenomenon, I argue that considering this point further exposes the complex gaze operating in his work. I

\(^{14}\) MacGregor, 123.
will admit that Darger’s attachment to these images exceeds what one considers ordinary. He sought these photos and advertisements out, compiling multiples on certain themes. For example, he acquired twenty copies of the Coppertone Girl. However, “ordinary,” like “normal,” is a relative term, and, Darger did very little, if anything, in moderation.

Theorist James Kincaid argues that images of children hold, for adults, both uneasiness and joy: “the child carries for us things we somehow cannot carry ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasures so great we would not without the child, know how to contain them”15. Our culture strives to protect and preserve images of childhood, associating children with innocence and with a carefree and pre-sexual state. Darger’s art complicates these associations. However, as theorists Kincaid and Higonnet suggest, culture also complicates images of children. In Higonnet’s assessment, the romantic child becomes a sensual creature, soft and pliant, blurring gender. Kincaid takes a more provocative and controversial stand: arguing that the child, pure and stainless, acts as a foil for our disavowed desires. As our nation’s attachment to the Coppertone Girl advertisement implies (fig. 4.6), culture cultivates this movement between sexuality and non-sexual innocence, further eroticizing the child. Kincaid warns that our culture dwells on this image, and other child-manifestations with “underpants on the way off,” for the wrong reasons:

Not only do we read our adult desires back onto the blushing child, there’s a crude allegory of cultural practice here as well, an emblem of vigorous duplicity: we uncover what we shield, censure what we enjoy.16

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Culture’s slippages of innocence and sexuality create, eroticize, and commodify the Coppertone Girl and numerous other girl-figures (in uniforms, frilly dresses, and Mary Jane shoes). These girls come to Darger’s art ready-made, over-flowing with eroticism and emotional investment. If we are to believe Kincaid, then, the art world eroticizes Darger’s girls as much as the artist does. Cultural constructs of erotic fantasy and repressed paranoia create interest in and concern for this aspect of Darger’s work. Speaking of Darger’s imagery as contained within his pathologic fetish further disavows that Darger’s work participates in a larger cultural phenomena of uncovering and shielding the child.17

Looking again at the bathtub quintet and the Coppertone Girl, a kinship emerges. The Coppertone Girl, with fair-hair, teasingly displays a prepubescent body without revealing her sex. She compliments the frontal bathtub androgyne by presenting the supple skin and curves of her back side and “bottom.” Mischievously tugging at her swimsuit, a terrier dog assists in the titillating potential of revelation. A playful tug ignites the erotics of scanning this girl’s distinct tan lines, an indentation (the “small”) of her back, dimpled legs, puckered mouth, wide eyes, and hand-to-cheek (and mouth) gesture—a string of “surprises” rehearsing and saying innocent “child.” In both the bathtub scene and the Coppertone ad, the child’s body never fully defines as either girl or boy. They hover somewhere between sexes, emitting a sexless appeal, presenting without the need for sexual (genital) delineation.

To say that something approaches sexlessness does not suggest the being’s asexuality. On the contrary, this indistinct state carries erotic appeal. Sexlessness approaches what theorist Roland Barthes conceives as “the neuter,” a provocative concept annihilating

17 Kincaid’s overarching argument in Child-Loving asserts that notions of “the child” have been assembled in accordance with culture’s desire over the past two centuries. Pedophilia operates at the center of our culture, not at the periphery. “By insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism.” Kincaid, Child-Loving, 4-5.
distinctions between two opposing values, specifically the gender polarities of male and female. As neutrality, the neuter refuses to crystallize, it becomes instead a pleasurable “drifting,” a resistance to meaning, a “suspension,” and a “displacement.” The neuter is about “thinking the non-language, the non-color (but not the absence of color).” Sexlessness is sexy. Oscillating between poles of male and female, sexlessness suggests an evacuation of meaning forging a liberating, blank space ripe for the projection of fantasy. Kincaid’s thoughts on cultures’ construction of the child correspond with Barthes neuter concept as another fantasy object vacillating between oppositions of male/female and active/passive. Culture imagines this child as:

…genderless, blond, vacant, wide-eyed (unsuspecting), and secretive (mischievous)... When the figure is nominally female, it is made exceptionally active, even aggressive; when male, more passive, even sneaky; the females are given short hair, distinctive features; the males long hair and soft, hazy features – all merging toward (though not duplicating exactly) an androgynous oneness, the perfect erotic child.

Within the frames of Barthes’ “neuter” and Kincaid’s “perfect erotic child,” one witnesses similar stirrings of girlish in-between bodies from Darger’s first Vivian collage. As Darger moves this child through the permutations of Little Rebel, to Little Eva, and to his running/morphing child, he continues to play with gender. While mischievously toying with the Vivian, he, nevertheless, retains her girlish, feminine attributes—braiding and coiffing hair with bows, hats, and ribbons. Darger grounds her body as female through gendered hair codes, even though she displays male anatomy. The trans-gendering girl approaches, but, never achieves, neuter sexlessness.

**Sissies and Tomboys: Playing with Gender**

Darger extrudes *nuded* and trans-gendering children from the characters that populate advertisements, coloring books, and comic strips clothe. For example, a girl in a short jumper and roller skates, from a newspaper advertisement, translates onto carbon paper as a nearly nude, trans-gendering girl wearing only socks and shoes. (fig. 2.8) Darger pulls a pencil along the silhouette of her diminutive figure, imagining her soft, soon-to-develop form beneath the folds of cloth. Male genitalia complete her open-legged, active pose. Drawing for Darger becomes an act of penetrating scrutiny; he defrocks the girl in order to know what lies behind the surface of her exterior. The act of tracing—of creation and possession—allows Darger to begin at a girl’s essential form to unlock secrets of girlhood latent in images from popular culture. Drawing instigates a literal exposure, a frank reveal of the openness and ambiguous potential of girl bodies. By starting with a *nuded* form, Darger reclaims her “innocent” and “natural” origins. This process allows Darger to re-invent the girl by re-inscribing and re-combining her palimpsest body into a child of remarkable powers, beauty and wonder.

Rendering a nude body, Darger delineates biological sex predominately through hair style and hair length. Bouncy curls and flowing locks signify “female.” Short-cropped hair signifies “male.” Passages in the *Realms* narrative confirm this pattern in Darger’s visual art:

Indeed all these thoughts were rolling and seething in Gertrude’s breast, as she was pensively leaning her pretty head on her hand, watching Jennie Turner as she was adapting to her slender and pretty little form a little boy’s attire, in which it was deemed safest she should make her escape to the Christian army, under the Emperor.

‘Now for the needed sacrifice,’ said she as she stood before a looking glass, and shook down her silky abundance of golden curly hair. ‘I say Gertrude, it is a pity too,’ said she as she held up some of it almost wistfully. ‘Pity so much of it has got to come off.’
Gertrude smiled sadly, but did not answer. Jennie turned to the glass, and the scissors glittered as one long lock after another was detached so that she wore now short bobbed hair. ‘There now, that will do.’ she said, taking up a hair brush. ‘Now for a few fancy touches. There Gertrude, ain’t I a pretty young boy?’ she said turning around to Angelinia Aronburg, laughing and blushing at the same time. ‘Now I can be your loving boyfriend all the way.’

A masquerade of male gender implicitly informs this humorous and sweetly erotic passage. Declaring herself a pretty boy, Jennie admires her own transcendent beauty and blushes as she takes her performance further by flirting with Angelinia. A few paragraphs later, this same bunch discusses mannerisms and “sissy” boys:

And I must stamp and take long steps like a boy, and look saucy.” “Don’t exert yourself too much on that.” said Gertrude. “There is now and then sissy young boys who act like girls you know, and I think therefore it would be better and easier to act like a boy who is in the class of sissies.

Acting like a boy who acts like a girl, Jennie sets out on her escape. In Darger’s imaginary world, gender twists and turns on the child’s body as a tool for adaptation. The slippages of gender, comprising sissies and tomboys (Little Rebels), prove valuable, even, necessary for saving the day. Gender-play runs deeper than the façade of this cross-dressing vignette.

Peering into Darger’s journal, one would be aware “Jennie Turmer” comes to this discussion already an alluring, tomboyish persona. She stems from Darger’s adolescent experiences at the asylum with a similar fellow inmate Jennie Turner, who Darger “could be attracted to:”

When I learned from others of her disposition I kept away from her. I had my doubts for a while thinking they wanted her for themselves and lied to me. The truth was heaven help any man that when she grows up marry her. She was a wildcat and let you know it.

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19 Quoted in MacGregor, 526.
20 Ibid, 526.
Drifting back to another girl of significance giving “tit for tat,” who Darger also nicknames “wildcat”—Daisy Vivian—a momentum of associations brims and spills forth: from tomboyish, rambunctious Jennie Turmer to Daisy Vivian to Little Rebel to saucy Shirley Temple (with slingshot) to multiple anonymous darlings with silky golden curls, and on to more. Although independent and physical—traits often associated with tomboyishness—such fluid, little girl representations veer from gender deviance. According to cultural theorist Judith Halberstam, a tomboyish bent in preadolescent girlhood associates with “natural” desires for greater freedom and mobility enjoyed by boys. Tomboyish behavior becomes socially problematic when it extends into adolescence.\textsuperscript{22} In an interesting twist, the tomboyish charms of Darger’s preadolescent girls, like their visibly threatening trans-gendering bodies, remain within their girlish femininity. Expressing a curiosity about the boyish comportment of little girls (in particular, the real Jennie), Darger imagines his extraordinary child (the fantasy Jennie) resplendent with cross-identifications of girlhood and boyhood.

Accordingly hair prevails as a signifier of gender while genital differences carry less specificity in determining girls from boys. Darger marks genital regions with either female (a soft “v”) or male (a simple drawing of penis and testicles) traits. The few boys that do appear in the Realms maintain their short hairstyle and genital designations. Little girls, on the other hand, possess loose, mutable forms. Girl-creatures with both girlish hairstyles and male genitals never fully morph into boys. The gender of hair traits remain, even in this in-}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} Darger, History of my Life, 54.}  

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} Judith Halberstam, “Oh Bondage Up Yours!: Female Masculinity and the Tomboy” in Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children, eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 193-194.
between state. Captions accompanying trans-gendering images, like *At Sunbeam Creek...At Torrington*, continue to assert that we “Are with Little Girl Refugees Again…” While his written words do not speak of this obvious transformation, Darger’s verbose imagery indicates that these in-between creatures fluctuate between girl and girlish, exhibiting a sense of continuance—a becoming—without a final transformative endpoint.

The *Realms of the Unreal* procures vitality through flux, an excessive *metamorphosis* comprising perpetual changes, boundary crossings, and the surprise encounters of incongruous elements. Metamorphosis, according to literary historians is “the defining dynamic of certain kinds of stories—myths and wonder tales, fairy stories and magic realist novels.”

Mutable gender in Darger’s *Realms* evokes a similar, metamorphic narrative that guides shape-shifting child bodies in L. Frank Baum’s *Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904). Tip, the boy protagonist and orphan-adventurer, learns, to his chagrin, that he was born a girl—the Princess Ozma—and must reverse a malevolent witch’s spell to reclaim his Emerald City. Tip prefers instead to stay a boy so he can continue to roam the countryside with the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman. After much cajoling from companions, he acquiesces, only under the condition that he tries being a girl “for awhile, just to see how it seems...But if I don’t like being a girl you must promise to change me into a boy again.”

Owing a complete, first edition set of Baum’s famous Oz series, Darger emulates the magical sparkle of this otherworldly place within his own *Realms of the Unreal*. Darger, like Baum, never completely assigns specific sexual biology or gender to one child or the other. Gender and sex, rather, operate as enchantment, subject to playful morphologies suggesting

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supernatural power. Territories bearing names of Oz locations and comparisons between Oz and the Realms appear frequently throughout Darger’s narrative. The Realms of the Unreal openly converses with Oz, a kindred and miraculous place, where anything can happen and where possibilities extend and envelope the child’s body.

Darger’s exchanges with gender and sex limn his little ones in vivid, contradictory terms. Their changeling bodies pulsate throughout his landscapes, driving dynamic movement, repeating rhythms, and organic vitality in his visual narrative. Though childlike and playful, Darger’s gardens and expansive landscapes teeter between prelapsarian bliss and precocious sensuality. Their metamorphic cadence echoes that of Hieronymous Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, (c. 1505-1515) (fig. 4.7). The central panel of Bosch’s triptych illuminates a paradise of frolicking nudes, birds, hybrid creatures, mysterious orbs, and gargantuan fruits. Syncopations of energy, streaming through the all-over composition, force the viewer’s eye to slow-down and absorb a few small vignettes of activity at a time. Through Bosch’s other world of elicit play and pleasure, one witnesses transmutations of perpetuating life, devoid of aging, illness, violence or death. Additionally, life springs, not from copulation and birthing, but, from self-generating transformations—mutations, hatchings, doublings—cyclic life without need of sexual differentiations and union of male and female.25 Naked bodies resonate with sensuality as they twist and intertwine, crawl into objects, ride beasts, glide through pools, and consume bursting, succulent berries.

A similar collective effervescence teems from Darger’s world of secret childhood. In some examples, his protean kindergartens rival the corporeal theatrics, heterodoxy, and sensual desires reverberating in Bosch’s scene. (fig. 4.8) From the misty indigo of distant

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25 Warner cites mutations, hatchings and doublings as dynamic components of progenative, metamorphic imagery and text. See her correlation of Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights with themes of mythic Golden Age in Fantastic Metamorphoses, 43-62.
horizons to the freckles on a scarlet mushroom, Darger takes the viewer’s eye from the
infinite to the minute. Undulating lines follow the traced silhouettes of gigantic flowers
towering over trees, of nymphets floating upwards and unfurling bejeweled butterfly wings,
and of nuded girls sprouting penises and ram-like horns. While one studies these landscapes,
one is also under study. Girls in Darger’s world, like the denizens of Bosch’s, engage the
viewer’s eyes. Their blank stares conflate with myriad dot patterns and floral petal
arrangements, cluttering the surface with small, intense, all-seeing holes.

Endless visual energy threatens to exhaust the viewer, yet, never succeeds. Darger
mesmerizes with the intensity of immediate delights, while hinting at the violence yet to
come. As Bosch frames his garden within the narrative of Eden and hellish sins, Darger too,
juxtaposes paradise with brutality. The same little bodies, now, bubbling forth in blissful
harmony, disperse and dismember in other massacre and martyrdom imagery. Ambiguous,
religious morality and dogma loiter in these spaces. Nature’s power, latent in symbolic
flowers or the tempestuous storm-cloud on the horizon alludes, as well, to an omnipotent and
fickle godhead.

Within his pleasure-garden, Darger fends off death with generation. He wields the
contradictory and reciprocating energies of the Vivian Girl, an extraordinary creature who
seemingly multiplies into every girl with yearning compliance. Her repeating form
unceasingly pulses and strengthens with progenerative uniformity, re-sounding a call of
vivam! with every polka-dot, golden ringlet, and gleaming, blue eye. The little girl’s
precocious (knowing) body exists in an innocence of eternal childhood. She dies a child and
resurrects as one. As little girls “go to Jesus and Mama” or, like Darger’s Little Eva,
politely deny their demise, death holds no power, presenting as a transitory state and not as
an end. Death repeats and cycles, turning and deferring to generation. Death gives birth to
the Vivian (born from death was I), the little redeemer, Darger’s Christian trope.

As Darger reminds us; girls are braver than boys, they physically dominate and
overpopulate the Realms. Their bodies migrate from the romantic portrayals of the praying
Samuels in flowing hair and nightgown, from the pouting “Miss Virgie’s” aiming her
slingshot, and from the bathtub Adonis’ display of perfect, sexless childhood. Irrepressible
girls, vivid and palpable through their omnipresent, multiplying, and morphing bodies,
represent a new world order in Darger’s Realms. The liminality of the girl’s body, her state
of flux, and her fecundity effectively embody the powerful nature of the garden in which she
revels. Abundantly erotic and innocent, the Vivian Girl carries the life, vitality, and flux of
Darger’s unreality.

Open (Legs, Possibilities)

Regardless of their genital state, all of Darger’s little girls share the ability to
challenge the assumption of a decorous asexuality in their quotidian, bourgeois past.
Originally traced from comic strips or newspaper ads, these children emerge from
representations of disavowing sexuality into Darger’s corporeal world of open-end
possibilities. Consider a languorous child taking center stage in At Jennie Richee. Storm
Continues. Lightning Strikes Shelter but no one is injured. (fig. 4.9) Akin to hundreds of
nudes throughout the history of art, this mini-odalisque lies on elbow and hip, tipping her
body up and frontal for ease of viewing. A floral fan, with multiple pansies comprising an
overall bloom, teasingly covers her (her?) genital region. Looking away, she (she?) exudes
passiveness, an orientalizing pleasure-object ripe for visual consumption. A flat, nondescript
chest and curling ram’s horns springing from her brunette locks attempt to convolute a specific reading of gender while her available body speaks the codes of female objectification. This exotic creature, a familiar representation of sexuality rests at one end of Darger’s spectrum of nuanced “girls;” the trans-gendering little one stands (and sprints) to the other.

Although nuanced, this trans-gendering, queer girl-in-motion does not assimilate quietly into art history’s conventional nude. Here, the term “queer” follows the same spirit as L. Frank Baum’s use in his Oz collection, as something alluringly odd, strange, and arousing interest—an unstable state of being embodying a sense of adventure. “Queer” also employs a spirit of resistance, transgression, and creativity. Darger’s queering of the girl body works within the dimensions theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick elucidates:

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.

Queering the girl (via male member), Darger de-familiarizes her body, drawing one’s eyes from her girlish locks to boyish sex. Compacting signs of both sexes, this hermaphrodite appears superabundant—some sort of totality encompassing both sexes, although, still, girlish. Oddly, while looking “full,” she also feels empty. Her form ebbs with too much gender and sexuality and flows with feminine characteristics and child-like innocence.

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26 For example, in The Marvelous Land of Oz, Tip sprinkles magic, life-giving dust onto the awkward-looking Saw-Horse, a “queer animal” with a log-body and stiff, branch legs. Baum, 59.

Confusing and bewitching, her body repels a hetero-normative gaze, yet, beckons with all sorts of unknown indulgences and pleasures.28

The girls shooting guns and running throughout Untitled (battle scene during lightning storm. Naked children with rifles) (fig. 1.5) accentuate their gangly forms through wide-leg stances and long arms extending, pumping, or bracing from the recoil of their guns. Their stark, white bodies appear vacant and as empty as the puffs of smoke emitting from rifle barrels. A thinly traced line cuts and defines each one. With the exception of varying hairstyles and colors, only simple facial features, tiny belly button circles, and occasional nipple-dots keep the bodies from being white silhouettes.

Unlike the mini-odalisque, these girls refuse to lie down. Only the dead and wounded assume reclining positions. These nuded ones literally make their stand against an unknown foe, acting out the “bravery of their sex” on the battlefield. Although most appear to be hermaphrodites, girlish characteristics prevail. Darger takes great care to delineate braids, bows, hats, and bobs crowning each child. Girls in full clothing also populate the scene. A handful in short skirts run. One, at the far left near three conspicuous, gigantic daisies, raises and fires a rifle.

Girls, for the most part, repeat a similar active, take-charge persona throughout Darger’s imagery. Marrying boy-sex parts with their boyish actions, trans-gendering girls eschew social constructs of their sex as meek and mild. Their bodies become a site of resistance and potential, testing the boundaries of polite girl culture. In Breaking Jail second

28 These markers of vacancy and emptiness signify “do not have” qualities in children according to James Kincaid. As negative inversions of adults, children possess innocence, a vacant and blank quality, designating their lack of (adult) sexuality. As a result “children are defined and longed for, according to what they do not have.” Kincaid, “Producing Erotic Children,” in The Children’s Culture Reader, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 247. Darger’s children take an unexpected turn, queerly. They simultaneously “have” and “do not have” markers of innocence and sexuality.
time wounding and killing guards freeing 68 naked child prisoners (fig. 4.10), the trans-gendering girl reads as both a killing machine and precocious child, refusing to keep her legs together.\textsuperscript{29} Shedding their girlish ways but not their long, blonde locks, they fearlessly display their heroic, nude bodies. A tight group, bearing arms, moves as a single unit—legs overlapping neighboring legs, penises dangling, hands waving in front of other’s faces, bodies fanning left and right to cover both halves of the scene. Raising rifles and assuming a wide-leg stance exposing their male genitalia, these jail-breakers simultaneously expand their \textit{littleness} in size while unfixing their gender. Girls forcefully take what they want, without permission and in direct conflict with male, traditionally “authoritative” figures (soldiers, academics wearing mortar boards). They act, refusing to be acted upon.

Escapees in the background of this jail-break scene jump from a lilac-color precipice to the safety of their gun-toting compatriots. Arms, legs, hair braids, and penises rise up from the sheer force of their descent in a rushing chorus of energy. A crackling strike of lightning above and slightly behind them, mimics the jagged pattern of their fall. Dangerously near the escapees, this thunderbolt pulses in tune with the dynamism of the jumping/morphing girls. Both signify unpredictable forces of nature.

Signs of self-possession do not always prevail in girl imagery. Like all else in the Realms of the Unreal, no singular rule or code regulates representation. \textit{At Jennie Richee. Are rescued by Evans and his soldiers, after a desperate fight.} (fig. 4.11) features a specific trans-gendering motif in Darger’s repertoire that sharply contrasts the active, defiant child.

\textsuperscript{29} Social decorum (and mothers) demand that girls keep their legs together. The wide-spread, decidedly male stance of trans-gendering girls evokes the tale of Marie-Germaine (see pages164-165). According to Renaissance scholar, Michel de Montaigne, young girls in the French town of Vitry-le-Francois sang a particular song warning others not to stretch their legs too far or they will become male like Marie. See Thomas Laqueur, \textit{Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 126-129.
This girl-with-pail stands upright, frontally displaying her *nuded* form and male genitalia. Sometimes placing a finger to her mouth, or, as she does here, tucking her arm behind her back, this recurring child-motif in Darger’s art subtly projects her body forward towards the viewer. With flat-chest and without any indication of secondary sex characteristics, she appears to be all “tummy.” Her defining cuteness, a coy plea for attention, manifests in her upturning eyes and tucked-in chin.

The sense of innocence radiating from her little body morphs into growing sexuality as men in this scene respond to her body language with reciprocating gazes and smiles. A shirtless man, a soldier, leans into her space and rests his upright rifle near her head. His right leg extends and gently touches her ankle. The slight opening of his mouth and his relaxing posture, orienting towards hers, signals an ease and engagement between them. Another soldier passes by and watches this couple’s affectionate exchange.

The scene continues to shift through sexual innuendo. One begins to notice a contrast between the soft, unformed chest of the girl and the broad, muscled physique of the soldier. He and other soldiers firmly grip and hold their rifles angling from areas between their legs. Phallic, poised guns suggest sexual prowess. The random soldier passing by, now, punctuates a growing erotic charge, becoming a surrogate for the viewer’s gaze. Even though the caption indicates “Christian love”—the attentive veneration of girl slaves by Christian soldiers—one becomes acutely aware of the scene’s contradictions and dangerous, potentially puerile, production. Should one believe that Christian virtue tames and desexualizes these characters? The coupling and cavorting of nude, cross-sexed or ambiguously-sexed (one child with no genitals in view) “girls” with full-dress and shirtless, adult men leave the viewer on a precarious edge. Perception flirts with this coupling of adult
male and girl leaving the viewer to find himself/herself on a threshold, containing fantasy by
eulogizing the girl-slave and emasculating the soldiers, or, courting socially taboo
possibilities.

Projecting vulnerability, an already erotic state, this particular girl-with-pail, a non-
runner, deviates from other running girls suggesting agency. Darger, instead, conventionally
objectifies her. She willingly displays herself for the pleasure of other characters and for that
of the viewer’s. Sexless from the “tummy” up with simultaneous markings of sex from the
tummy down, she invites all eyes to scrutinize her strange, sensual, and still form. The
whimsical pail that she holds doubles as a signifier of her playful nature and her toil as slave.
When holding a finger to her mouth (the other common gesture of the girl-with-pail type),
she magnifies an even greater sense of coy vulnerability. Inert, she plays the willing victim
in Darger’s visual repertoire.

The strange carnalities of Darger’s girls evoke the “one-sex model” dominating
anatomical thought prior to the eighteenth century. In Making Sex, Thomas Laqueur explains
that epistemological discourse stemmed from one archetypal body—male: “Woman was
understood as man inverted: the uterus was the female scrotum, the ovaries were testicles, the
vulva was a foreskin, and the vagina was a penis.”

Corporeal flux and gender resulted
from production and retention of bodily heat, a “vital heat” regulating biological and social
associations with male/hot (active) and female/cold (passive) properties.

Ambroise Paré, a sixteenth-century physician and master of teratology, illustrates this
one-sex principal in the tale of Marie-Germaine. While jumping across a ditch in pursuit of
runaway pigs, Marie experienced a physiological transformation. Her energetic action raised
her internal temperature causing her vagina to descend and form into a penis. Marie later

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30 Laqueur, 236.
grew a beard and lived her life as a man, Germaine. Paré’s tale and the one-sex model foreground a larger conceptual trajectory of Western thought equating the “nature” of men with action and women with passivity. This “heated” logic encompassed a variety of biological functions, one specifically applied to menstruation and the transition from girlhood to womanhood. According to one-sex thought, women purged blood because their cold bodies produced a surplus of the nutriment (likewise, milk). Men, on the other hand, being “hotter,” burned off such substances in greater quantities than women and, thus, did not menstruate.

Hierarchal binaries of male/female and active/passive, under the principle of vital heat, flourished throughout the Medieval era and into the Renaissance, informing hagiographic portrayals of socially-independent, female saints. “Hot” virile women (the virago fortis/strong virgin) of Catholic legend boldly transgressed gender boundaries, embodying power and prestige traditionally in reserve for men. Darger’s running/morphing child draws from the heritage of the virago fortis, the defiant woman bearing male characteristics of active heat, vitality, and corporeal theatrics. This strong female elides within the playful metamorphosis of somatic boundaries between boys and girls in Darger’s art. However, unlike phallic women within the frame of the one-sex model, Darger’s girls rebuke the notion of being inversions of males, less perfect boys. Trans-gendering girls never fully conform to the signs of male sex. They visually morph into a girlish creature, something entangling girl and boy, yet, privileging the girl.

**Divine Ambiguity**

Medieval scholar, Margaret Miles turns the figurative phrase, “becoming male” in her critical inquiry into hagiographic narrative and the female body. Miles argues that particular
female saints performed “male-ness” by rebuking social and biological determinations of roles—practicing forms of asceticism (that, for women, included maintenance of chastity and virginity), estranging themselves from patriarchal figures and domesticity, and exhibiting spiritual fortitude. Male hagiographers described these “virile” women as “more like men than nature would seem to allow.” Contradictory liminalities of gender, not only thrive within these tales of Christian saints, but, also, inform ways in which Catholics thought, and continue to think, about the power of the divine. Those female saints, dear to Darger (Joan of Arc, and by extension, The Little Flower of Christ) and one with etymological ties to the Vivians (Vivia Perpetua) serve as models within this genre of “becoming male.” Their stories pattern those of numerous female martyrs, renouncing their physicality and sexuality, resulting in either a life of asceticism or martyrdom. Joan of Arc’s and Vivia Perpetua’s acts, however, move beyond performances of bravery and self-abnegation into androgynous arenas of cross-dressing and trans-gendering epiphanies, respectively. Their significant stories destabilize the categories of gender and orient, not necessarily towards the goal of becoming male, but, to that of transcending their sex and earthly existence—a divine androgyny explicit within the cult of the virgo fortis, or “strong virgin.” Darger embraces this gender-bending lineage of St. Joan and St. Perpetua, exploiting their venerated, authoritative virility in order to fabricate his own holy and simultaneously, erotically

31 See Introduction to Part Two of Margaret R. Miles, Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 81-84.

32 Miles, 55.

33 Other examples from this “male” genre include: Thecla, a beautiful noblewoman who repudiates her engagement to retain her virginity, alienates her family, and follows the Apostle Paul. Thecla cut her hair and wore men’s clothes in order to travel freely and avoid rape. (Apocryphal literature, Acts of Paul and Thecla written in Asia Minor, circa 195 CE); Pelagia, who masqueraded as a man and joined a monastery (later discovered and killed for her transgression); and the fictitious Saint Uncumber, popular in the Roman Catholic Church from the 15th century through the liturgical reform of 1969. For an account of Thecla’s acts see Karen A. Winstead, Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 7-8.
charging and socially transgressive Vivian. Through powerful and available models of the 
virago fortis, Darger dimensionally queers the Vivian articulating her little girl body as a 
powerful site of resistance and giving her a fire all her own.

Unpacking Darger’s trans-gendering “Vivian” returns this discussion to the 
declarative vivam (I shall live!) and the derivative, teleological nomen (Vivia of the female 
saint and patron of orphaned children and mothers) and Vivia Perpetua. As hagiography 
attests, the life of Vivia Perpetua demanded nothing less than total surrender of mind and 
body to the Christian cause. Her Acts, believed by scholars to be written in her own voice 
and that of another male, work to transcend the vulnerability and social stigma of her body, 
identifying with a heroic athleticism and spiritual integrity of “male-ness.” Her trans-
gendering epiphany, sanctified as a vision, allows Perpetua’s image to play both sides of 
gender expectations, slipping back and forth between cultural notions governing male and 
female bodies. Her transformative body projects ambiguous, “female” messages vacillating 
between innocence, sin, lust, familial bonds, and physical weakness and projects associations 
with the male body—spiritual discipline, physical control, religious agency, and athletic 
victory.34

Perpetua’s Acts begin with her conversion to Christianity and subsequent 
incarceration by the Romans in Carthage (1 AD). Ignoring her father’s pleas to renounce 
her beliefs and to resume her motherly duty (to reunite herself and her nursing child with her 
pagan family), Perpetua prays for liberation from both. Divinity grants her petition. 
Unencumbered by family or male domination, Perpetua “becomes male” as an active, 
religious agent, experiencing visions and an increasing drive to sacrifice earthly ties. The 
night before her martyrdom, she dreams of the martyr’s arena in which she strips in

34 Miles, xii.
preparation for contest against an Egyptian. Awestruck by her transformation into a muscular body, her gaze drops to her genital region and confirms her systemic manhood.35 Perpetua literally saw herself as male. “Becoming male,” Miles posits was the only way in which Perpetua could envision herself “possessing the stamina, control, and strength necessary for martyrdom.”36 This brief but potent male adaptation metaphorically captures Perpetua’s release from social conformity and from biological roles as mother and wife.

Perpetua demonstrates her Christ-like fortitude within the arena the following day after her trans-gendering vision. Bravely encountering wild beasts and gladiators in the coliseum, she withstands the goring of a “mad heifer.” Unwilling to accept denial of her martyrdom’s glory, Perpetua dramatically concludes her own life (retaining agency up until the point of her death) by guiding the sword of a hesitant gladiator to her own throat. Caught up in the rapture of her perseverance and corporeal duty, she shouts, “I am a Christian, and I follow the authority of my name, that I may be perpetual (ut sim perpetua)”37 Vivia Perpetua delivers the imperious, somatic thrust of her victory in this linguistic moment.38

35 Her vision alludes to the common practice of men stripping in preparation for athletic contests against beasts and gladiators. Persecutors stripped women to humiliate them before crowds and to capitalize on the spectacle of their bodies. Nakedness in religious doctrine also metaphorically disassociated men from society. Stripping off one’s clothing equated to stripping oneself of possessions and familial ties. Legends of female saints titillate readers by stripping the female martyr multiple times and conversely finding miraculous ways to cover them. Thecla, for example, was stripped by persecutors to confirm her female sex. Clouds of fire covered her pious, virginal body.

36 Miles, xii.

37 Miles, 60.

38 Martyrdom rejects the role of the victim. To die is to win. Even though Perpetua realizes she will stand before ferocious beasts in the coliseum, she envisions the confrontation as facing evil, and although dying, she will win. “It would not be with wild animals I would fight, but with the devil, but I knew I would win the victory.” Quoted in Judith Perkins, The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era (New York: Routledge, 1995) 32. Suffering equates to power, but unlike other female martyrs
Perpetua’s body, even though representing “male” heroism, wavered under the pen of her male hagiographer. His version dwells on the vulnerability of her body, objectifying her as naked and defenseless before the eyes of spectators.39 In his rendition, the sight of Perpetua’s delicate frame horrifies the crowd prompting her persecutors to provide her with a tunic. Later, after a “mad heifer” gores her and throws her down, Perpetua covers her thighs with that same tunic, “thinking more of her modesty than of her pain.”40 A formulaic humility common in tales of female saints prevails in the male account; Perpetua’s version, instead, underscores her spiritual journey.

The power of Vivia Perpetua’s name, her trans-gendering vision signifying perseverance and strength, and her legendary status as a conquering Christ-like figure, sets a divine, fantastic precedent for Darger’s Vivian Girls. Perpetua’s legend, like the story of the Vivians, challenges the “normative” way in which society views the relationship between sex and gender. Perpetua prepares a foundation for the Vivian, a point of departure already venerable, allowing Darger to further experiment with and discover the possibilities of gender-bending as a state of reaching oneness with Christ.

**Virago Fortis: Warrior Maiden**

By the time Darger alludes to the Vivians’ driving spirit as akin to that of the “maid of Orleans” and inserts Joan of Arc’s holy card into his imagery, Jeanne la Pucelle’s legend that achieve victory through death, the Vivians live through their trials. Little girls that do die, as Darger reveals in his imagery, ascend apotheosis-style into heaven.


40 Miles, 61.
has already reached the Catholic pinnacle of sainthood. Her upwardly mobile image additionally reaches another elevation as secular spokesperson for the U.S. government’s World War I effort. (fig. 4.12) Imploring women to “save your country” by purchasing stamps, a feminine Joan in full-armor raises her sword and her eyes towards heaven. This American poster internalizes and exploits Joan’s visage, a maiden warrior, as an allegorical stream of hope, unity, restoration, and victory. Virginal innocence presents as a position of strength, a purity fighting contamination. Ironically, the image of Joan asks women to fight not as she did—in a socially transgressive manner—but, instead, within the bounds of acceptable womanhood, as consumers.

Darger’s veneration of St. Joan as an emblem of female virtue embraces abstract elements of her legend, but, more emphatically plays with particulars of her gender ambiguity and reputation as a virago fortis, or warrior maiden of the spiritual realm. Specific female aspects of St. Joan’s martyrdom manifest in her virginity and defense of her

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41 The Catholic Church canonizes Joan of Arc in 1920. Darger writes the Realms of the Unreal between 1911 and 1939. He begins Realms’ images after his move to 851 Webster in 1932.

42 According to cultural historian Ann Bleigh Powers, a Joan of Arc “vogue” flourished in America between 1894 until 1929. Periodicals and theatrical productions capitalized on America’s growing interest in the girl saint. Many equated St. Joan’s attempts (500 years prior) to drive the enemy from French soil with the patriotism of American soldiers in France during World War I. The New York Herald Tribune wrote that “it was an outstanding fact of our campaign in the Great War that Joan of Arc was almost as much the heroine of the doughboy as of the poilu.” Ann Bleigh Powers, “The Joan of Arc Vogue in America, 1894-1929” in American Society for the Legion of Honor, New York 49.3 (1978):177-192.

43 In this poster, Joan illustrates an American feminine ideal. Youthful, buxom, small-waisted, and wearing make-up, she sheds the boyish mannerisms, short-cropped hairstyle, and prepubescent look commonly associated with her image.

44 St. Joan enters an American discourse conflating childhood with religious virtue and patriotism decades before this poster. Mark Twain valorizes “little Joan” in his 1895 work of fiction, Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc. Joan’s image also circulates around the globe as an androgynous youth in the popular children’s book, Joan of Arc, (1896, in French, 1918 translated into English) illustrated by Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel.
This, too, aligns her with a virginal ideal flourishing under the influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary, elevating St. Joan’s status among women. Her greatness, however, hinges upon extraordinary acts of bravery and a legendary body resistant to age and sexual differentiation. The legend of Joan of Arc asserts an incongruous virile female-ness ruled by an excessive spiritual conviction rivaling that of Christ. She “transcends the limits of her sex” while boldly asserting that fortitude and passion are not the exclusive properties of men.

Like the Vivians, Joan of Arc remained little throughout her short, intense life. Her saintly acts span a six-year period from age thirteen (when she first heard voices) until her death at the stake at nineteen. Although her age and chosen name (pucelle) propel the maiden into womanhood, her legend safeguards her innocent, childlike persona. Hagiographies, especially those written in the nineteenth century, conflate St. Joan’s life with the intertwining cults of the child and of the child Jesus, emphasizing her humble, bucolic origins as a shepherdess. Writers additionally cite reports of St. Joan’s amenorrhea to confer her virginal state of prepubescence and holiness. French historian Jules Michelet concurs in 1844 that, “She had, body and soul, the divine gift of remaining childlike. She grew up, she became strong and beautiful, but she never knew the physical miseries of womankind.”

Coupling this sustaining childhood with practices of transvestism (on and off the battlefield) with extraordinary bravery and with a lifestyle devoid of conventional gendered obligations,

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45 Virginity as an ascetic practice and narrative trope diffused male fears about women’s flesh. Acta, mostly written by male hagiographers, equate virginity with cleanliness akin to the state of Baptism and that of prelapsarian Eve.

46 In the eyes of the Catholic Church, a virginal life allowed women to circumvent some of the sins of the Fall of women and therefore, was considered holy. A virgin also symbolized wholeness akin to the holy, intact physicality post partum of the Virgin Mary. See Marina Warner, “Virgins and Martyrs” in Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) 68-78 for a discussion of virginity, ascetic renunciation, and the myth of the Virgin Mary.

47 Warner, Joan of Arc, 19.
St. Joan’s image swirls within a conundrum. She is female, but she is not “woman” in social standing or physiological maturity. She dons male clothing and exudes spiritual passion, strength, and vigor—qualities associated with men. She embodies an innocent child, a holy (virginal) woman, and a fortitude approaching that of Christ. Historian Marina Warner eloquently describes Joan of Arc’s image as “sexlessness….The state of suspension, of nondifferentiation, achieved by a transvestite girl…confirmed by the Christian tradition as holy.”

However, beneath this layer of holiness (and re-invention by the Catholic Church over centuries), lies the offending body of a girl who threatened to challenge the social prescriptions and boundaries of gender. With her sentencing to death as a heretic, by burning at the stake, St. Joan received the same lethal punishment in reserve for witches and lesbians or “tribades.” Medieval society deemed tribadism as “naturally” deviant due to the queering of gender dominance—a woman assuming a “male” sexual role with another woman. Guilty of passion, active sexual participation, and in some cases, cross-dressing and/or bearing a “female” penis, these social heretics suffered the same fate as Joan of Arc.

Although most accounts of St. Joan’s trial relate her verdict of heresy to the dubious origins of her miraculous voices and to larger, international politics involving the Hundred Years War, Warner reminds us that St. Joan’s inquisition steadily probed the manifestations of her “male” attire. The verdict, in part, demanded justice for St. Joan’s social transgressions, finding her guilty of possessing the audacity to challenge the cultural constraints of

48 Ibid., 157.
49 Women tried and convicted for sodomy, according to Laqueur, were punished not for sexual acts but for social performances (including dressing) above their station. The real concern became one of gender (not of sexuality) and female encroachment upon male entitlement. Laqueur notes that actual physiological difference was often determined by judges and physicians who mistakenly described an enlarged clitoris as a “female penis.” See Laqueur, 136-138.
her sex. The sexual ambiguity that elevated her status among Catholics, ironically, twisted into a confirmation of degenerate evil during the course of her indictment. Specifics of Joan of Arc’s fiery death suggest that the allure of (and fear of) her uncertain gender prevailed beyond her trial. An anonymous account records her death not as a spectacle of Christ-like suffering but as a violent interrogation of her ambiguous body:

*She was soon dead and her clothes all burned. Then the fire was raked back, and her naked body shown to all the people and all the secrets that could or should belong to a woman, to take away any doubts from people’s minds. When they had stared long enough at her dead body bound to the stake, the executioner got a big fire going again round her poor carcass, which was soon burned, both flesh and bone reduced to ashes.*

Rouen authorities chose not to strip Joan of Arc before burning her body. Along with purging her profane form, did her executioners test her mutable one-sex corporeality with intense heat, tempting a magical transformation? Bystanders expecting to see physical indications of her “male-ness,” instead witnessed a “poor carcass”—the blatant display of her “womanly secrets” degrading her divinity to counterfeit status.

Executioners attested to finding her heart, intact and engorged with blood, within the ashes. Symbolic of her integrity and devotion to God, this unconsumed heart, already pure, thus, impervious to purgation at the stake, retained the primary nutriment associated with vital heat. Joan of Arc’s disembodied heart brimming with hot virility continues the phallic narrative of the *virago fortis*. Refusing finality, this remnant of body and soul performs a resurrection, decidedly more spiritual than corporeal a familiar sacrificial logic akin to that of the risen and triumphant Christ.

Darger wields this ablaze and intact sacred heart burning with divine *eros* in a manner familiar with and congenial to messages of suffering and victory inherent in Christology and Saint Joan’s legend. Delivering this motif conventionally as a straight-forward “Sacred heart of Jesus” icon and as the floating, medical illustration in Untitled (Heart of Jesus), the artist repeatedly renders this magical, substantiated heart, alive and alight, in conjunction with the spiritual fortitude of humble, heroic girlhood. Burning hearts, for example, embolden the standards for both Christian armies in *the Realms*—imaginary Abbieannia and Angelina (fig. 4.13). Abbieannia portrays its everlasting spirit as a multi-pierced heart, afflicted by a large sword and crown of thorns. Blood profusely drips from the heart’s base while flames rise and flank a glowing red cross at its crown. Angelinia’s standard overlays a traditional Sacred Heart of Jesus icon onto the stars and stripes of the United States. In this particular flag, Darger ambitiously embraces two potent symbols, conflating patriotism with Christian fervor.

The confluence of inflamed-heart symbolism with that of Darger’s new girl order flows beyond these flags and seeps into narrative works. Within the scene of *At Angelinia Agatha. Jennie in vain offers her sight lost in an accident for the conversion of John Manley her worst enemy*, (fig. 3.12) holy cards of St. Thérèse (the Little Flower of Christ) and Sacred Heart of Jesus hang as large paintings in the background. Both holy faces gaze out at the viewer. Their bodies orient towards each other, silently acknowledging their pendant relationship. Pulling open his tunic, Christ reveals a deep cavity in his breast, ablaze with the glow of his flaming heart. His intimate gesture offers the locus of both his love and suffering—a symbolic space through which St. Thérèse and, by extension, the pious Vivians may access and partake at His Eucharistic table. The Sacred Heart motif operates here to
compress the liturgical vocabulary of body given and blood shed, replenishing sacrificial streams and divine love flowing throughout this image.

A triangular visual path connecting the Little Flower to her beloved Christ, to the Vivians, and, then, back, establishes the little girls within a symbolic order of sacrifice and faith. Gone are St. Thérèse’s childish metaphors of daisies and sunshine. Instead, one finds a context for her inflamed-heart pairing within her late writings—an erotic delivery of religiosity aligning with sadomasochistic fantasy:

Martyrdom was the dream of my youth, and this dream has grown in the sheltered world of Carmel ... A single form of martyrdom would never be enough for me, I should want to experience them all. I should want to be scourged and crucified as you were; to be flayed alive like St. Bartholomew, to be dipped in boiling oil like St. John ... offering my neck to the executioner like St. Agnes and St. Cecily, and, like my favourite (sic) Joan of Arc, whispering your name as I was tied to the stake.\(^{51}\)

One can almost hear a breathless, frustrating ache in the Little Flower’s enumeration of painful deaths, none of which seem to satisfy her longing for martyred glory. The drifting of her rhetoric, skipping from one gruesome, somatic fantasy to the next, evokes a similar sexual fascination with violence common in female hagiographies. She savors each manifestation of corporeal torture, surrendering her body over and over, ending with her favorite, a maiden, like herself, Joan of Arc. Choosing the warrior maiden above all other martyrs, the Little Flower appears to live her late years vicariously through St. Joan’s visage. Shortly after the Catholic Church declares Joan of Arc venerable in 1894, the Little Flower “adopts” St. Joan as her spiritual mentor, “feeling the desire and courage to imitate her.”\(^{52}\)

She wrote and performed the lead role in two dramas detailing the maiden’s life: *The Mission*

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\(^{51}\) Furlong, 95.

\(^{52}\) In an 1897 letter to Brother Abbé Bellière, St. Thérèse compares herself to St. Joan stating that she “dreamt in my childhood of fighting on the fields of battle ... it seemed the Lord destined me, too, for great things.” See Frohlich, 105.
of Joan of Arc (1894) and Joan of Arc Accomplishes her Mission (1895). Biographers note that both plays feel transparently autobiographical, emphasizing commonalities between Joan of Arc’s life and that of the Little Flower’s: their poverty, demure nature, willingness to leave home and family, and their virginal purity. In this passage, St. Michael’s voice speaks:

But to God alone belongs all the glory,
To prove it He arms a mere child,
And this child, this young warrioress
Is not the descendant of a rich and valiant king –
She is nothing but a poor shepherdess.
But God calls her: All-powerful,
He wishes to give to a timid virgin
A heart of fire, the soul of a warrior;
Then he will crown her pure and ingenuous head
With lilies and laurels.\(^{53}\)

Later, in the final act, St. Thérèse, dressing as Joan of Arc, superimposes herself against an image of Christ’s crucifixion. St. Michael concludes:

Daughter of God, during your life
You resembled your spouse Jesus\(^{54}\)

Dying of tuberculosis, St. Thérèse never experienced heroic agency or the ecstatic agonies of martyrdom. Her life of self-abnegation revolved around her chastity and her duty to a convent, where she awaited future calling as Bride to the Lamb. In At Angelinnia Agatha. Darger’s juxtaposition of St. Thérèse and the Vivians conveys a sense of latency and longing pertinent to the Little Flower’s life. The caption tells of Jennie Vivian yearning to offer “her sight lost in an accident for the conversion of John Manley her worst enemy…,”—an altruistic wish (not an act) of bodily martyrdom.

\(^{53}\) Frohlich, 92.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 97.
Looking again at this icon of the beckoning Christ, exposing the burning organ in his chest, one imagines his “mate,” St. Thérèse, also, as a heating vessel filling with desire. Her words continue to stoke their impending union:

Jesus is really powerful enough to keep the fire going by Himself. However, He is satisfied when He sees us put a little fuel on it. This attentiveness pleases Jesus, and then He throws on the fire a lot of wood … I want at least to tell Him frequently that I love Him; this is not difficult, and it keeps the fire going.\(^{55}\)

Eventually, she arouses her soul into conflagration:\(^{56}\)

In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I OFFER MYSELF AS A VICTIM OF HOLOCAUST TO YOUR MERCIFUL LOVE, asking You to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of infinite tenderness shut up within You to overflow into my soul, and that thus I may become a martyr of Your Love, O my God!\(^{57}\)

Her image pairs with Christ as a pendant, a royal couple, signifying not only divinity, but, also, a potential wholeness and perfection of humanity. Darger places the Little Flower where she has always aspired to be—within Jesus’ glances, as his bride in divine marriage.\(^{58}\)

St. Joan’s image, in another work by Darger, performs a similar symbolic dance, in accordance with a pendant Christ (crucified) and the selfless actions of Vivian Girls. In *At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck. The result after Violet saves a priest and his sacred monstrance from*  

\[^{55}\text{Ibid.}, 75-76.\]

\[^{56}\text{In both religious and secular contexts, virgins burn with divine }\text{eros. For example, in John D. Bryant’s Pauline Seward (1847) the protagonist, awaiting Communion, hears a hymn in her mind, “O King of love, they blessed fire / Does such sweet flames excite, / That first it raises the desire, / Then fills it with delight.” After receiving the Eucharist, Pauline prays to God to “fire my soul with infinite desire.” Chicagovan, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917) felt “on fire from her constant union with the divine Heart.” For these and more examples see Peter Gardella, Innocent Ecstasy: How Christianity gave America an ethic of Sexual Pleasure (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).}\]

\[^{57}\text{Quoted from St. Thérèse’s “Act of Oblation to Merciful Love” (1895), Frohlich, 24.}\]

\[^{58}\text{The Little Flower’s performs the transformation from virgin to bride via eschatological precedent of the Virgin Mary’s ascension into heaven and placement at Christ’s side as his Queen. See Jocelyn Wogan-Browne “Chaste Bodies: Frames of Reference” in Framing Medieval Bodies, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) 24-42.}\]
being shot (detail) (fig. 4.14), St. Joan’s visage, like St. Thérèse’s, manifests as a large painting. Instead of displaying her role as maiden warrior carrying her standard or leading troops into battle, she kneels and prays. A halo surrounds her head. Her weaponry either leans against her body or rests on the ground. Her magnificent horse lingers behind her, turning to witness St. Joan’s raised arms and penitent face. She pauses to pray before entering battle, evoking and re-enacting Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Within this interior, Darger places Joan-in-prayer next to a sculpture of a crucified Christ, thus, staging another theatrical coupling—a daughter of God, resembling her spouse Jesus.59

In the far right corner, a blonde Vivian Girl also falls to her knees and prays. Her gaze extends to the sacrificial pair of Christ and St. Joan. Next to this praying girl lies Violet Vivian, recuperating from a gun-shot wound. Again, Darger pulls a symbolic thread through this image, reading from left to right: Christ on the cross, St. Joan, and bleeding Violet. Violet, in her bodily sacrifice, also resembles Jesus.

These two images employing St. Joan and St. Thérèse, overlay heroism (active saint) and patience/yearning (latent saint), rendering a familial kinship exponentially expanding with iconic and cross-gendering declarations of Christ-like strength. St. Thérèse’s image denotes “martyrdom” as an unfulfilled desire confessing through a chain of interchangeable roles as Joan of Arc, daughter of God, and spouse of Jesus. She embodies the archetypal female role, waiting for service within her hortus conclusis. St. Joan, on the other hand, calls the Vivians to perform virile transgressions of their female sex. She is Christ-like through actions and outer presence; her “virile” image merges with Christ, achieving oneness with divinity by expressing agency. In this sense, St. Joan’s example does more than

59 The Little Flower’s description of St. Joan. See page 176.
contextualize Darger’s little girls, St. Joan legitimizes their role as sacred gender-benders. The Vivians (and, other girls), like St. Joan, become active, phallic females blurring gender and commanding reverence. They wield a divine privileged body, marked as a recipient of grace, free from sin, and free from social constraints.

The Vivian Girl’s male-sexed body—a disfigurement—links with a heritage of female saints assuming male features. Hagiographies describing physical transformation or male disguise center around the narrative of chastity. St. Wilgefortis (a particular saint whose name also denotes the *virago fortis* category\(^{60}\)), St. Paula of Avila, and St. Galla of Rome for example, all grew beards shortly before marriage. As a result, none married; however all were martyrs because of their transgressions. Such disfiguring features protected their inviolate bodies from the sexual advances of men by distracting or repulsing perpetrators. Legends also hold these strange transformations to be a gift of grace enabling Christ’s female followers to more closely resemble him. In many cases, females adapting outer male attributes (cutting hair, miraculously growing facial hair, or wearing male clothing) did so in order to serve a life of religious devotion and to enable social freedom. In short, these adaptations, whether self-generated or preternatural, constituted a form of survival. If trans-gendering girls in Darger’s art signal a similar sacred ambiguity, could male genitals act symbolically to protect the integrity of little girls and enable their social mobility?

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\(^{60}\) The cult of a crucified and bearded woman, St. Wilgefortis, thrived from the 15th through the 18th centuries. Her name derives from the Latin *virago fortis* (strong virgin) and the idea of the virgin’s authoritative virility. St. Wilgefortis is also known as St. Liberata, St. Uncumber, and St. Kümmernis—all names suggestive of liberation from bondage and grief. For a history of St. Wilgefortis see Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis since the Middle Ages* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).
Overlaying the *virago fortis* and Darger’s Vivian Girl, this reading stirs and blends the mysterious, erotic flavor and gender-ambiguity between dainty child and virile spiritual warrior. Sts. Joan’s and Perpetua’s optical and oratorical presences envisage and sanctify the possibilities of gender integration, imitation, and identification within the context of saintly Vivian *vitas* conversing with Catholic belief.

**Tasting**

Plucking girls from the cultural imaginary and manipulating their forms in accordance with multi-directional whims of desire, Darger’s artistic practices deeply resonate with the varying and sexually complex child-centered box constructions, films, and collages of his contemporary, Joseph Cornell. Turning to Cornell’s *tastes* offers striking parallels and comparisons for engaging Darger’s visual and verbal excesses, as well as, a means to follow the effuse terrains of desire forming both artists’ work.

Cornell often spoke of his pleasure of watching young women, of eating delectable desserts, and of writing in his journal while in the automat and diners of New York City. Youth and pink frosting evoked the pastimes of childhood and the sweet evanescence of life, yet also longed from something beyond the everyday approaching the metaphysical: “paper back in 8th Ave., cafeteria fruit tart but no capture of that mood that has come in this spot with such transcendency…”61

Probing connections between the artist’s penchant for young women, children, and sugary sweets, Mary Ann Caws surmises that Cornell’s sensuality “extends to the sweet rolls he consumed, even as he gazed longingly at the orange glaze on a layer cake in Horn and

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Hardart’s automat, the chocolate icing on another, and the pink icing on yet another cake in the window, which he regrets not purchasing. There is a strong parallel between his sensuality connected with food and his unattainable starlets…”

Theorist Michael Moon further articulates this flowing Cornellian eros as an “oralia” characterizing his profuse artistic practices and lifestyle as an “inexhaustible urge to eat sweets and to produce language through speaking and writing.”

Both Caws and Moon point out that the sweetness and hunger of Cornell’s aesthetic practices, akin to his consumption of desserts, resulted in both successes and failures. Satisfaction proved to be transitory; regret and loss overshadowed delight:

Before going into library a pink icinged vanilla cream-filled roll cake had been observed—later when stopping by to purchase some things its disappearance from its plate glass pedestal in the window brought a real regret of delicacy that went beyond the mere regret—lunch in a diner, banana crème pie, doughnut, and drink.

In his art and life, Cornell openly pursues pleasures like a child wandering through an imaginative landscape. He wove indulgences into dense, associative webs (what he called “constellations”) insinuating a self-perpetuating, poetic infinity. For Cornell, a passage in Mallarmé evokes a “sylph” on the subway. A cork ball imaginatively transfigures into a soap bubble, and, then, a celestial moon. Kool-aid and brownies (literally) replace wine and cheese at exhibition openings. The drifting eroticism flowing between wistful interludes (gracing dreams and lucidity, past and present, childhood and adulthood) filters through Cornell’s daily life into the transfixing images of his art. For some scholars, his glass-


63 Moon folds Cornell’s trans-historical interests in psychoanalytic condensation (from Freud’s interpretation of dreams) and Gerard de Nerval’s visionary sequences in the novella, Aurelia (from which Moon extrudes “oralia”).

64 Cornell diary, March 1, 1947, quoted in Caws, Joseph Cornell, 141.
covered boxes encapsulating romantic depictions of children lend an air of voyeurism and sexual sublimation. Moon, however, argues that Cornell’s work complicates such understandings of sexuality, exploring the artist’s avowed desire for girls (also boys) in dense philosophical, aesthetic, and, sensual ways. Moon finds a mercurial *eros* operating as an endless, never-resolving dialogue in Cornell’s work:

> The boxes should be understood not simply as terminuses of signification, erotic or otherwise, but as indices of the always high ratio of possible articulations in relationship to elusive and momentary but nonetheless transformative overflows of perception and feeling.\(^{65}\)

Considering Cornell’s *Untitled (Medici Princess)* (c. 1952-54) (fig. 4.15) within the context of mutable “oralia,” I view this box construction, not as containment, but as a momentary distillation of multifold desires. Like the falling and shifting crystals of a kaleidoscope that compress into transient, glittering patterns, this deceptively quiet box shapes fragments from art history, the haunting gaze of a precocious child and the romance and melancholy of the color blue. To experience the box’s intimate theatrics, I must peer through layers of glass and playfully follow an inner (penny) arcadia. My eyes move along flanking checkerboard patterns, simulating a “click-clack” sequencing of shimmering pennies and balls precariously cascading into compartments. The checkered pattern signals mixed sentiments—pleasure and disappointment—coloring this piece. With the heavy lids of a fair princess’ eyes drawing me, I visually move towards her only to find that she dissolves into a grainy, cyan recess. She slips ways, becoming as distant, and as unknowable as the horizon. Like a child, I find pleasure in the momentary delights of this game, but, I want more. I want to play, again. Knowing this princess box is one of several multiples, I sense the hunger of

\(^{65}\) Moon, 149.
Cornell’s “oralia”—the outpouring of sensations, memory, and yearning that attempt to prolong and perpetuate a transient pleasure.

Complementing Moon’s analysis of Cornell’s “oralia,” I overlay onto the Medici Princess, a brief encounter with Cornell’s Christian Scientist beliefs. Ecstatic sparks and veils of discontent couching with the artist’s religiosity additionally whisper another strand of irresolvable Cornellian eros. A Christian Scientist since 1925, Cornell eschewed conventional medicine, engaged in daily prayer and meditation, and remained active in his church’s Sunday School and Reading Room. The sect’s founding metaphysical philosophies, that Mary Baker Eddy penned in 1879, imbue Cornell’s journals and marginalia. These beliefs purport that man and the universe enter into being as the idea and reflection of God and therefore spiritually remain eternal and incapable of decay and death. “Life is divine Principle, Mind, Soul, Spirit. Life is without beginning and without end. Eternity, not time, expresses the thought of Life, and time is no part of eternity…Life is neither in nor of matter.”

Cornell rarely dated his box constructions. December 24th, his birthday, appears to be one of the few dates having significance for him: "I am peculiarly prone to Christmas, from childhood, in the context of New York, snow, magical store windows, [Christmas] Eve, etc." Preferring to fuse the timeless with the daily, Cornell sprinkles terms such as "eterniday",

66 Mary Baker Eddy, Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures. 1906 (Re-print, Boston: Trustees under the will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1934) 468-469.


"snowsday", and "springsday" throughout his writings. One diary note reads, "I'm always one day ahead of conventional time and that one day is an 'eterniday'". 69

An aura of never-ending, childlike wonder and history pervades Cornell’s Medici Princess. Within a box, an “eterniday” (forever unchanging in spirit, yet, circumscribed within the materiality of a temporal present) oscillates around this maiden. One perceives Cornell’s attempt to frame and preserve her innocent bloom and to fight her corporeal destiny. Art historian Richard Vine views such Cornellian conflation of innocence and spiritual undertones as suggesting “post-Edenic states of impermanence and fragmentation”. 70 Banal materiality (everyday objects and bodies fated to age) conveys both the impossible spiritual state of the physical world and the magical portal for apprehending Life (Soul, Spirit), if only briefly. Temporal and earthly pleasures—objects, music, sylphs, and sweets—become so many daily opportunities (hopes, epiphanies), as well as failing attempts to encounter the Divine through the inextricably bound relations of time (past, present, future) and the material world.

The Vivian Girl, bristling in her hallucinatory polka-dots and equally mesmerizing black-hole eyes, embodies a princess of a different kind. She exemplifies Darger’s artistic tastes, practices and piety, with an enthusiasm kindred to Cornell’s, yet, decidedly more irrational and excessively “oral.” Within thousands of pages and decades of journaling and scrap-booking, his shimmering landscapes populate with her expectant, multiplying face and continue to unfurl; accordingly, Darger’s appetite for little girls, never wanes. Darger, too, yearns to ingest an inexpressible spark, however, his hunger orients beyond a desire for transitory encounters into a need to sustain an imaginative whole (and holy) childhood.


Unlike Cornell’s post-Edenic materiality, Darger’s unreality operates within an Edenic world, an excessive space operating between heating entanglements playing out within spectacle, religiosity, and children’s “pure” bodies.

Tensions initially emerge in Darger’s yearning to capture the *indescribable*. A conflicting correspondence shapes an ongoing inadequacy to achieve the full measure of his project. Darger shares these sentiments in notes to “the reader” (Volume III of the *Realms*):

> Dear Reader, This description of the great war, and its following results, is perhaps the greatest ever written by an author ….The accounts of the numerous stirring scenes mentioned here will become interesting and attractive as well as fascinating reading to the people of our nation, but also highly important and valuable though unreal. I have here written as far as I was able, in unusually long details to make the scenes more striking, but even then I have not succeeded in accomplishing what should have been done, as it is impossible to describe them as they really are. *The poet, the painter, and the artist*, even if they were to seek this all out under the allurement of fiction or truth, could not have accomplished any more.⁷¹ (italics my emphasis)

Straddling the impossibilities of maintaining the spectacle of the most “thrilling story” anyone ever told, Darger’s art speaks through a self-perpetuating desire. His need to escalate form and content in unreal proportions propels his project to dramatic excess. Extremes are never enough: never quite adequate to capture the elusive quality of the *indescribable*. Additionally, the narrative structure of his “historical” tale (packing facts, figures, and chronology) struggles for coherency within an overwhelming abundance and swarming diachronic urge to repeat (*to stretch out, increase, redouble⁷²*) scenarios and motifs. Like the passing storm in Heade’s landscape, Darger’s vision cycles within mythic time. He begins, returns periodically, and ends within a golden age of childhood.

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⁷² Darger’s choice words for describing his project in the introduction to Volume III. See *Chapter One: Conflagration !!!* for Darger’s full description.
In his diary passages, Darger expresses nostalgia for the bloom of childhood, perhaps a childhood very different from his own. “I hated to see the day come when I will be grown up. I never wanted to. I wished to be young always. I am grownup now and an old lame man, darn it.” His art openly caters to this wish. Trans-gendering bodies bear no sense of evolution. Change manifests, instead, as instantaneous, magic transformation. Children’s bodies freely move laterally, shape-shifting between genders, but, never growing up or old. Sexual hybridity acts to arrest progressive change and disrupts the sequence of child-adolescent-adult. Sadly aware of the impermanence of childhood, Darger strives to maintain, and perhaps, to perfect childhood in his unreality.

Striking up visual parallels between Sts. Joan of Arc and Therese of Lisieux, Christ, the Vivian Girls, and (verbally) St. Vivia Perpetua, Darger enhances his girls’ ambiguous gender with religiosity. Through his daily rituals of Mass, Darger’s Eucharistic diet fortifies notions of sacrifice and spiritual union inseparably melding with little girl-bodies. Church-going and art-making reaffirm and naturalize his Vivian Girls into strong, redemptive figures, while Darger’s consumption of children’s literature, Biblical passages, and spiritual guides feed his idiosyncratic, insatiable religious piety. Darger’s worn copy of The Imitation of Christ73 and Baum’s Wizard of Oz fashion his unique faith and outlook conflating Christian humility with the perception of childhood innocence and Christian suffering with the trials of orphan-adventurers. The artist longs for the time when he was a child, to experience life again, afresh, to become “little,” again. Darger’s art formulates the “child” with great urgency; she/he, this other Christ, embodies a hunger not only for renewal but also for

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73 Scholars attribute this spiritual guide to Thomas á Kempis (c. 1380-1471). Book I, “On imitating Christ and rejecting all the folly and unreality of this world” stresses that “Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of his;” therefore, everyone “must try to make his whole life conform to the pattern of Christ’s life.” Thomas á Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, 1418, trans. Paul M. Bechtel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 38.
redemption. Darger’s child promises to save one’s imagination from the dull drums of adulthood while delivering one’s soul from damnation.

While suggesting that sexual morphing in Darger’s art orients towards perfection (wholeness) and spiritual transcendence, this conclusion, conversely, discerns Darger’s failure in that regard. Marked by sex, Darger’s child complicates the notion of innocence, seemingly so important to the cultural definition of childhood. She remains within a discourse of sexuality—a readymade erotic girl from modern media, a child the artist’s hand manipulates, and, additionally, a child caught within his gaze and the gaze of the viewer. Her golden locks and articulating, doll-like limbs preserve her girlish manner even when pairing with male genitalia. She bears these gender burdens, never elevating to the level of divine androgyyny her exemplar, Joan of Arc, embodied.

As she sprints further into a mesh of desires and tastes, she moves beyond disappointment into frustration, slipping further between gaps of innocence and sexuality. This slippage flares when girls come into contact with flame. In both Darger’s text and image, an aggressive fire manifesting into anthropomorphic shapes enacts a fantasy of consuming the object of desire. Often, flame attacks from the waist down: “Hands to her face screaming shrilly a little girl, her clothes smoking and half blazing, was running forward, tendrils of flame licking at her dress and waist …”

Fiery tongues, licking at girls’ clothing, threaten to violate their little virginal bodies both through sexual innuendo and the inference of eating. The reprise of flaming tongue episodes darkly suggests Darger’s erotic attraction to little girls. In this passage, Violet...

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74 A Blengiglomenean (or Blengin: girl with butterfly wings) saves this girl from her fire-stalker in the Realms, volume I, 89.
Vivian almost meets her demise when fire magically ignites while she is napping under the watch of Christian soldiers.

A few moments later smoke pours from the bedroom door and Violet runs out of the room. As the foremost of the soldiers reached the door he saw Violet run around to the front and of it with her clothing on fire from the waist down, and the whole bed was also on fire. She looked to them like a blazing torch. The two nearest soldiers were in their shirt sleeves but they caught the burning Vivian Girl Princess and with desperation attempted to beat out the flames with their bare hands, stripping off burned shreds of her clothing. The poor unfortunate little girl seemed very much dazed, and with piercing screams would have broken awry from the two soldiers had another seized her, and threw his coat around her to smother the flames. But soon the terrified girl struggled and finally broke from their grasp, her burned clothing falling off as she slipped from their grasp...The flames were again fanned into life by her motion through the air and were now shooting upwards toward her shoulders and face...75

Darger seems unable to resist rekindling the fire, this threat to Violet’s integrity. Her body’s agitation enables a dramatic resurgence of flame that the soldiers eventually extinguish. Violet, although burning, manages to retain her beautiful appearance:

“Oh I hope my poor face is not burned. Is it!” Evans pressed his face closed (sic) to hers and assured her truthfully that her most exquisite beauty had not been marred and she answered her loving guardian with a brave attempt at a smile...76

In such heated seeing, Darger’s trans-gendering girl becomes an impossible object, further removing her from reality, and, even, from the artist’s unreal paradigm of a pure and innocent, celestial beauty. Full of resistant meanings openly on display, yet, secret, she performs a complex entanglement of contradictions, endorsing conventions while also challenging hierarchies and boundaries. Darger wields the little girl as a tool for producing desire, teasing his appetite by placing her within scenarios of elevating risk and along the

75 Darger, _In the Realms of the Unreal_, Volume IV, Chapter 18, 183.
76 Ibid, 184.
edges of (fiery) consummation. This moving and morphing Vivian Girl operates within an undying problematic formula, as dynamic and alluring as Darger’s fabrication of the *indescribable*. She, like that which cannot surrender to adequate description, hovers beyond the grasp of the poet, the painter, and the artist.
Conclusion:

Life

And now the work is done, that Jupiter’s anger, fire or sword cannot erase, nor the gnawing tooth of time. Let that day, than only has power over my body, end, when it will, my uncertain span of years: yet the best part of me will be borne, immortal, beyond the distant stars. Wherever Rome’s influence extends, over the lands it has civilized, I will be spoken, on people’s lips: and, famous, through all the ages, if there is truth in poet’s prophecies, vivam—I shall live.

- Ovid, Metamorphoses

The final word of Ovid’s glorious Metamorphoses—vivam—concludes an epic meditation of bodies changing into new forms. Rather than concluding the poem, vivam instills a new beginning. Life springs eternal. Within a language of fire, utterances of metamorphoses and man emerge from nothingness and chaos to be molded by the hands Prometheus. Refusing finality, the emblematic phoenix springs forth to shape the envoi in eternal flux. Reproducing from itself, this fire-bird poiesis—a hermaphroditic spirit—rises into heights of endless reverie and immortality.

Fire’s touch equally shapes the momentum and pulse of roaring battles, churning skies, and vital bodies in Darger’s art. With a self-referential twist, Hands of Fire (fig. 5.1) emits generative mysteries akin to the Promethean urges forging Ovid’s mythic verse. Darger conjures a child’s nightmare, awakening our senses along with those of seven, sleepy Vivians, safe within their beds. White night gowns emerge from amorphous orange color-washes adjacent to eerie, gothic bedposts. Two glowing mitts float above,

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hovering like giant balloons. A crimson-winged silhouette enters from the right; its yellow-tipped talons echoing those that menace the girls. Darger’s phantasmagoric fantasy shifts and undulates, following the slow rhythm of wavy line and liquid color. Unlike the quick syncopations of his kindergarten scenes, pulling the eye here and there with myriad detail and reciprocal looks, a soft, mutable and central focus controls the scene. Coming for an emergent space between dreams and lucidity, this hallucinatory moment suggests multiple stories, indifferent to fixing one particular meaning.

Following the full caption, *At MacCalls Run. Hands of Fire*, the viewer begins to locate the image within Darger’s *Realms* narrative:

Two red hands the very height and width of the walls, throwing a singing heat that scorched the very air, traveled slowly up and down the two side walls, and then were gone leaving everything in a seemingly supernatural darkness.2

The Vivians, “not apparently frightened but nevertheless excited” determine to search the room for clues, proceeding “to work in their nighties at that.”3 The hands come and go with mercurial ease. They remain simply a mystery, another manifestation of fire popping up without notice. Like the visual image, Darger does not allow this passage to conform into significance within his story. Underscoring a continuing, persistent drama between little girls and flame, the passage operates as another strange spectacle along the Vivians’ journey. Within the purview of the scene’s effusive erotics, predatory hands, dramatically close to nighties, threaten to ignite the night’s air with their nearly electric, charged sparks.

One also sees within these hands, detached yet, aflame, those of the artist—forming and fumbling connections, grasping at impossibilities; collecting, tracing and pasting. They

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3 Ibid.
become the image of the very idea of his perverse creation, embodying an inquisitive playfulness, as well as, a surging violence prevailing within rhythms and spikes that oppositional pulls and confluences govern. *Hands of Fire*, among other works, elicits metamorphic storytelling on a grand scale. One must be willing to enter the interior of Darger’s vast, cosmic struggle and to partake in his unceasingly progenitive vision. He recasts eternal, allegorical conflicts and flux shaping humanity: Good and Evil, Angels (Angelinnia) and Devils (Glandelinia), the Garden and the Fall. As burning hands reach for little girls, one envisions the virgin and the god: he driven by desire, she by fear. The red winged-creature takes shape in inky blackness only to dissipate into puffs of smoke in the following scene. Its dissolving, phoenix-like body leads to a new, bright day. Although Darger pulls our imagination toward the distant and primordial horizon, making myth and mirth, his contradictory messages blurring innocence with sexuality equally belong to this world, and our cultural moment.

The hands additionally gesture towards the insightful “madness” of André Breton’s beloved Nadja, a woman resembling “other children so little, with their mania for taking out their dolls’ eyes to see what’s there behind them.”4 Nadja, too, sees Breton, the poet, in the sky, as a vision of burning hands, “the hand of fire, it’s all you, you know it’s you.”5 Her vision transforms a banal, commercial object—a red street sign of a pointing hand—into animistic spirit. A sense of Nadja’s “madness”—her ability to see afresh—works in Darger’s art also. “Madness” manifests in his intense desire to enliven mass-media personalities of comics and advertisements and to position himself as a visionary, recounting his tremendous

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5 Breton, *Nadja*, 100.
Dear Reader, the “sorry saint,” writes, *I will guide you through this marvelous land, taking you to unbelievable heights. I will show you my vision.*

One searches his beautiful surfaces, so full of imagery—cluttering a vision overflowing with surplus meanings and associations—and, yet, finds resistance to elucidation. His art equally provokes interest and vexes interpretation. Like the empty doll’s head that compels the child to look inside, something magically lingers and seethes within the eloquent secrets in works like *Hands of Fire.*

Fire, as *Pyre* asserts, indexes lingering tensions, desires, and mythic resonances flowing through Darger’s art. Fire’s secretive and enchanting spirit captures the underlying desire for change, speed, and vitality in *the Realms.* Like Darger, the fire-watcher (and setter) we become slightly hypnotized and aroused when gazing into its monotonous and brilliant light. Flame in Darger’s artistic corpus links by analogy and metaphor to myriad elements, spanning historic commemoration to mystical union. Destructive and fiendish, fire clings to childhood tragedy while underscoring the hyperbolic heights of panoramic-style spectacle. Conflagrations equally rage within battlefields, as well as, within hearts. In combination with the child, fire (*pyre*) evokes the rarified essence of beauty and wholeness. Conversely, as in *At Torrington* (fig. 4.3), flame merges with and exposes the mercurial and erotic body of trans-gendering girls. Constructing a grand narrative of change and generation, Darger sparks such encounters, inviting the viewer to use the fluidity and power of fire to flow between bodies, narratives and meanings. Within all the mystery and reverberating forms, an apparent and steady sense of the artist’s desire to capture life still emerges. Precocious girls bubbling forth in unbridling bliss, refusing to conform to their
“nature,” and fires engendering sudden, irrevocable loss project the very state of living—conflicts, mysteries, and reconciliations—the rapturous joy of being alive.

**Envoi: Precocious Vitality**

*Pyre* has focused on little girls, articulating their tender forms and keeping their stares and polka dots reverberating in the foreground, just as Darger would desire. Coming back to Darger’s child—and to her heroic, blonde hair, blue-eye precedent, Shirley Temple—this envoi addresses the imaginary persona of the Vivian Girl and shows the ways in which an inflamed speech of transgressive desire and excess meld within her light, and bouncy, pop culture vocabulary. Comparing Darger’s Pop aesthetic with that of Andy Warhol’s, an insider who also gravitated towards the precocious Shirley Temple, *Pyre* resounds *vivam!* within the Vivian Girl’s miniature, white hot package of purity, virtue, eroticism, vitality—and Pop.

Shirley Temple, one of Darger’s exemplar heroines in her guise as the Confederate “Little Rebel,” and, arguably, *the* visual and virtuous model for his Vivians, emerged as a major Hollywood starlet in 1935. According to *Time Magazine*, Temple, at age eight was “the world’s most photographed person,” appearing in newspapers and celebrity magazines daily and, even, competing for media-time with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.6 Her films consistently broke box office revenue records from 1935-38, catapulting her star quality beyond that of any of her actress peers, child or adult. Temple’s ubiquitous and profitable image hit commodified heights through sales of hats, shoes, dolls, books, and hair

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Serving as an honorary officer of several children’s clubs, Temple became the face of childhood during the Depression Era.

Darger references Temple when he writes, “How about the play known as “The Little Rebel?” Was not she braver than the soldiers…?” The Littlest Rebel, a 1935 blockbuster, adapts Edward Peple’s play featuring a precocious Confederate and her struggles to keep family together during the Civil War. In all probability, Darger did not see the actual play; he either encountered Temple through merchandising of “The Littlest Rebel” children’s book (fig. 5.2) or viewing the movie. He occasionally mentions movie actors in the Realms (Charlie Chaplin, in particular) and envisions the Vivians on film: “How long do we have to wait before the adventures of the Vivian girls do appear in the cinema?”

Temple-mania also struck Warhol, around age eight or nine. Warhol, not surprisingly, absorbed Temple’s mass-market appeal. Attending movies and accumulating Temple merchandise and promotional materials, Warhol followed her stardom as a member of her fan club. He continued to write letters of adoration to Temple through 1948, well past her (and his) childhood prime. The Warhola family’s proud display of their son’s autographed photograph of Temple, on their living room mantel (next to a crucifix), attested to the young artist’s devotion.

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8 See my discussion of Temple/Little Rebel heroics in Chapter Two: Pure.

9 Darger, In the Realms of the Unreal, vol. 13, 3500.

Art historian Blake Stimson argues that Shirley Temple provided a darling persona for Warhol, a model for operating in the world—“a style or comportment—that mixed both child and adult functions and attributes, both innocence and savoir faire.” For Stimson, Temple’s stardom, along with her boisterous authority, with “implicit critique of adult norms and pretenses,” appealed directly to the shy, queer, young Warhol.

Temple’s precocious manner equally impressed upon Darger. His Vivians look and handle themselves with a definite Temple style. Thinking back to At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck where Violet recuperates from her shooting, to the nuded jail breakers, to the flirtatious Jennie Turmer, and to At Roseanna Hogan (fig. 1.4), where the Vivians set tall grass on fire, one begins to realize the Vivian’s masquerade of adulthood. They roam the Realms intervening in adult situations (warfare) and address adult themes (sexuality, spirituality) while still maintaining their child-like deportment. Their pluckiness surrounds them like an aura of supernatural powers, giving them an infallible nature and a slippery ability to evade adult responsibilities. As a particularly boisterous man-child himself, Darger may have taken great delight in such images as At Resurrectoaction Run. Attacked by fierce Glandelinians, one of the Vivians hurls grenades (fig. 5.3), living vicariously through his little girls as they throw explosives without risking repercussion.

Temple’s precocious body, her flair at coquetry additionally informs Darger’s girls. In At Jennie Richee. Are rescued by Evans and his soldiers, after a desperate fight. (fig. 4.11), the trans-gendering, girl-with-pail, affectionately mingling with the shirtless soldier, evokes numerous scenes in Temple films where she cozies up to adult men. Intimate relationships and proximities between adult males and Temple, some as orphan- to-protective

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11 Ibid., 527.
male or as “daddy’s girl,” structure her films. In the *Littlest Rebel*, for example, she sits on her father’s lap (cheek-to-cheek) crooning love songs. Later, she flirtatiously shares an apple with Abe Lincoln (of course, on his lap) and negotiates the release of her Confederate father from prison. A film critic of the time found her a “little too enervating” and her films to be of “disreputable enjoyments.”

Contemporary film theorists, noting *Esquire* magazine’s (1935) article asking readers to “relish the similarity between Shirley Temple and Mae West,” argue that both Temple and West operated on sexual surplus. In the case of Temple, her veneer of innocence and pliability made her sexuality socially-acceptable, marketable, and ambiguous.

While the dimpling and cuteness of Temple shines through in Darger’s girl, Temple’s deportment does not offer exegetical substance for the girl-with-pail trans-gendering proclivities. However, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, a string of continuances flow between various “male-ness” of the Vivian Girl’s persona and her hermaphroditic sexing. Sexing (Temple-style) and sexing (Darger-style) may just boil down to sexing the child, in general. Through her sexual charms, Temple performs slippages between the boundaries of child innocence and adult sexuality as diligently and as dangerously as Darger’s trans-gendering girl.

The Vivian Girls and a thousand others in Darger’s tale—all orphans—extract, from Temple’s orphan-characters, impish charm and spunk and a sense of motility and availability. Like the Vivians, Temple circulates freely in her films, intervening in adult matters without responsibility or particular attachment to family. Warhol wove this abstract social persona of

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12 British critic Graham Greene pointed out Temple’s coquetry in a 1937 review. Twentieth Century Fox sued Greene for libel, and won. Greene’s comments quoted in duCille, 15.

13 Again, my resistance to view the trans-gendering Vivian Girl as a fetish weighs heavily on the pejorative connotations on the term and the manner in which critics use “fetish” as a stifling end-cap to discourse.
Temple, her orphan charms, into his own personality, appearing “fluid, mobile, unattached.”

The confluences of Warhol’s Shirley Temple-worship and his desire to picture himself within the context of celebrity rise to the surface in his self-portraits. Mimicking Temple’s careful orchestration of hand gestures in her publicity photographs, Warhol projects a recognizable darling persona. (fig. 5.4) His self-portraits play with repetition (his gesture repeating and repeating Temple’s), as well as, play with their shared, superficial naïveté. Scholars point out that Warhol’s portraits as a whole, collapse the notions of commodity and celebrity into an all-encompassing “branded” object—infinitely reproducible and anonymous. As such, his portraits depart from the tradition of portraiture by circumventing the original subject. Drained of their subject, Campbell Soup cans, Marilyn Monroes, and self-portraits all signify, instead, the act repetition and, through repetition, acquire recognition.

Looking at Warhol’s repetitive gestures, in comparison to Darger’s repeating “girl wall,” their distinctive stylizations of celebrity reproduction expose a mutual sense of veneration and implication of infinity. (figs. 5.5-5.6) Both artists work flat surfaces, bright colors, and a sense of childlike perspective. Warhol achieves what theorist Simon Watney reads as a “specific scale of childhood vision…the pinups tacked to any child’s bedroom wall.” A “pinup” sensibility also engenders a child-like reading in Darger’s works. His Vivians, too, sit one on top of each other as if magically adhering to an invisible wall. Darger’s acts of repetition, though, do not overtly draw attention to repetition itself. His

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14 Stimson, 538.

polymorphous girl-wall magnifies their arresting vibrancy and vivacity of the environment around them. As the chapter, Conflagration!!! suggests their bubbling effect offers a visual economy for seeing all the girls’ faces, like that of clustering angels in the Ghent Altarpiece. Moreover, Darger’s girls, even in their immobility, imply movement. Repetition and high key color produces ebullient patterns signaling vitality and life. Their organic generation suggests an autonomous fecundity (again, akin to Bosch’s Garden). Darger nuances their forms slightly enabling a syncopating flow—a flickering sensibility similar to a reflective light in their penciled-in eyes.

Warhol, in contrast, deadens through artificial repetition. His “subjects” passively repeat, receiving slight modifications in color and misregistration, as a parody of individualism. Warhol extends this sense of “façade” throughout his subject matter. His cultivation of passive subjects and repetition seems apt, however, in his series of flower images. Flowers (1964) (fig. 5.7) conveys cultural assumptions of flowers as passive receptors (vessels waiting for busy bees). Lacking affect, the floral “faces” reiterate those of his celebrities, cows, and soup cans—an artificial flavoring of Pop, another beautiful object offering an opportunity for consumption without substance.

Comparing these flowers to those of Darger’s in At Jennie Richee. Racing Through a field of gigantic flowers to seek shelter as the storm renews (fig. 5.8), also conveying flat washes of candy-like color and faint silhouettes, differences prevail. Darger’s flowers come alive as they open their blooming petals wide, sticking out dual-sex organs, like little tongues. Stamens dangle and stretch across each flower’s face signaling their potency. Their lily-like, fleshy stems wind and contort. Darger pictures his flowers as blooms and buds—peaking and holding stasis. Enormous in size, this grouping of agitated flora offers the safety
of their canopy for the Vivians below. They run and trans-gender, evading a white, thunderbolt strike. Forces of nature converge and echo a self-sustaining power. Both artists move their imagery beyond the frame: Warhol’s aesthetic implies an assembly-line repetition that defers the original *ad infinitum*; his world of mass-produced imagery remains in the realm of the mechanical. Darger’s circuitous streams of patterns and progenerative signs suggest a vital preternatural force incapable of containment. His childish vision animates this scene overflowing with magical, persistent life. Duplication, in Darger’s hand, turns from the mechanical to the miraculous. By all accounts, Darger’s art revitalizes his own existence, imbuing the ordinary with the extraordinary, until the moment his art and his life were “all over.”

Either in extreme active modes of fight or flight or in peaceful environments where they play or watch attentively, the Vivians demonstrate their boundless energy and enduring spirit. Capturing this internal spark, John Ashbery in a poem he dedicated to Darger, “Girls on the Run,” (1999) suggests both the frenzied pace and lurking dangers constituting Vivian existence. Ashbery captures the girls’ simmering energy with a tint of erotic tension:

Let’s get out of here, Judy said.  
They’re getting closer, I can’t stand it.

Inside, in the twilit nest of evening,  
Something was coming undone. Dimples could feel it,  
surring over her shoulder like a wave of energy. And then –  
it was gone. No one had witnessed it but herself.

…now better to let it come toward us, then we will see what it is made of.16

Desire combs the Realms: it resonates through Ashbery’s poem as a blend of childish premonition and defiance. I recall a similar sense of expectancy and excitement in my

memories of childhood games commanding quick starts and stops (playing “red light, green light,” in the backyard until darkness prevailed). The Vivian plays a similar game—a breathless child running from the threat of puberty—eyes wide, alert, body palpitating to the beat of an anxious heart. The Vivian releases into somatic exhilaration, lost in the rapturous abandonment of sprinting full speed, moving indeterminately towards and away from unknown dangers. Wait and see, Asbury suggests, for the unknown may shift into the known, the unreal into the real, the sacred into the profane. Conditions change rapidly in the Realms. The holy (whole) Vivians, who redeem a fallen nation, literally embody motility as changelings: prepubescent girls, here: hermaphrodites, there. They, too, seem to “come undone” in a titillating charge of capricious morphology. The Vivian Girl, not a pure invention, is a re-casting and plundering of ideas, feeding an innate adult desire for revisionings, for seeing anew through the eyes of a child. Through her, life springs tender and fresh. A desirous body, touched by flame, she propels beyond the banal into poetic animation.
(Fig. 1.1)

Henry Darger, SECONDS BEFORE DEATH, Dick Speeds along on his home-made Scooter Car, page from Pictures of Fire Big or Small in which Firemen or Persons Lose their Lives, c. 1950-70

Photograph by the author, Collection of Intuit, Chicago
(fig. 1.2)
Anonymous, *Untitled (boy on street watching fire)*, c. 1926
Collection of the Chicago Historical Society
ISERSON
brings
NEW SCINTILLATING
Spring Fashions
From the Orient
DESIGNED BY
Alyce M. Johnson

Here indeed is a scoop, Alyce
Herson Johnson well-known stylist of
New York University with a practical
background acquired in the Mary
organization and a previous expe-
rience as managing editor of the
Earlswood Publications—redesigns our
entire line. We now offer a Spring line
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Clarence Brown’s air conditioned fabrics. All Handmade and Hand
embroidered. Prices from $15.75 up.

ISERSON IMPORTS

(fig. 1.3)
Iserson Imports advertisement, 1936
Henry Darger, *At Rossanna Hogan. Vivian Girls are again chased by foe, but escape by setting tall grass on fire near battle line*, n.d.
(fig. 1.5)
Henry Darger, *Untitled (battle scene during lightning storm, detail)*, n.d.
Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Henry Darger, *At Sunbeam Creek*. Are with little girl refugees again in peril from forest fires but escape this also, but half naked and in burned rags, n.d.

Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 1.7)
Henry Darger, *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls, detail)*, n.d.
Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Anonymous, documentary photograph of Henry Darger’s apartment, c. 1973
Anonymous, documentary photograph of Henry Darger’s apartment, c. 1973
Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (avian habitat)*, 1942
(fig. 1.11)

Dorothea Tanning, *Children’s Games*, 1942
(fig. 2.1)

Henry Darger, The Battle of Calverhine, (left and right halves), 1929
Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432
(fig. 2.3)

Martin Johnson Heade, *Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay*, 1868
(fig. 2.4)

Henry Darger, At Jennie Richee. *While sending warning to their father watch night black cloud of coming storm through windows*, c. 1945
(fig. 2.5)

(fig. 2.6)

Souvenir photograph of Henry Darger and Whillem Schloeder from Chicago’s Riverside Amusement Park, n.d.
(fig. 2.7)

Cover of The Great Chicago Fire: The Human Account, 1946
(fig. 2.8)

Henry Darger, tracing of Sears Roebuck model, n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 2.9)

Henry Darger, At Cederine. She witnesses a frightful slaughter of officers (left and right halves), n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 2.10)

Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls)*, c. 1945, Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Jan and Hubert van Eyck, detail of *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432
(fig. 2.12)

Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (we will slam them with our wings)*, c. 1945, Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Henry Darger, Untitled (collage of faces with Joe Namath), c. 1968, Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 2.14)

Michael Ray Charles, *Study*, 2004
“The Greatest Mother in the World,” 1918, World War I poster designed by Alonzo Earl Foringer
(fig. 3.2)

*The Littlest Rebel* film still, starring Shirley Temple, 1935
(fig. 3.3)

Henry Darger, *Untitled (Vivian collage)*, n.d.
(fig. 3.4)

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Infant Samuel Praying*, 1778
(fig. 3.5)

Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (Vivian collage)* featuring girl in bed
Henry Darger, *At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck. The result after Violet saves a priest and his sacred monstrance from being shot*, n.d.
(fig. 3.7)

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Penelope Boothby*, 1788
(fig. 3.8)

“Butterflies” from Wheeler’s Graded Readers: A First Reader (1901)
“Butterflies” with Henry Darger’s additions of tongue and black eyes, photograph courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum, Collection of AFAM, NY
Documentary photographs of Henry Darger’s apartment featuring Catholic icons
“The Virgin of the Smile” or “Out Lady of the Smile” icon
Henry Darger, *At Angelinia Agatha*. Jennie in vain offers her sight lost in an accident for the conversion of John Manley her worst enemy. Instead her sight suddenly came back, n.d.
Henry Darger, detail of *At Angelinia Agatha*. Featuring St. Thérèse of Liseux’s holy card

St. Thérèse of Liseux holy card (The Little Flower of Christ)
Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (idyllic landscape with girls)* featuring pansy-passion flower-pansy motif on girls’ skirts
(fig. 3.16)

Henry Darger, detail of *Untitled (kindergarten scene)*, n.d.
example of *hortus conclusis*: Follower of Robert Campin, *Madonna and Child with Saints in Enclosed Garden*, c. 1440
Henry Darger, *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee. Vivian Girls witness childrens [sic] bowels and other entrails torn out by infuriated Glandelinians. The result after the massacre. Only a few of the murdered children are shown here*, n.d.
Henry Darger, cover to *Pictures of Fires Big or Small in which Firemen or Persons Lose their Lives*, c. 1950-70, Photograph by the author, Collection of Intuit, Chicago
(fig. 3.21)

Henry Darger, page from *Pictures of Fires Big or Small* . . . , “no cartoons please,” Photograph by the author, Collection of Intuit, Chicago
Henry Darger, page from *Pictures of Fires Big or Small...*, Bo Peep with commemorative article on the Iroquois Theater Fire (1968), Photograph by the author, Collection of Intuit, Chicago
Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Innocence*, c. 1790
(fig. 3.23)

Henry Darger, *Untitled (Heart of Jesus)*, n.d.
(fig. 4.1)

Henry Darger, *At Sunbeam Creek...At Torrington*, n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Henry Darger, *At Torrington. Are persued [sic] by a storm of fire but save themselves by jumping into a stream and swim across as seen in the next picture*, n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
Henry Darger, *Their color is caused by glare of flames. At Torrington. They reach the river just in the nick of time*, n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 4.4)

Henry Darger, *Jennie Richee. They are placed in concentration camp with crowd of child prisoners*, n.d.
(fig. 4.5)

Anonymous photograph from magazine (bathtub quintet), from Henry Darger’s magazine clippings
(fig. 4.6)

Coppertone Girl advertisement
Hieronymous Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, (central panel of triptych), c. 1505-1515
(fig. 4.8)

Henry Darger, *Untitled* (detail), n.d.
Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Storm Continues. Lightning Strikes Shelter but no one is injured* (detail), n.d., Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, NY
(fig. 4.10)

(fig. 4.11)

Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Are rescued by Evans and his soldiers, after a desperate fight*, n.d.
“Joan of Arc Saved France,” 1918, World War I poster designed by Haskell Coffin
Henry Darger, flags of Abbiennia and Angelinia, n.d.
Henry Darger, *At Zoe-Du-Rai-Beck. The result after Violet saves a priest and his sacred monstrance for being shot* (detail), n.d.
(fig. 4.15)

Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, c. 1952-54
(fig. 5.1)

(fig. 5.2)

Cover of “The Littlest Rebel” children’s book
(fig. 5.3)

(fig. 5.4)

Andy Warhol, *Six Self-Portraits*, 1967
Andy Warhol, *Marilyn*, 1967
(fig. 5.6)

Henry Darger, *Untitled (detail)*, n.d.
(fig. 5.7)

Andy Warhol, *Flowers*, 1964
Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Racing Through a field of gigantic flowers to seek shelter as the storm renews*, n.d.
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