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Dialogic *Gravitas*: Catholic Horror Fiction and Dialectical Discourse

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Abstract: This article examines how fictional dialogues within the Catholic horror literary subgenre can nourish dialectical habits of mind for readers—and foster the seriousness of philosophical and theological discourse. Specifically, the article traces how dialogue evokes the classical virtue of *gravitas* via the genre's style and substance. To highlight the approach, the article briefly explores several examples of such horror literature, including J. K. Huysmans's *Là-Bas* (1891), Georges Bernanos's *Under the Sun of Satan* (1926), and William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971). It concludes that Catholic horror literature's dialogic *gravitas* can play an important ethical role in teaching, moving, and delighting audiences—Catholic or otherwise—toward dialectical modes of discourse. As such, dialogic *gravitas* can help remedy the dangers of oversentimentality and post-truth relativism that have emerged more fully in the 2020s.

Keywords: dialectic; literature; Catholicism; dialogue; rhetoric

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke (1941) famously proclaims the literary arts as "equipment for living" (304). As part of this equipment, fictional dialogues can model how human beings productively and ethically discourse. By engaging the imaginations of readers, literary dialogues invite a potential for dialectic, or what Burke (2018) defines as "competitive cooperation" (98) whereby characters volley ideas back and forth, aspiring for truth. While not as overtly philosophical as dialogues from philosophers like Plato, Cicero, or Erasmus,[1] modern novels' dialectical dialogues may model how this dialectic unfolds in more organic manners than outright philosophical dialogues. As such, dialogues in modern novels can robustly cultivate readers' ethical and productive dialectical habits of mind.

Within literature, dialectical dialogues serve the poetics and the rhetoric of texts. Fictional dialogues offer something more than mere entertainment, yet they

[1] Some modern authors also write philosophical dialogues in the spirit of Plato, such as Iris Murdoch and Peter Kreeft.

also offer something more than mere cognitive exercises. Rhetorician Richard Weaver ([1964] 2006) reminds us that "activity"—or "not merely cognition"—is an important goal of being alive; and in the Platonic tradition, rhetorical communication concerns motivating the will, not merely instructing the intellect (64-65). Therefore, we should not only consider the internal cognitive elements of the dialectic but also outward rhetorical extensions of the dialectic. After all, if we neglect rhetorical implications and overemphasize cerebral approaches, we can diminish the role played by actual audience members (64–65). To that end, literary dialogues can, to quote Weaver, "move men's feelings toward a goal" and concern matters of common experience (63). The fictional story itself acts as part of this common experience since, through readers' imaginations, they can experience what characters experience. Such experience cooperates—and does not overturn—readers' reasoning. According to Weaver, *skilled* poets or writers of fiction "show reasoning power enough for their poetry and contribute something to the mind of which dialectic is incapable: feeling and motion" (Weaver 62). While dialogues found in literature offer imaginative fabrications (after all, characters' literary speech in novels and short stories is often cleaner than real world speech), such fabrications can provide models of dialogic architecture, spirit, and content. As models, they serve the persuasive *officia oratoris*: to delight, to teach, and to move. Effective dialogue delights readers to want to read the dialogue; it teaches readers how to dialogue well; and finally, it moves readers to dialogue in a similar manner as the fictional characters after they leave the fictional world and engage with the real world.

Aesthetic distance separates readers from the imaginative world expressed in the work. Depending on the work and the reader, wide or narrow gaps can form between the fictional world and the actual world, and between readers' imagination and their active lives. Kenneth Burke points out how reader escapism can problematize the rhetoric. As an example, Burke (1941) gestures to self-help books: "The reading of a book on the attainment of success is itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are 'succeeding'" and "make no serious attention' to apply the book's recipes" (299). The same can apply to dialectical dialogue in philosophical literature. For instance, readers can read Plato's *Crito* and internalize the energy of effective dialectical dialogue by vicariously living through the character of Socrates; thusly, readers may feel like they have somehow spoken a dialectical dialogue while they in fact "make no serious attention to apply the book's recipes" in the world. By reading a dialectical dialogue, readers may deceive themselves into feeling like they have been an active party in a dialogue—and accordingly, they feel satiated. Because readers feel that they have productively participated in dialogue, they may not be motivated to apply Plato's Socratic Method or dialectical reasoning to conversations within their own life.

This real-world neglect of dialectic is where the fictional genre—in this case, supernatural horror—can play a vital role. Via the imagination, contemplative supernatural horror fiction demands serious attention to apply the book's "recipes." That is, the horror commands and evokes *gravitas*. Horror stories,

that is, artificial stories of fear,[2] evoke Weaver's actual "feeling and motion." Specifically, supernatural horror stories place audiences in grave imaginative environments compounded with high stakes and attention directed toward metaphysical concerns: serious orientations toward *pietas* and *virtus*. Due to horror's severity and depictions of suffering that evoke fear, the genre demands *gravitas* more than other genres. The stories' dialogues play pivotal roles in fostering that *gravitas*.

This article suggests that an often-overlooked subgenre of horror literature—that is, *Catholic* horror literature—provides insight into how to foster habits of serious dialogic discourse as modeled (and rhetorically communicated) in the literature. As an orthodox Christian denomination committed to, and influenced by, the classical Greek and Roman traditions that celebrate the dialectic and the virtue of *gravitas*,[3] Catholic horror literature invites audiences to similarly nourish habits of ethical and effective interpersonal dialogue. These habits can extend to all audiences: Catholic or not Catholic, religious or areligious. The literature directs readers toward a wider philosophical engagement with truth and ideas—and summons them into the rhetorical and dialectical space between extreme relativity and extreme dogma.[4] Specifically, I argue that horror's explicit dialogic seriousness elevates the stories beyond entertainment. Such seriousness moves readers toward philosophical orientations and the according dialectical habits that fuel such orientations. After discussing *gravitas* and defining "dialogic *gravitas*," I briefly outline how dialogue and *gravitas* operate in three Catholic horror novels: J. K. Huysmans's *Là-Bas*, Georges Bernanos's *Under the Sun of Satan*, and William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*. Finally, I discuss how the horror genre contributes to social, ethical, and pluralistic truth-seeking discourse. Ultimately, horror storytelling—and its according dialogic *gravitas*—can be valuable in today's age that suffers from emotivism and overly-relativistic attitudes which dangerously undercut philosophical inquiry.

Dialogic *Gravitas*

Gravitas can be defined as seriousness. More specifically, it recognizes the grave importance of particular ideas that should be taken seriously. While seriousness can sometimes be disregarded as a virtue in the modern world, the virtue of *gravitas* pervaded ancient Roman thought and culture. For example, Cicero (1913) notably discusses *gravitas* in Book One of *De Officiis*. He argued that rulers should command serious demeanors and embrace the role of responsibility (97). He further discusses how public officers must conduct themselves with dignity,

[2] For this article, horror stories are defined as stories that evoke fear—per the definitions of Stephen King (*Danse Macabre*, 1981) and Douglas E. Winter (*Prime Evil*, 1988).

[3] C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image* highlights the roots of Platonism found in Roman Catholicism—and its according commitment to metaphysical realism. These roots and commitments still prevail in Catholicism today.

[4] This sentiment is shared by classically minded rhetoricians such as Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon.

virtue, and seriousness to fulfill their duties effectively (97). Additionally, Cicero (1928) champions the seriousness of Natural Law. In *De Legibus* he explains, "Law is the highest reason, implanted in Nature, which commands what ought to be done and forbids the opposite" (317). In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero (2000) explains that piety, as well as Natural Law, is a serious duty. Therefore, people have the responsibility to take metaphysical orientation seriously—not through mere superficial play-acting and empty ceremony. Cicero explains that piety "cannot exist in mere outward show and pretense," and if piety, reverence, and religion disappear, life would become "a welter of disorder and confusion" wherein loyalty, social union, and justice would likewise disappear (7). In this ideal way, *gravitas* and *pietas* cooperate.

Schools of Stoicism probably most famously endorsed the virtue of *gravitas*. In *Meditations*, Roman Stoic ruler Marcus Aurelius (2003) celebrates "gravity without airs" when writing about his teacher Sextus (7). His phrase captures the Stoic ideal of maintaining a serious, dignified demeanor without frills or arrogance. It suggests that a natural weightiness of character comes from inner strength and self-awareness rather than external posturing. Accordingly, Marcus Aurelius and other Stoics, like Epictetus and Seneca, privileged philosophy: the inner life over individual passions. By emphasizing reason and virtue over fleeting desires or impulses, Stoics aimed toward states of composure and morality that naturally rest on *gravitas*. Furthermore, Stoics emphasized contemplation of one's moment of death, or *momento mori*, which serves as a powerful tool for cultivating *gravitas*. Regular reflection on life's finitude helps foster humility, reduce attachment to trivialities, and develop a sense of urgency in living virtuously.

Both Ciceronian and Stoic *gravitas* take seriously the human concordance with reality. The seriousness of reality translates into Christianity, as well. Catholic fiction's universal themes quest toward objective realism or what Russell Kirk (borrowing from T. S. Eliot) calls "the permanent things." And this realism is far from saccharine. As Anglican writer Dorothy Sayers ([1941] 1987) aptly shares in *The Mind of the Maker*: "The proper question to be asked about any creed is not, 'Is it pleasant?' but, 'is it true?'" (16). She explains that Christianity is compelling "not because it is the most cheering view of man's existence but because it is truest to the facts." She specifies, "It is unpleasant to be called sinners, and much nicer to think that we all have hearts of gold—but have we?" (16). Furthermore, Kirk ([1969] 2016) notes that ever since the stories of Job and Homer, literature has always sought to form a "normative consciousness" that seeks to "teach human beings their true nature, their dignity, and their rightful place in the scheme of things" (31). Not all of those natures and realities are comfortable. The virtue of *gravitas* is a part of this classical normative consciousness. And through the Christian lens, it is far from simple. It involves seriously accepting God's creation and one's place in it. It acknowledges the real while simultaneously conforming the mind and heart to the true. Ultimately, such proportionality, or *consonantia*, symbiotically connects readers to the art and, by extension, to the wider *kosmos*. Such cosmological concord stimulates aesthetical satisfaction and delight.

From this perspective, literary *gravitas* seems to oppose playfulness. However, it offers more than a hardline bifurcation. After all, seriousness and

playfulness can cooperate. Philosophical literature often combines serious philosophy with playful storytelling. But the horror genre's playfulness is not merely innocent fun; it is ironically delightful because it engages readers with bristling suspense and tension—and the according catharsis. Ultimately, horror is a serious genre that draws audiences' attention toward mortality. Horror provides a narrative home for the seriousness of Cicero, the austerity of the Stoics, and Christian spiritual realism. And supernatural horror specifically orients readers toward the seriousness of metaphysical reality or *pietas*. Because horror storytelling can be raw in its depictions and subject matter, it follows Marcus Aurelius' suggestion to be "without airs." Of course, such *gravitas* requires that the depictions are not merely performative "shock for shock's sake" which would conversely undercut the contemplative role of horror in the story. Instead, it nourishes philosophical questions and serves to texture the inner life of characters. As catalysts of fear, mortality and suffering incite meaningful thinking and motivate characters toward serious action based on that deeper thinking. From this perspective, readers can witness characters vibrate between contemplation and action—and, via character-surrogates, readers can imaginatively participate in a similar type of vibration.

Yet, the genre's magic can be found in its imaginative—albeit dark—kind of playfulness that widely appeals to audiences. As horror theorist Matthias Clasen (2017) posits in *Why Horror Seduces*, horror audiences know that horror's fictional frightening situations are simulated "play behavior" (58–59). Resembling nightmares where individuals eventually wake up in the comfort of their own beds, horror fiction allows audiences to experience danger and fear without facing actual consequences. At the same time, Catholic horror keeps audiences close enough to the aesthetic that the fiction does not compromise its seriousness. That is, the horror attracts enough audience buy-in that they do not think the story is laughable or mere fantasy. Both these playful and serious ingredients mix into a rhetoric: one that instructs and moves but also entertains. Ultimately, any play within horror stories behaves as a rhetoric of irony. Horror stories are not either playful or serious. Nor are they partially playful and partially serious. Instead, horror stories' imaginative playfulness exacerbates their seriousness. Horror storytelling resembles a game that becomes more fun when taken seriously and played with a straight face. According to Soren Kierkegaard's ([1989] 1841) *The Concept of Irony*, irony provides a phenomenon or appearance that contradicts its essence (247). In the spirit of irony, an imaginative story may playfully craft adrenaline-fueled fictional phenomena, but its essential meanings and universals seriously correspond to actual reality. Once someone recognizes that a nightmare is a nightmare, they do not usually laugh it off. They may awaken from a nightmare knowing that it was an unreal nightmare, but maybe they are still emotionally rattled by the seriousness of the underlying truths about reality communicated by the nightmare. This type of ironic dynamism energizes the stories and awakens readers to serious attitudes about serious things.

The serious dimension of fictional dialogue within these horror stories—or dialogic *gravitas*—helps balance poetics with dialectic and cohere it into such a rhetoric. In many ways, dialogic *gravitas* resembles the classical dialectic. After all,

dialogic *gravitas* offers serious dialogue where two or more characters pursue truth through reasoning. But unlike philosophical dialectic, dialogic *gravitas* is elevated by the story, characters, and genre. Unlike strictly philosophical dialogues, dialogic *gravitas* more robustly commands feeling. While the content is serious, grave feelings are cultivated when readers identify with character-surrogates who fight to return order to their worlds. Apart from the cosmic pessimist variety of horror stories (those inspired by the philosophies of E.M. Cioran, such as some of Thomas Ligotti's stories), many horror stories are not merely tales of hopelessness and despair. Therefore, while the philosophical dialectic can seek order by resolving opposites through dialogic intellectual exchange, protagonists in horror stories confront nefarious opposing forces and seek order through dialogue, as well. Through social communication, protagonists better understand the truth, defend the truth, and decide upon good actions. Moreover, these dialogues are situated in plots where fictional threats are felt by readers. These identifiable feelings of fear (without despair) within the dialogues help close the aesthetic distance between reader and the text. To this end, dialogic *gravitas* within horror helps readers take truth and goodness seriously—and not fall into despair. In sum, horror's dialogic *gravitas* extends toward the ideal which, as Weaver ([1963] 1985) explains, "only the intellect can understand and only the soul can have affection for" (82). As a rhetoric, it offers intellectual, dialectical dialogues with soulful poetics superadded.

Naturally, all dialogues evoke some sort of feeling—even philosophical dialogues. Some dialogues—while pursuing truth—offer moments of levity. Plato's *Phaedrus*, for instance, feels lighthearted in the first third of the dialogue when it appropriately discusses erotic love. Plato's *Ion* reads as lighthearted because it brims with jest and sarcasm. However, Plato's *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, and *Phaedo* offer much more dialogic *gravitas* because the dialogues' contexts and situations color them with serious states of peril. *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, and *Phaedo* demand more seriousness than much of *Phaedrus* or *Ion* not only because they robustly explore the topic of death, but also because of scenes (involving Socrates in prison), circumstances (involving Socrates about to charged or put to death), and characters (involving Socrates who is about to die). In Plato's *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, and *Phaedo*, the dialectic, rhetoric, and underlying story, all row in a particular direction: toward seriousness in relation to mortality. The dialogues can have narrative consequences—specifically, their outcome can help save Socrates from being executed.

Darker and more poetical than Plato's dialogues, horror novels can offer fertile fields of dialogic *gravitas* that can engage readers more holistically than stand-alone philosophical dialogues. Novels more fully engage the senses (through the imagination) in addition to the will and intellect. Engagement with the senses offers extra layers of communicated *gravitas*. After all, in reading a novel, readers imaginatively transport themselves into scenes that concretely involve danger, suffering, and death. In short, even dialogue-heavy scenes in horror novels often involve action in respect to plot, whereas Plato's dialogues only minimally use action and plot, if at all. Novels' scenic dimensions are often richer than strictly philosophical dialogues. A novel's dialogic scenes are

embedded in longer narrative experiences, which—if the novel effectively depicts its characters' psychologies—readers become empathetically invested in characters' journeys and root for protagonists to achieve their goals. Ultimately, novels do not necessarily replace philosophical dialogues; instead, novels are visceral arenas wherein philosophical dialogues can contextually unfold. A novel's dialogic *gravitas* not only engages the intellect in a similar manner as philosophical dialogues, but a novel stimulates emotion and engages the senses; therefore, a novel's dialogues rhetorically engage the whole person.

Burke (1941) explains that certain genres like tragedies, comedies, and satire act as "equipment for living" because they "size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (304). In this list of genres, Burke does not mention the genre of horror. But horror is a genre, nevertheless. So, what are horror's corresponding attitudes? In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (1995) explains that effective tragedies evoke powerful emotions of fear and pity and involve depictions of suffering and death (69–71). Although modern horror stories differ from classical tragedies, Aristotle notes the importance of the darker narrative ingredients, which (arguably) later evolve into the modern horror story.[5] From this perspective, horror storytelling can be seen as a species of the genus of tragedy.

If horror offers a more severe species of tragedy, it arguably requires even more *gravitas* than then typical tragedies. Steeped in *gravitas* rather than levity, serious tragedy is the opposite of levity-fueled comedy. Due to its darkness, some critics, Christian or otherwise, may see horror as damaging—perhaps even dangerous to readers. They may not see the benefit of *gravitas*-heavy horror since it may lead audiences to into despair, nihilism, or apathy, and away from the *eudaimonia* found in the cultivation of virtue. Scott Woodcock (2013), for instance, asserts that the horror film, specifically with violence and gore, erodes sympathy; therefore, it is morally unacceptable. Yet, as Ian Stoner (2020) points out, horrific and violent dimensions have always pervaded storytelling (515). Among the examples Stoner provides, both Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Homer's *The Iliad* are relevant since they promote ancient wisdom and virtue (515). While it is true that modern horror novels' horror sequences may be more suspenseful and experiential than Greek epic and tragedy horror sequences, suspense is not altogether absent. Suspense can even be found in messenger characters' reiterations about off-stage actions. While stories-within-stories may not evoke as much affect, they still offer experiences of horror—especially if stories-within-stories are detailed and patiently told by characters. For example, in lines 1041 through 1152 of Euripides' (2005) *The Bacchae*, the Messenger reiterates how Pentheus climbed a tree to spy on the camp of Maenads which included his mother Agave; eventually, Pentheus was discovered, knocked down from the tree, and his mother and other Maenads dismembered him, scraped off his skin, and played in

[5] While horror theorist Noël Carroll resists a connection between classical tragedy and modern horror in his book *The Philosophy of Horror*, Terry Heller emphasizes this connection in *The Delights of Horror*. This article leans toward Heller's perspective.

his blood (155–58). Agave finally impales her own son's head on her holy wand "as if it were a mountain lion's head" (Euripides, 157–58). Because the Messenger witnessed the atrocities first-hand, he patiently recounts the sequence of events using descriptions and even dialogue. Ultimately, his retelling is tense: it offers incremental suspense as well as a horrific conclusion. Unlike Euripides' tragedy, the horror of Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, does not rely on messengers relaying stories of horror. Its horror is often driven by tension rather than suspense. For example, in Book 21, Achilles is chased by Scamander, the river god, because Achilles has clogged up the river with corpses. This scene provides a monstrous chase scene of supernatural dread; after all, it conveys a rare instance where Achilles' genuinely seems threatened. While both Euripides and Homer's scenes of horror certainly provide what Aristotle calls "spectacle," both scenes are not extraneous; both scenes work toward the unity of the compositions; the scenes serve the plots which ultimately lead audiences to wisdom and morality.

While mean-spirited horror film and literature certainly exists, to cancel an entire genre ignores the constructive dimensions of the rhetoric. Such cancelation mistakes the trees for the forest. After all, horror fiction and its appropriate dialogue work dialectically. Kenneth Burke (1941) provides a glimpse into this dialectical relationship. In a rare moment where Burke discusses dark literature, he explains, "A book wholly constructed of the repellent may partially close the mind to the repellent"; such writing might therefore cause readers to develop a "psychological callus, a protective crust of insensitiveness" (241). To avoid such an outcome, Burke proposes an alternative method of engaging readers through the genre of horror: "Horrors strike deeper when they strike out of a sweet and gentle context. . . . And when they do strike, note how they strike: for one has been responding to the humanity of humans; one has been warmed; one presumably is aglow" but then the feeling may be "blasted into hell" (241). He does not promote that horror should repel readers and drive them into despair; rather, as a thinker who appreciates classical dialectic, he promotes that it should work dialectically. The work should oscillate between gentle tenderness and harsh reality.[6] Effective and ethical horror, like classical tragedy and classical dialectic, cannot end with complete closure and full human understanding. While some plotlines may be resolved, the overarching metaphysic still sits outside of human understanding: a formalism of substance that humbles the audience while also affirming the metaphysical. Dialogic *gravitas* operates within this framework and contributes to the celebration of philosophy and theology within dark literature—that is, a celebration of the discomforts of *agnosis*, never reaching fully rational certainty.

Catholic Horror Literature

William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* begins "sweet and gentle" from which its horrors are told and emerge. On the other hand, the existential frustration of J. K.

[6] This relationship is exemplified in some dark literary Catholic fiction which may not be traditionally classified as horror literature, such as the work of Flannery O'Connor.

Huysmans' Catholic horror novel *Là-Bas* and the gritty darkness of Georges Bernanos' novel *Under the Sun of Satan* embrace moments that are "blasted into hell." These three Catholic horror novels offer a spectrum of horror tragedy to consider. By placing these novels in conversation with one another, we can better understand the nuances of dialogic *gravitas*. The novels extend across eighty years: from 1891 to 1971. The first novel emphasizes dialectical dialogues' pluralistic role. The second two novels spotlight conversations with demons and devils.

The following survey of literature traces dialogic *gravitas* through crucial textual moments. The survey displays dialogic *gravitas* across several works, rather than only one novel, to establish dialogic *gravitas* as a trend in Catholic horror literature and not simply a single author's unique approach. Therefore, while each of these novels can certainly be literarily analyzed with more depth, a deeply literary approach sits outside the scope of this article. In short, the following survey provides glimpses into how dialogic *gravitas* can—and does—unfold in Catholic horror narratives. Hopefully, the survey sparks future conversations about relevant intersections between rhetoric, dialectic, and poetics.

J. K. Huysmans's Là-Bas

Huysmans' 1891 novel *Là-Bas* (*Down There*) begins the "Durtal" series of four novels (which include *Là-Bas*, *En Route, The Cathedral,* and *The Oblate*), in which the character of Durtal, a Parisian author, slowly converts to Catholicism over the course of the novels and eventually moves from Paris to a monastery. As the first part of this sequence, *Là-Bas* is the precursor to the conversion. The novel follows Durtal as he finds spirituality in the wrong places—specifically, Satanism. Upon visiting (and immediately leaving) a Black Mass in Paris, he eventually realizes that Satanism is fundamentally wrong. His later spiritual conversion emerges from a recognition that the civilized world is becoming Satanic. Disillusioned with cosmopolitan corruption, Durtal recognizes that the spiritual naturalism of the Middle Ages was more truthful than modern schools of materialism and relativity. Durtal draws these conclusions throughout the novel's philosophical and dialectical dialogues—and converts in the novels proceeding *Là-Bas*.

Là-Bas's characters are intricately woven into the introspective fabric of the story. Each character adds depth and complexity that heightens the novel's *gravitas*. Through different characters and their dialogues with Durtal, Huysmans explores themes of spiritual decay and redemption that highlight Durtal's inner conflicts. But ultimately, the novel offers a type of pluralism. And dialogue plays an important role in this pluralism. Specifically, the novel features an array of diverse perspectives from a range of disparate characters in conversation with one another—all pursuing meaning with varying degrees of spiritual overlap. For instance, Durtal seeks solace in the macabre as he academically researches the notorious murderer Gilles de Rais for his book. Durtal's obsession with the historical figure's atrocities mirrors his own spiritual crisis, which helps Durtal wrestle with decadence, diabolism, and redemption. Therefore, in a way, he cerebrally converses with this historical figure. Additionally, Mme. Chantelouve, Durtal's mistress, entangles him further into the dark underworld of Satanism. She

embodies both seduction and spiritual corruption. Her duality reflects the conflict between Durtal's yearning for purity and his descent into darkness. Such reflection is demonstrated via their dialogues. Thirdly, Durtal is friends with Des Hermies, a physician who is fascinated by the occult, who offers a rational yet deeply cynical perspective on the human condition. Through their conversations, Des Hermies serves as Durtal's trusted guide through the esoteric and forbidden. And finally, there is Carhaix, the church bellringer, who provides a contrasting voice of unwavering faithful Catholic tradition amidst Durtal's spiritual crisis. Carhaix's steadfast Catholicism contrasts—and thusly highlights—the spiritual void in the other characters' lives. In sum, Durtal's philosophical conversations with this cast of characters—some bad, some good—help eventually move him toward edification.

The novel's conversations do not include much levity. In fact, the last lines of the novel communicate some of the novel's most grave themes. For instance, the very last line is spoken by Durtal to Carhaix and Des Hermies, saying, "They (Parisians) will stuff their guts with food and evacuate their souls through their bowels" (Huysmans [1891] 2001, 265). The novel does not end with optimism or conversion, but instead, it ends with Durtal's frustration with the damnation of Parisians. *Gravitas* can be found in Durtal's *agon* with Parisian society, his yearning for truth, and his strong (albeit nascent) orientation toward *pietas*. Much like Dante's pilgrim in the Divine Comedy, *Là-Bas'* Durtal faces the horrors of interacting with evil people before he eventually turns toward the True, Good, and Beautiful. And like Dante's pilgrim, part of Durtal's process is dialoguing with the "damned."

Georges Bernanos's Under the Sun of Satan

Under the Sun of Satan, a 1926 novel by Georges Bernanos, illustrates the profound spiritual struggles of Father Donissan, a rural French priest. The narrative explores themes of sin, redemption, and the eternal battle between good and evil. Distressed by unworthiness and doubt, Donissan encounters Satan in various forms, which leads to intense internal and external conflicts. Through patient and haunting prose, Bernanos presents a moving portrayal of the human soul's quest for salvation amidst the shadows of despair and temptation.

Before introducing readers to Father Donissan's transmundane interactions, Bernanos begins with scenes that showcase how evil operates within mundane rural dialogue. These early scenes feature a sixteen-year-old girl named Mouchette whose frenzied, manic, and lying behaviors may suggest demonic possession—although readers are not given any explicit evidence of supernatural intervention. Ultimately, Mouchette's scenes provide dark entry points into the novel's dialogic *gravitas*. While her interactions do not yet involve the supernatural, they showcase how unethical characters may manipulate other unethical characters who are not spiritually fortified. For example, in an opening scene in the novel, a pregnant and defiant Mouchette sneaks out of her house under cover of night to confront the womanizing Marquis who has impregnated her. Ostensibly, she seeks to assure him that she has kept his secret from her father.

But it quickly becomes clear that she does not seek to persuade or seek truth in the dialogue—but to play via lying. Yet, she lies not to protect herself or to manipulate for gain. She lies simply for the pleasure of lying. To Mouchette, "Each falsehood was a fresh delight, which tightened her throat like a caress; that night she would have lied despite insults, despite blows, to the very peril of her life; she would have lied for the sake of lying" (Bernanos [1926] 2017, 37). The verbal game spirals into confusion for both the Marquis and readers. Mouchette's lies multiply, disorienting and destabilizing the conversation until it becomes a maze of shifting claims. Her words, like her intentions, are slippery. The frustrating game reaches a brutal climax: she takes the Marquis's own gun and shoots him in the face at point-blank range.

Following the murder, she visits her doctor, Dr. Gallet, to discuss the pregnancy and her potential courses of action which include abortion and suicide. But, once again, the encounter becomes a performance. Despite the doctor's resistance to her seductions, she toys with him through language, innuendo, and contradiction—like she had with the Marquis. The dialogue, once more, becomes erratic and difficult to follow, not only for the doctor but for readers as well. Her reasoning shifts mid-sentence; she oscillates between coyness and fury. In an unsettling admission, she says that she is "crazy," questioning if she is "man or beast." (Bernanos [1926] 2017, 47). She insists that such animalistic unpredictability makes men desire her—and yet, it is the same bestial nature that undercuts any possibility for constructive dialogue.

In these scenes, Mouchette's speech is not a means of communication but a weapon of disrupting the pursuit of truth. As a maenadic character, Mouchette fractures conversations into a series of ambiguities and impulses where logic and dialogue become impotent. Though the Marquis is certainly unethical, Mouchette's amorality runs deeper—not only in her actions, but in her very mode of conversation. Her violence is not merely physical, but a destabilizing verbal force. Through her, the novel presents a vision of moral and disintegration that is connected to active dialogic confusion. Resembling an approach often seen throughout the work of Flannery O' Connor (who was influenced by Bernanos), readers are shown what dialogue looks like when it lacks goodness. The horror that unfolds from the absence of goodness ironically orients readers toward the grave need for goodness to guide social communication.

Under the Sun of Satan shifts away from townsfolk drama and toward the transcendent when it illustrates the spiritual trials of Father Donissan. While the intersection between spiritual warfare and dialogue can be traced throughout the novel, it can be specifically highlighted in one harrowing scene between Father Donissan and the Devil. One night, while Father Donissan walks down a countryside road, the Devil, disguised as a friendly horse dealer, converses with Donissan. The Devil showcases his magical prowess and weaves webs of lies. Not naturally eloquent himself, Donissan "had long suffered from the inability to express what he felt"; his communication was burdened with "clumsiness" that was peppered with long stretches of silences (Bernanos [1926] 2017, 94–95). Still, when conversing with the Devil, he surprisingly speaks words inspired by God, a testament to his inner resolve where even his silences communicate rhetorical

power. The priest remains steadfast and serious despite the Devil's laughter and mockery. In an act of courage, Donissan eventually runs at the Devil, only to fall through the phantom onto the ground unconscious. Upon awakening on the side of the road, he (and readers) becomes uncertain if the diabolic encounter was real, a bout of madness, or a mere dream. This ambiguity draws the reader into Donissan's tumultuous spiritual experience driven by both *virtus* and *gravitas*.

The dialogue between Donissan and the Devil highlights the stark contrast between Donissan's earnest truth-seeking and the Devil's playful spectacle. Bernanos emphasizes the gravity of Donissan's spiritual journey. After all, Donissan courageously confronts the evil head-on in a profound act of faith—and does not let the Devil's playful speech and insidious demonstrations corrupt or tempt him. Bernanos' Donissan offers an example of *gravitas* at work, rather than play, within the narrative. Through this tense dialogue, he places readers in that *gravitas*.

William Peter Blatty's The Exorcist

It is unclear whether William Peter Blatty was influenced by Bernanos. Nevertheless, *The Exorcist* bears striking similarities to Bernanos' work, particularly in *The Exorcist*'s dialogues between Father Damien Karras and the demon Pazuzu (the demon who possesses the 12-year-old Regan MacNeil's body). The exchange echoes the Devil's conversations with Father Donisson in *Under the Sun of Satan*. Both sets of conversations highlight the demon's tendency to trivialize the seriousness of truth and goodness. For instance, early in *The Exorcist*, a psychiatrist hypnotizes Regan and prompts "the person inside of Regan" to speak (Blatty [1973] 2004, 140). Here, Pazuzu tells the truth in these dialogues, but it codes its answers, playing with the psychologist. For example, when the psychologist asks, "the person inside of Regan" "where do you come from?" Pazuzu answers, "Dog" (Blatty [1973] 2004, 140). When the psychologist specifies, "You say that she comes from a dog?" Pazuzu follows with "Dogmorfmocion" (Blatty [1973] 2004, 140). The hypnotist does not understand that Pazuzu is speaking in code. Pazuzu is speaking backwards; Dogmorfmocion is a mirrored, backward code for "No-I-com(e)-from-God" (Blatty [1973] 2004, 140). Pazuzu inverts the letters of the words. The message of the phrase is technically true—but the rhetoric requires that the truth be decoded. Much like early Sophists, the demon is playing language games rather than taking truth seriously.

Reciprocally, the psychologists never take the demon seriously, as well. They see Regan's possession through a lens of behaviorism rather than a grander spiritual reality. Moreover, they offer their own type of game—hypnotism—to draw out the truth by manipulating the girl's unconscious mind. In this scene, the demon doesn't take scientists seriously—and the scientists do not take the demon seriously. Consequently, the truth is never understood because proper *gravitas* is not consulted.

Unlike these early games between the demon and psychologists, Father Damien Karras is a serious man—and while he wrestles with a crisis of faith throughout much of the novel—he represents *gravitas* through the intersection of

reason and faith, science and religion. Much like the devil's tactics toward Donissan in Bernanos' *Under the Sun of Satan*, Pazuzu mocks sacred rituals and manipulates Father Karras with insidious lies. Here, Pazuzu admits that "the devil likes liars" (Blatty [1973] 2004, 263) and "I *do* like to playact" (Blatty [1973] 2004, 265). For example, the demon pretends to be other people by manipulating its voice. It pretends to be Karras' mother as well as Burke Dennings, a character who the demon pushed out of a window to his death earlier in the novel. Ultimately, Pazuzu manipulates Karras' psychology by play-acting and deceiving Karras away from truth-seeking. The demon deliberately turns a serious dialogue into untruths and play. But coached by the stoic priest Father Merrin, faithful Father Karras commits to the *gravitas* and dialogically perseveres out of love.

The novel's underlying irony between play and seriousness pervades the novel. Not only does it operate between Pazuzu and Karras, but it is also ironically found in Regan MacNeil. As an innocent and playful girl, she becomes a vessel for the demon's corrupt and malevolent games. Through Pazuzu's conversations with the psychologist and Karras, Blatty delineates two forms of play: one innocent and one evil. But of course, they are not so easily parsed out. After all, Regan becomes possessed when she "plays" with the Ouija board presumably to have innocent fun; and the serious demon possesses her and turns her into a game to manipulate. This contrast mirrors Bernanos' exploration of earnest spiritual truth-seeking and the Devil's deceitful games. Both novels feature not only playful diabolical spectacle but playful diabolical dialogue. The playfulness contrasts the seriously pious characters. Karras, who revives his faith when encountering the demon, combats diabolical play with truth-driven *gravitas*. He directs himself toward *pietas* and dutifully saves Regan through courageous action.

Conclusion

Like classical tragedy, horror fiction offers literary suffering that points to the wider *kosmos*. Both characters and readers march through arduous landscapes in pursuit of understanding. Much like Dante's pilgrim in *Inferno*, the novels' protagonists do not merely *witness* horrific spectacles, but they dialogue with evil to better understand it, combat it, and then avoid it. Through characters' dialogic interactions, readers also better understand and battle with evil. This dialogic approach is seen not only in Dante's *Inferno* but also in *Là-Bas*, *Under the Sun of Satan*, and *The Exorcist*. All the while, authors act as ethical guides—akin to the character of Virgil—to guide readers through the horrors and help readers internally dialogue with good characters and not so good characters. In the three novels, the authors' consciences speak through devout Catholic characters, such as priests, who dialogue with various characters in the novels, including one another. These devout characters help anchor the dialogues and stabilize the story with faith and reason.

Suffering within Catholic horror literature may confuse audiences—but the suffering is ultimately connected to love, reality, and sociality. In a letter to French writer Frederic Lefevre soon after publishing *Under the Sun of Satan*,

Georges Bernanos (2022) writes, "The problem of Life is the problem of Suffering" (3). He explains that some people think that he is "serving Despair" from his "platter of hell" (9). But Bernanos insists that he writes to incite "excessive terror from hatred of sin"; therefore, he looks to move readers toward Goodness with his fiction. Certain readers yearn for suffering, he claims, because suffering is the "bread that God shares with man" (9)—and, as such, it leads to love. Bernanos explains that we cannot live outside of reality. This reality does not only consist of privileged moments of intellectualism, sensualism, or even vague religiosity; rather it also consists of a "deep expanse of suffering that suddenly bubbles to the surface like water from an underground river" (10). Consequently, horror literature helps readers resolve this loving suffering in a social manner. Readers witness dialogic human-to-human sociality on the page; they thoughtfully befriend characters in their imaginations; and they even befriend the author through the literary rhetoric of the author's creation.[7]

From a rhetorical perspective, the reading of Catholic horror literature is a social act—and, ironically, an optimistic one. A novel's dialogic *gravitas* supports that optimism. It counters positions from post-structural theorists like Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille who, in their atheistic frameworks, promote laughing at a godless void as a source of humanistic optimism.[8] Rather, Catholic horror gestures to optimism in substance, namely God and Being—and the journey to better understand such substance. Therefore, as the three novels evidence, Catholic horror's seriousness is far from pessimistic. Both tragedy and horror paradoxically point at the joy of truth, which can be joyful in its severity. Tragedy and horror gesture to candor—an important part of truth-seeking communication[9]—rather than saccharine sentimentality that may immediately gratify audiences. In *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver ([1948] 2013) warns us about similar problematic sentimentality and its "hysterical optimism." Such sentimentality is problematic because it lacks candor and its associated *gravitas*. Weaver argues that recognizing tragedy can provide a remedy. He writes that sentimentality will continue "until the world again admits the existence of tragedy, and it cannot admit the existence of tragedy until it again distinguishes between good and evil" (10). Almost forty years later, Allan Bloom ([1987] 2012), refines this perspective in *The Closing of the American Mind* when reflecting on younger generations who do not take evil seriously. He shares that many young people in his time (that is, Generation X) did not know or believe in evil (67). They believed in "evil deeds, not evil people" that could be quickly resolved. In other

[7] See Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) for more.

[8] Nietzsche—and later thinkers like Georges Bataille—favor the playful Dionysian (rather than the serious Apollonian) as means to deal with the nihilistic negativity when there is no God. For example, in the section "On the Higher Man" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche (1899) writes "Man must become better and more evil,'— thus I teach. The evilest is necessary for the best of beyond-man." (430). Soon after, he writes: "Learn, I pray, to laugh beyond yourselves! …The laughter I have proclaimed holy. Ye higher men, learn to laugh!" (439). Similarly, many post-structuralists who riff off Nietzsche do not seem to take contemplative truth-seeking—and by extension, philosophy in its traditional sense—as seriously as pre-modern thinkers.

[9] See Plato's *Gorgias* 487a for a specific look at candor.

words, Bloom recognizes the more recent trend to hop over the discomforts of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and seek to immediately arrive at a new version of *Paradiso* without much effort (67). People seek to laugh their way beyond good and evil—and leapfrog over truly dialectical dialogue.

Works of horror literature—specifically the dialogues found in Catholic horror literature—seek to heal this breach and return readers to dialectical habits of mind. Horror literature takes the time to dwell with good and evil, the physical and the metaphysical. The storytelling takes both elements seriously in a complex, not naïve, manner. Taking cues from Plato, Catholic horror uses dialogue to grapple with such complexity in patient philosophical and theological manners. As a result, Catholic horror fiction—and its respective dialogues—immerse, teach, and orient modern readers toward concordance with reality and the grander *kosmos*.

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