

## "The Face of Mr. Flip": Homophobia in the Horror of Stephen King

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All fear is more or less social. If there is such a thing as the transhistorically and crossculturally monstrous, it can still only be manifested in socially specific monsters. One idea of horror fiction sees it as a politically conservative force, identifying threats to the social order as monstrous and celebrating the story of their successful elimination. Stephen King has said that "Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us. We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings . . . the creator of horror fiction is above all else an agent of the form" (*DM*, 50, 58). Recently, Noel Carroll has used King's remarks to form the basis of a *Philosophy of Horror*:

What King may have in mind here . . . is that the horror narrative appears to proceed by introducing something abnormal—a monster—into the normal world for the express purpose of expunging it. That is, the horror story is always a contest between the normal and the abnormal such that the normal is reinstated and, therefore, affirmed. The horror story can be conceptualized as a symbolic defense of a culture's standards of normality; the genre employs the abnormal, only for the purpose of showing it vanquished by the forces of the normal. The abnormal is allowed center stage solely as a foil to the cultural order, which will ultimately be vindicated by the end of the fiction. [Carroll, 199]

Carroll's temptingly lucid theory seems like a fair extrapolation of King's comments, until we notice that Carroll has solemnized King's playful irony. Is "the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit" really the ma-

jor part of us? How "normal" is that part? Is such "normality" really "always" reinstated and reaffirmed at the end? And finally, is "the conservative Republican" in us really the only part to which monstrosity appeals?

More recent comments by Stephen King would indicate that his philosophy of horror is rather more complex: "one thing that reviewers and scholars have missed so far is that I have tried to have some fun in these novels and that I've tried to poke some fun along the way. I guess that if people have missed one glaring point it is that fantasy and horror can be wonderful tools of satire" (Magistrale, *Stephen King*, ms. 28). Perhaps the "conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us" is as much object as subject of satire; maybe the deadly serious business of culturally conservative horror is being made fun of as one of the monsters! King himself believes that critical interest in his fiction is due largely to the fact that his "work underlines again and again that I am not merely dealing with the surreal and the fantastic, but more important, using the surreal and the fantastic to examine the motivations of people and the society and institutions they create" (Magistrale, *Stephen King*, ms. 23). It would seem that any full study of the relationship between King's novels and society's norms would have to be ready to find examination as well as affirmation, satire as well as reinstatement. The monstrous may appeal to both the conservative and the radical within us, alternately and sometimes simultaneously.

One of the socially specific fears most often represented in King's horror is homophobia. Various defined as a fear of homosexuality, homoerotic excitement, effeminacy, passivity, or weakness in other men or in oneself, "homophobia" is clearly so overdetermined as to be practically an umbrella term covering any threat to male gender identity. Interestingly, when King reaches for an example of effective horror, he comes up with a scene that plays on homophobia. Calling Anne Rivers Siddons' *The House Next Door* "the best" horror novel he's read lately, King describes a scene where "There's this one guy who's very proud of his masculinity, and the house makes him sort of sexually 'hot' for this other guy, and everybody's at this party, and these two people are making love! And the guy later – POW! – blows his brains out. . . . it's nasty; it's a nasty book. A NASTY BOOK!!!" (Van Hise, 20). King goes on to explain how the terror of this fiction draws its power from the social:

The essence of the horror in this scene . . . lies in the fact that social codes have not merely been breached; they have been exploded in our shocked faces. . . . much of the walloping effect of *The House Next Door* comes from its author's nice grasp of social boundaries. Any writer of the horror tale has a clear – perhaps even a morbidly overdeveloped – conception of where the country of the socially (or morally, or psychologically) acceptable ends and the great white space of Ta-

boo begins. Siddons is better at marking the edges of the socially acceptable from the socially nightmarish than most. (*DM*, 264)

One might say that in this novel, which King considers the epitome of horror, heterosexual society is frightened to death by the spectacle of homosexuality: when "They find Buddy Harralson and Lucas Abbott embracing, naked," Buddy's father-in-law "expire[s] of a stroke," Buddy's wife "screams on . . . and on . . . and on," and Buddy himself commits suicide (*DM*, 264). Does Siddons' novel show the elimination of (homosexual) abnormality and the reinstatement and reaffirmation of the (heterosexual) norm? Perhaps; homosexuality is expunged, but so is much of society along with it! It seems just as likely that the novel shows the self-destructive consequences of homophobia, that this horror fiction may be read as a satire on heterosexist society, with its "morbidly overdeveloped" conception of what is and is not socially acceptable. Which is more horrible, a heterosexual husband's gay attraction or his and others' homophobic response? Is it the homosexuality or the homophobia that leads to death?

In a scene prominently placed near the beginning of *It*, a group of young men beat up two homosexuals and throw one into a canal. Asked why he wrote this scene of homophobic destruction, King responded by saying that he based his horror fiction on social fact: during Bangor's 150th anniversary celebration, a gay man did die after being thrown into the Kenduskeag Stream. "If the chapter strikes you as homophobic," King said, "please remember that this is a case of 'We don't make the news, we just report it!'" (SK, 5). Here King refuses to let his attitude toward homosexuality be confused with that of his homophobic characters; it is not he but the society he writes about with reportorial accuracy that fears gays. King makes a similar distinction in countering the charge that his "fictional violence," even if modeled on actual events, may yet serve as a model for further violence in "real life." After recalling a "homosexual-murder case" that may have been influenced by a scene from *The Shining*, King admits to some concern, but argues that "these people would all be dead even if I'd never written a word. The murderers would still have murdered. So I think we should resist the tendency to *kill the messenger for the message*" (Beahm, 42; italics added). King's comments imply that, if society is disturbed by the homophobic violence in his fiction, it should recognize and criticize its own homophobia rather than blaming the writer for it. In such accusations, the writer becomes the scapegoat for homophobic attitudes that society can continue to hold unconsciously as long as scapegoats make self-recognition unnecessary.

But how does *It* read without King's spirited extratextual defense? Does the novel come across as a satire on homophobic society or as a demonization of homosexuality and a consequent reaffirmation of heterosexuality as the norm? Michael R. Collings describes the "treatment of ho-

homosexuality" in *It* as "more openly vicious" than in any of King's previous fiction. Collings believes that King as author shares his characters' homophobia: "Not only do the characters react negatively and strongly to the suggestion of homosexuality, but the narrative links (i.e., the narrator's voice itself) continue that harsh, stereotypic attitude. The gay man killed never rises above the slickest of stereotypes, nor do reactions to his death ever overcome the hurdle of his sexual orientation" (Collings, 23). While it's true that the relationship between gay Don and Adrian is presented largely in terms of butch/femme stereotypes, it should be noted that King seems to have more on his mind than the perpetuation of heterosexual clichés. King makes Adrian effeminate in order to show up the homophobes' attitudes and actions as all the more deplorable. Garton, Unwin, and Dubay are exposed as cowards when they pick on the less "masculine" Adrian because they think he will be less able to defend himself. Garton's hatred for Adrian is represented not as a natural fear of the unnatural (the effeminate man), but as a childish inability to resolve his own gender insecurities. When Adrian makes a flirtatious remark, Garton believes that "His masculinity had borne an insult which he felt must be avenged. *Nobody* suggested he sucked the root. *Nobody*" (*It*, 22). A nearby policeman realizes that Garton's defensiveness ("He called me a queer!") is rooted in the fear that he might really be gay (*It*, 23). Bashing gays and dressing tough, Garton is desperately trying to find a proper male role model with which to identify but is ever fearful that he is acting "queer": "Like his two friends, he was dressed in unconscious imitation of Bruce Springsteen, although if asked he would probably call Springsteen a wimp or a fagola and would instead profess admiration for such 'bitchin' heavy-metal groups as Def Leppard, Twisted Sister, or Judas Priest" – groups which are themselves gender benders, an irony King may have intended (*It*, 20). Garton is like the local citizens who won't enter a gay bar "for fear all the muscles would go out of their wrists, or something"; he wields a switchblade to assure himself of phallic prowess and "punch[s] Adrian in the groin" to fix the latter as feminine in relation to his own masculinity (*It*, 26, 32).<sup>1</sup>

King extends his satire on homophobia from three boys to the town as a whole, closing off society's option of using them as scapegoats for its own homophobic beliefs. King writes of the "town's tightly homophobic attitude, an attitude as clearly expressed by the town's preachers as by the graffiti in Basse Park," thus equating the words of the town's most respected members with the crudest anti-gay threats scrawled by the likes of a Garton (*It*, 28). No one in town helps Don or Adrian as they're being beaten; this negligence amounts to a tacit condoning of the act. Finally, in his most uncompromisingly satiric touch, King describes the gay bashing and killing as an unwritten part of the town's anniversary celebration, "one final event which everyone had somehow known about but which

no one had quite dared to put down on the Daily Program of Events. . . . Ritual sacrifice of Adrian Mellon officially ends Canal Days" (*It*, 21). Here what Noel Carroll described as characteristics of horror fiction—the expulsion of the abnormal in order to reconfirm the norm—is revealed by King to be a *real life ritual* exposed in all its horror by fiction. Gay Adrian is eliminated so that the townspeople can feel more at home with their gender and sexuality. After all, what really rankles Garton is that he is unable to win the town's celebratory hat ("I Love Derry!") that Adrian had successfully won at a carnival game: how can a gay man express and "win" a town's love while he is shut out? (*It*, 30). Never mind that, as the one Derry resident who really knows them realizes, "these men, fags or not, seemed to have learned a secret of getting along with each other which their heterosexual counterparts did not know" (*It*, 26). The most important thing to the townspeople is to ensure their own sense of belonging (to the town, to their sex), even if they become in the process the very alien sex perverts they fear.<sup>2</sup>

It should now be clear that, unlike Collings, I do not see *It's* implied author or narrator as homophobic; on the contrary, homophobia would seem to be the target of the book's satire. It's true that the policemen from whose perspective much of this chapter is written have no special liking for gays ("About the bum-punchers I'm neutral" [*It*, 23]), but, in addition to King's extratextual defense of his novel's real-life accuracy ("I took notes on the police interrogation . . . a lot of the conversation in the chapter is reputedly what was said" [SK, 5]), there is also the fact that even the police and the D.A. in the novel feel that gay bashing is wrong: "Averino did not like gays, but this did not mean he believed they should be tortured and murdered"; "The guy was a fruit, but he wasn't hurting anyone," Boutillier said" (*It*, 24, 38). In a bizarre thought that both expresses and struggles to transcend homophobia, the police imagine the gay bashers' retribution as occurring in the form of what they most fear and desire: "I'm going to put them in the slam, my friend, and if I hear they got their puckery little assholes cored down there at Thomaston, I'm gonna send them cards saying I hope whoever did it had AIDS" (*It*, 38).

The gay bashing, the police interrogation, even this imagined retribution: all of these form what might be called the "realistic" background to what is essentially a surrealistic or fantastic novel. When the veritable monster, the supernatural horror is introduced, what does *It* represent? Does *It* challenge or defend social norms? Is *It* the threat of homosexuality, the danger of homophobia, or some indefinite combination of both? We might begin by noting that *It* finishes the job begun by the gay bashers: *It* kills Adrian. This continuity may suggest that *It* is largely the supernatural embodiment of human evil: *It* is the boys' and the town's own homophobia monstrously out of control. This supposition receives some confirmation in the fact that *It* seems to have been the author of the par-

ticularly inhuman anti-gay graffiti in Bassey Park (*It*, 28–29). It is also associated with “thousands” of “I Love Derry” balloons, which remind one of the hat for which Garton jealously beat Adrian. Don says that “It was Derry . . . It was this town,” suggesting that in his mind *It* is the monstrous embodiment of the town’s homophobia (*It*, 36). With “great big teeth,” *It* takes a bite out of Adrian’s armpit, “Like it wanted to eat him, man. Like it wanted to eat his heart” (*It*, 35). Does *It* carry out in a horribly literal sense the metaphorical threat made by Garton to Adrian earlier on in the chapter? Garton: “I ought to make you *eat* that hat, you fucking ass-bandit!” Adrian: “If you want something to eat, hon, I can find something *much* tastier than my hat” (*It*, 22). Does *It*’s penetrating teethwork give *It* the sense of potency and sexual satisfaction Garton craves? Noting that “there was a big chunk of meat gone from [Adrian’s] right armpit,” an officer speculates that “One of the [gay bashers] really liked to bite. Probably even got himself a pretty good bone-on while he was doing it. I’m betting Garton, although we’ll never prove it” (*It*, 38). Is *It* the town’s unacknowledged homophobia, the responsibility they all share for Adrian’s death, a culpability they deny by scapegoating Garton and the other two boys as the only ones deserving conviction?

Well, if *It* is the town’s homophobia wreaking havoc on Derry’s gays, then why does *It* manifest *Itself* in the form of a clown whose uncertain sex mirrors that of *Its* victim? *It* “looked like a cross between Bozo and Clarabell, who talked by honking his (or was it her?—George was never really sure of the gender) horn,” much as Don and Adrian are first seen as a “couple of girls,” their gender difficult to determine (*It*, 13, 21). Is *It* homophobic other or homosexual double? The D.A. thinks that *It* might be “Kinko the Klown or a guy in an Uncle Sam suit on stilts or Hubert the Happy Homo” (*It*, 37). Later on in the novel, the police speculate that *It* may be a “sexfiend,” a “fiend for boys” (*It*, 180). And, as if in response to young boys’ fears (“It’s one of the queers the big kids are always talking about”), *It* appears as a hobo, frightening the boy Eddie with the proposition, “Come back here, kid! I’ll blow you for free” (*It*, 260, 309)—an invitation disturbingly reminiscent of Adrian’s words to Garton.<sup>3</sup> The other guys tell Eddie that the hobo has syphilis, “a disease you get from fucking . . . another g-g-guy if they’re kwuh-kwuh-queer. . . . Some guys with the Syph, their noses fall right off. Then their cocks” (*It*, 309–310). Eddie thus comes to associate homosexual contact with castration and death. Not surprisingly, when another boy meets the hobo-clown, he hears *It* say, “Want to play some more, Richie? How about if I point at your pecker and give you prostate cancer?” (*It*, 590).

If *It* was formerly the town’s monstrous homophobe, the embodiment of gays’ worst fears, now *It* would appear to be the monstrous homosexual, heterosexual society’s worst nightmare. Has King moved from gay rights’ activism and social satire to heterosexism and cultural conserva-

tism? Certainly, *It* can be read that way. In one subplot, a boy is edged toward insanity by the sexual advances of another boy. Led in a circle jerk and then masturbated by Patrick ("You liked it! You got a boner!"), Henry balks at fellatio—but it is too late. He is finally overcome by doubts about his own sexuality: "On the day when he had allowed Patrick Hockstetter to caress him, that bridge [over some mental abyss] had narrowed to a tightrope" (*It*, 823, 914). Henry goes crazy, trying to eliminate his own fear of effeminacy by projecting it onto others and cutting it out ("Okay, fag," Henry calls Eddie, planning to knife him) and attempting to prove his manly strength by thrusting his knife into women ("*Kill her*") (*It*, 967, 914). The circle jerk and masturbation scenes are both viewed through the horrified eyes of Beverly, female and representative of the natural (social) order. She thinks of the circle jerk as something "so strange, so ludicrous and yet at the same time so deadly-primitive that she found herself, in spite of the giggling fit, groping for the core of herself with some desperation" (*It*, 816)—as if trying to get a hold on normal (hetero)sexuality? The thought of her boyfriend's penis makes her "flush" and "almost sick to her stomach," but this is the natural modesty and maidenly excitement expected in a young girl when she dreams of what (hetero)sexuality will be like; in contrast, Beverly's response to the circle jerkers' "*things*" and to Patrick's masturbation of Henry's "*thing*" is "terror," seemingly the proper attitude toward (homo)sexual perversion (*It*, 815). Not coincidentally, Beverly figures prominently in the book's main plot: she is the girl who saves Eddie, Richie, and other boys from Henry's fate; by making love to all of them, she guides them successfully through their gender insecurities and into a safely normal (hetero)sexuality ("*I made love to all of you?*" / "*That was y-y-your way to get us o-out*" [*It*, 931]).

Thus, in one reading of *It*, homosexuality (effeminacy, perversion) is the monster, the gender-indefinite hobo-clown that can only be destroyed by heterosexual experience—"this essential human link between the world and the infinite, the only place where the bloodstream touches eternity" (*It*, 1082–1083). Michael R. Collings finds a "certain justification" (logical reasoning or moral rightness?) in what he considers to be King's homophobic "attitude in the novel": "By its nature, homosexuality opposed heterosexuality, the linking of man and woman in the deepest emotional bonds. And that intense bonding lies at the center of *It*" (Collings, 23). Does same-sex attraction "naturally" "oppose" heterosexual bonding? Are homosexuals by their very nature a threat to the security of heterosexual couples, their sexual orientation and their gender identity?

Let us see if *It* can be read in another way, one that does not ratify society's homophobia. The answer to the question of whether *It* represents the threat of homosexuality or the danger of homophobia can be found late in the novel, where we learn that *It depends*. It takes the form of whatever *It's* victim at the time most fears: "all of [Its] glammers were only

mirrors, of course, throwing back at the terrified viewer the worst thing in his or her own mind" (*It*, 1015). So gay Don sees it as the town's homophobia, while insecurely heterosexual Eddie and Richie fear it as a gay advance threatening their masculinity. It, it turns out, is afraid of any Otherness, "that maddening, galling fear . . . that sense of Another. It hated the fear, would have turned on it and eaten it if It could have . . . but the fear danced mockingly out of reach, and it could only kill the fear by killing them" (*It*, 1015). It tries to project Its fear of Otherness onto specific others because others can be eliminated, but the trick doesn't work: the Otherness It fears is within Itself, an inner insecurity, that cannot be allayed through the murder of outsiders.

In this too, It mirrors Its victims, whose own insecurity leads them to see Otherness as monstrous. Richie's vision of a threatening gay hobo—"How about if I point at your pecker and give you prostate cancer?"—seems to say more about his own sexual anxieties than about predatory homosexuality; from an adult perspective, the threat is ridiculous, the product of adolescent nightmare (*It*, 590). Patrick may be something other than a gay fiend who gets a sexual charge out of molesting another boy; instead, he might be seen as a psychologically disturbed youth unable to feel much of anything. After all, he does not even get an erection from masturbating Henry; Patrick is so insecure that only the feeling of being in complete control, as when he kills, gives him a "hard-on" (*It*, 831). And Patrick does not drive Henry insane so much as Henry's fear that "he had allowed" Patrick to caress him; Henry is driven crazy by his own fear of the Otherness within, his inability to live with his own homosexual impulses (*It*, 914). Finally, Beverly's terrified reaction to the circle jerk may be more complex than a heterosexual girl's natural repulsion for perverted, quasi-homosexual behavior. Beverly's strongest fear is not that the world will be tainted by the boys' homosexuality, but that their *homophobia* will lead them to rape or kill her if they discover her watching. The circle jerkers feel guilty about their act, knowing what (homophobic) society thinks of males masturbating together; if a girl were to see them, they might have to prove their heterosexuality by raping her, or kill her to ensure her silence about what she has seen.<sup>4</sup> If It represents a fear of the Otherness within and the monstrous desire to kill that fear by killing others, then It may well be the embodiment of homophobic society: men who would kill each other (and women who see too much) in a desperate attempt to deny the effeminacy within.

Just as It mirrors Its victims, so *It* will to some extent mirror *It's* readers: as I have shown, homophobes can certainly find monstrous confirmation of their worst fears and a ratification of their heterosexist world view, while those more sympathetic to gays can find social satire, homophobia demonized and exorcized. My own sense, as I have tried to demonstrate, is that readers who look closely won't miss the social sati-

rist behind the three-piece suit, the radical inside the conservative republican. As a child, King himself suffered under the rules of a homophobic society and felt compelled to conform to its macho prescriptions: "I had to play football, because I was big. If you didn't play football and you were big, it meant you were a fucking faggot, right? That's what it's like when you come from a small town" (Winter, 18). Many of King's fictions address the problem of how one can be something other than a football player – say, a writer – and still retain respect for oneself as a man.

The Stephen King stand-in or author surrogate in *'Salem's Lot* is Ben Mears who, because he is a writer, is suspected of being a "sissy boy" or a "faggot": the people "distrusted the creative male with an instinctive small-town dislike" (*SL*, 191, 106). Ben has come to write a book about the town's evil Marsten House which frightened him as a child; readers of *It* will recall that gay Adrian, also an author, "had come to Derry to write a piece about the Canal" into which he is eventually dumped (*It*, 27). Ben's first book included a "homosexual rape scene in the prison section," which the town reads as "Boys getting together with boys" (*SL*, 21). Ben's arrival coincides with that of Straker and Barlow, two men who "may be queer for each other"; at the same time, young boys start disappearing, and the town can't make up its mind which one of the three – Straker, Barlow, or Ben – is the "sex pervert" that did it (*SL*, 142, 139).

How can a writer defend the manliness of his vocation in a homophobic, anti-intellectual society? First, he can do so with what he writes. Ben's first novel sounds a lot like an early Stephen King novella, "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption." In this fiction, Andy is raped by the prison's "sisters" or "killer queens," but, instead of letting himself "just get taken," he decide[s] to fight" (*DS*, 21, 23). Through his financial genius, Andy gains power over the men who raped him; rather than allow himself to be beaten or "turned" gay, Andy breaks out of prison through a "hole" he has dug behind a girlie poster, thus escaping to freedom and heterosexuality (*DS*, 21, 80). The narrator and author of Andy's story is a fellow prisoner and rape victim who learns from Andy's example. Andy may have been forced to "bend over" by the rapists and the guards who searched his anal cavity upon his entrance to prison, but he fought back, defeating his enemies using the money he secreted in a part of his anus that remained inviolate (*DS*, 19). Similarly, the narrator smuggles his story out "the same way," thus triumphing as a writer and as a man over a violently intrusive world (*DS*, 95). In a tale that obviously contains certain homophobic elements, King does take pains to portray the prison rapists as able to find joy only in violence, as more antisexual than homosexual, as, in fact, homophobes, preying on "the young, the weak, and the inexperienced" in order not to feel so effeminate themselves (*DS*, 21). And the relationship between the narrator and Andy is described as involving mutual concern and the exchange of "pretty" rocks, as if to claim

sympathy and beauty as manly occupations in spite of what homophobes might say (*DS*, 29).

If Ben's first novel is like "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption," it might almost have been written to counter suspicions like those entertained by the homophobic townfolk of *'Salem's Lot* concerning a writer's manliness. Not only what he writes, but also his purpose in writing seem part of his masculine defense. Ben plans to write about the Marsten House as a way of "Confronting my own terrors and evils"; with the writing he hopes will come "control of the situation, and that would make all the difference" (*SL*, 113). Numerous passages in King's work make it clear that he sees the writing of fiction as a means of gaining control over his fears, of shaping amorphous anxiety into manageable form. In "The Body," fledgling author Gordie remembers "the first time I had ever really used the places I knew and the things I felt in a piece of fiction, and there was a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had troubled me for years come out in a new form, a form over which I had imposed control" (*DS*, 336). And many years later, in a recent interview, King himself still describes the advantage of writing in similar terms: "Fiction is in my hand, and that means I can control it" (*Magistrale, Stephen King*, ms. 13).

In *'Salem's Lot*, Ben plans to wield his writer's pen as proof that he is man enough to overcome the town's suspicions about his effeminacy and his own doubts concerning possible inner weakness. Like It, the vampire Barlow plays on his victims' worst fears—Ben's terror that he is nothing but a bookish wimp; that, as a writer and as a man, he is impotent:

*Look and see me, puny man. Look upon Barlow, who has passed the centuries as you have passed hours before a fireplace with a book. Look and see the great creature of the night whom you would slay with your miserable little stick. Look upon me, scribbler. I have written in human lives, and blood has been my ink. Look upon me and despair!* (*SL*, 411)

But Ben succeeds in taking pen and stake in hand and vanquishes the vampire; by giving his fears fictional form, he is able to overcome them. In the beginning Ben's imaginative capacity as a writer may have contributed to his fear of effeminacy, but in the end it helps him prove his masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps King is hinting that those, like writers of horror fiction, who can win the war against sexual fears in their imaginations are stronger than the unimaginative who end up fighting and killing real others in a desperate attempt to destroy the Otherness within. In "Graveyard Shift," Hall, unable to handle being ridiculed by a foreman who continually denigrates his manhood by calling him "college boy," turns his phallic hose on the man and causes him to be eaten by rats (*NS*, 50). In the end, however, Hall's macho display gets him nowhere; his hose isn't strong enough to

stop the rats (his own insecurities) from eating him up too. In "I Am the Doorway," an astronaut, returned from a failed mission to the planet of love, finds himself giving a beach boy the eye ("He was tanned almost black by the sun, and all he was ever clad in was a frayed pair of denim cutoffs"), but the eyes turn out to be peering from the astronaut's hand, as if aliens had entered his body and were looking through him (NS, 67). What the alien eyes see is not a beautiful boy, but something horribly other, hateful, and "they" kill the boy: "I didn't kill him, either – I told you that. They did. I am the doorway" (NS, 63). And when the astronaut looks into his own face through the eyes, he sees a "monster" which must be destroyed (NS, 70). One can read this tale as the story of a man whose inability either to accept or deny his homoerotic impulses leads to murder and suicide, or one can take it as a more abstract parable about a man's failure to live with Otherness outside or within himself.

King's longer works develop these same themes in revealing depth. *The Stand* gives us Kit Bradenton, whose homoerotic dream of "the most beautiful boy in the world, tall and tanned and straight, . . . wearing lemon-yellow bikini briefs" is horribly interrupted when the boy's face turns out to be that "of a Goya devil and from each blank eyesocket there peers the reptilian face of an adder" (St, 268–269). Kit's fear is that the 1960s are over and the country has since turned conservative and homophobic, that some macho man (like the Walkin Dude) will come and stab him for his homosexuality, and that Kit himself is now too old and decrepit to attract anyone but a monster: "The boy in the yellow briefs had been long ago, and in Boulder Kit Bradenton had been little more than a boy himself. *My God, am I dying?*" (St, 269). In *The Shining*, Jack Torrance finds himself looking at another boy:

Tall and shaggily blond, George had been an almost insolently beautiful boy. In his tight faded jeans and Stovington sweatshirt with the sleeves carelessly pushed up to the elbows to disclose his tanned forearms, he had reminded Jack of a young Robert Redford, and he doubted that George had much trouble scoring – no more than that young football-playing devil Jack Torrance had ten years earlier. (Sh, 110–111)

Like Claggart in Melville's *Billy Budd*, Jack, though he refuses to admit it to himself, is jealous of George's good looks, athletic and sexual prowess, and unselfconscious masculine identity. Like Claggart, Jack allows his own gender insecurity to lead him to defame another: using George's stutter as an excuse (as if that made the boy less of a man), Jack drops him from the debating team (for his impotence as a debater). When George attempts to reassert his manhood by taking a knife to Jack's tires, Jack cannot bear the affront to his masculine authority and viciously strikes out at the boy. Jack is, not coincidentally, a *failed* writer.<sup>6</sup>

Again and again, the defeated characters in King's fiction are revealed to be men who cannot imagine a constructive resolution to the battle of the sexes raging within them. Sometimes King seems almost callous about their fate, as if he were afraid that their effeminacy might threaten him or as though he were imaginatively killing off his own fear of weakness. In *The Tommyknockers*, a mama's boy named John Leandro manages to break his mother's injunction against eating fast-food cheeseburgers ("*Microbes*, his mother's voice spoke up in his mind. *Food in places like that can make a person very, very sick*"), but eventually he succumbs to his fear of her disapproval and is killed by contact with a Coke machine (*TK*, 438). King considers the passage detailing Leandro's death "a scene that I like as well as anything I've ever done"; his attitude toward the victim: "One of the main characters is a real wimp. I was glad to see him go" (*Underwood*, 83).

But King can also be extraordinarily sympathetic toward the "wimps" of this world, as if he himself were feelingly engaged in their struggle and did not take their loss lightly. This is the Stephen King whose art rises above kneejerk homophobia and the demonization of Otherness. In a scene from *Salem's Lot*, which may be viewed as paradigmatic of the (self-)confrontations in King's fiction, Father Callahan comes face to face with the vampire Barlow, a face which, though "strong and intelligent and handsome," also "seemed almost effeminate"; Callahan thinks: "Where had he seen a face like that before? And it came to him, in this moment of the most extreme terror he had ever known. It was the face of Mr. Flip, his own personal bogeyman, the thing that hid in the closet during the days and came out after his mother closed the bedroom door (*SL*, 352). "Flip": flip out, flip side, flippant; Mr. Flip, now suddenly "out of the closet" and "staring . . . with his clown-white face and glowing eyes and red, sensual lips," is Callahan's own fear of his other side, the side that mocks his attempts at manly action, the exterior embodiment of an inner effeminacy that threatens to drive him insane (*SL*, 352). And, like many another brave but insufficiently hardy souls in King's fiction, Callahan has faith in his identity (religious, adult, male)—but not faith enough: "The cross [held by Father Callahan] flared with preternatural, dazzling brilliance, and it was at that moment that Callahan might have banished [the vampire, his own fears] if he had dared to press forward" (*SL*, 353). From the moment Callahan gives up fighting to resolve his insecurities, from the moment he lets his childhood fear of weakness get the better of him, he is lost. Again and again, and most insistently near the end of *Salem's Lot*, the male reader is implored to recognize that the "transvestite," the "strangely masculine face bleeding with rouge and paints," is "his own face" (*SL*, 417–418). Only by facing up to one's fear of effeminacy, only by acknowledging the monstrousness of homophobia, can one learn to live with others and with the Otherness in oneself.

## NOTES

1. Garton is just one in a long line of macho, homophobic, and sexually insecure characters in King's fiction. Other examples include the 1950s-imitation tough-guy Billy Nolan in *Carrie* ("he was going to have her until every other time she'd been had was like two pumps with a fag's little finger" [*Ca*, 164]) and that "miniature streetpunk from hell," The Kid in *The Stand*, who rapes Trashcan with his ".45" (*St*, 608).

2. Derry's "ritual sacrifice" of gay Adrian, all but outlined in the sermons of the "town's preachers," reminds one of the homophobic scapegoating called for by the boy evangelist in "Children of the Corn": "No room for the defiler of the corn. No room for the hommasexshul" (*NS*, 263).

3. Compare King's novella, "Apt Pupil," in which a wino proposes to the boy Todd, "For a buck I'd do you a blow job, you never had better. You'd come your brains out, kid" (*DS*, 198). Todd later has a wet dream in which he stabs the wino, thus getting a sexual charge out of violently proving his masculinity. Todd's gender anxiety is exacerbated by his relationship with the former Nazi Dussander, a bad father who encourages Todd to take pleasure in inflicting pain. In another wet dream, Todd tortures a Jewish girl with a combination dildo/cattle prod supplied by Dussander; under the Nazi's tutelage, Todd attempts to straighten out his confused sexual orientation through rape. The fact is, as Tony Magistrale points out, "Dussander is symbolically raping Todd" – fucking with the boy's mind in a desperate attempt to restore the sense of potency he lost with age and the Third Reich (Magistrale, *Landscape*, 87). In a later scene, Dussander actually masquerades as the "old faggot" he fears he is, propositioning a wino and then, as if trying to project and eliminate his own effeminacy, kills the bum (*DS*, 209).

4. The fear that male bonding will be seen as gay attraction – what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed "male homosocial panic" – is pervasive in King's fiction. See Dennis's concern about embracing Arnie in *Christine* (*Ch*, 58) and Gordie's and Chris's embarrassment at their warmth for each other in "The Body" (*DS*, 430). Bookish, nerdy, diminutive, or overweight young males troubled by the fear that they may be – or be perceived as – gay include Charlie in *Rage* (*BB*, 106); Harold in *The Stand* (*St*, 971, 978); Randy in "The Raft" (*SC*, 279); the narrator in "Nona" (*SC*, 377); and (the only one in this list who overcomes his homophobia) Garraty in *The Long Walk* (*BB*, 179, 288).

5. Given the theme of this essay, perhaps something should be said about the critical controversy surrounding the relationship between Ben Mears and the boy Mark Petrie in *Salem's Lot*. King has made his position clear: "People say to me . . . that what I wrote there was a classical sub rosa homosexual relationship. I say bullshit, it's father-son" (Underwood, 122). King's response may seem less homophobic if one remembers that in the novel Ben is under suspicion of being a gay fiend, a child molester: *this* may be the charge that King is really repudiating. One should also remember that King has written often on the theme of the bad father who takes advantage of his son (Jack and Danny Torrance in *The Shining*, for example); King may want to make certain that readers view Ben as he was intended to be seen – as a good (surrogate) father to Mark.

Probably the most detailed and determined reading of the Ben-Mark relationship as containing homosexual undercurrents is Joseph Reino's. It seems that,

where King claims to have meant only paternal love, Reino sees (also or instead?) homoerotic attraction. The trouble with Reino's interpretation is that it is based almost entirely on verbal ambiguity: King's "fairy-light" is read "subsurfacedly" as a reference to the "fairy-feelings" between Ben and Mark; King's "the moment seemed to undergo a queer stretching" becomes an "ithyphallic innuendo," a reference to gay erection (Reino, 27, 29). These readings seem strained to me, despite the fact that I elsewhere find Reino to be a subtle and perceptive critic of King.

6. Beating George does not help Jack feel like any more of a man, because fears of effeminacy cannot be dispelled through attack on another. This, however, is a lesson Jack never learns, for his jealous assault on George is unconsciously repeated on his son Danny when Jack begins to suspect that the hotel prefers the boy's masculinity to his own. Jack's greatest fear is that his relation to the hotel is like that of the man in the dog suit trying to fellate his impotent master: submissive and yet unrewarded (*Sh*, 334). The point of the servile dogman as representative of Jack's fear of unmanliness is lost in Stanley Kubrick's film version of the novel, where the dogman becomes a pigman and the connection with Jack is not made. A bewildered Pauline Kael commented, upon seeing the film, that "Kubrick has an odd sense of morality: it's meant to be a hideous debauch when [Wendy] sees the two figures in the bedroom—one of them, wearing a pig costume, looks up at her while he or she is still bent over the genitals of a man in evening clothes on the bed" (Kael, 4).

In addition to using the dog to symbolize man's fear of effeminacy (the cowardly cur subject to another man's phallic rule), King also employs the dog as a figure for the sexually insecure man who overcompensates by acting like a hypersexed animal, even if this leads him to raping men. Consider the rapist Frank Dodd whose vicious spirit inhabits the rabid dog Cujo and assaults George Bannerman: "Hello, Frank. It's you, isn't it? Was hell too hot for you? . . . What's he done to me down there? Oh my God, what's he done?" (*Cu*, 285).

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