

# The Crow Was Standing on the Sky: Exploring the Secret Worlds of Douglas Coupland

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## Introduction

There had to be somebody out there who made a radical leap – someone who told the others that there existed this place beyond us that was different than anything we'd known, namely the future. And because of the future, all human lives become different, better than ours. We could apply our minds to being more efficient in the way we did tasks. And it was someone like Jeremy who told people this. And then someone came along and told people that on top of everything else, not only was there life and death, but there was also life after death. And it was someone like Jeremy who told people this. Jeremy's job was to be a teller.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of *Life After God*, the diminutive 1993 novel by the Canadian writer Douglas Coupland, a damaged and aimless young man named Scout retreats to the wilderness of British Columbia to recover from months of feeling anaesthetised by anti-depressants and overwork. He wakes one morning to a cold, clear sky, strips naked and immerses himself in a nearby river. As he sinks into the freezing water, Scout addresses the reader directly:

Now – here is my secret: I tell it you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of this passage seems plain enough; however, a closer reading reveals that things are not necessarily as simple as they might seem on the surface. While Coupland's work is saturated with religious language, usually borrowed from a nebulously understood Christianity, what he means with this

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<sup>1</sup> The character Liz, in Douglas Coupland, *Eleanor Rigby* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), pp. 222-223.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), p. 359.

use of language is unclear, calling us to delve further under the surface of his words and into murky, undefined territory. When Coupland employs the language of God across his considerable body of work, even in this passage, which resonates with seemingly familiar Christian images of baptism, confession, and surrender, he is in an important sense *not* writing about God at all, at least not any traditionally conceived monotheistic god.

What Coupland is presenting here, and what he mainly presents when discussing religion, is something far more akin to the tradition of Western esotericism than to any confessional assent to a radically transcendent deity. Coupland's novels, taken as a more or less unified *corpus*, describe a world divided between the visible world of the everyday and a hidden, secret world that can be glimpsed only in flashes, and then only by a select few. Once initiated into this secret world through a ruptural personal experience, this knowledge gives meaning and substance to the visible world. This knowledge, this *gnosis*, even has the power to heal. In this essay, we will explore the role and the character of the esoteric in Coupland's fiction over against his take on more traditional forms of religion. There are two important dimensions to the esotericism that we find in Coupland's writing; firstly, the esoteric knowledge represented by the secret world often has profound effects for the characters and events contained *within* Coupland's novels; secondly, Coupland has long been visibly concerned with awakening in his *readers* a sense of the world beyond the visible. At the same time that Coupland's works recount fictional initiations into the esoteric dimensions of reality, they can also be seen as potential *agents* of initiation in their own right.

### **Douglas Coupland and Christianity**

Linus, there are three things we cry for in life – things that are lost, things that are found, and things that are magnificent. You've got all three this evening.<sup>3</sup>

An astute reader may well ask a crucial question at this point: why *not* interpret Coupland's use of Christian language in *Life After God* more literally? Out of context, the passage, with its evocative images of baptism, all but demands such a reading. It is also worth noting that there is at least anecdotal evidence that many people have interpreted Coupland's work, and *Life After God* in particular, in just this way. However, to answer this fundamental question demands that the careful reader address not only this passage or even the whole of the novel, but Coupland's *overall* treatment of religion, and of organised

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<sup>3</sup> The character Jared, in Douglas Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (New York: Regan Books, 1998), p. 278.

Christianity in particular. In short, reading Scout's admission of his need for God as an act of Christian confession does not make sense in the larger picture presented by Coupland's novels. Coupland's work has a thematic unity and consistency that allows us to approach his novels as a more or less unified body of work.

Coupland is likely doomed to be remembered always for his first novel, the seminal 1991 *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, which not only made him a reluctant spokesman for his generation but also gave that generation its most popular and enduring name. Coupland himself addresses this legacy in his latest novel, 2009's *Generation A*, which transforms the narrative structure of his debut novel, a story both about storytellers and the stories they tell each other, into a fable about storytelling and experience set in a near-future dystopia beset by environmental and financial disaster, a future that is chillingly plausible. *Generation A* also makes explicit a connection between storytelling and religion that is implicit in a number of Coupland's novels, *Generation X* chief among them. Early in *Generation A*, Harj, one of the novel's five narrators, asks when looking out the window at the destruction wrought by a tsunami, "And then what do you do – do you pray? What is prayer but a wish for the events in your life to string together to form a story – something that makes some sense of events you know have meaning. And so I pray".<sup>4</sup> In the nearly two decades that have passed between *Generation X* and *Generation A*, Coupland has maintained his overarching interest in both storytelling and religion and has at the same time developed a unique and highly contemporary voice, mixing an arch, aphoristic, self-aware, pop-culture sensibility with meditations on the effects of contemporary culture, and in particular its technological aspects, on communal living. One of the persistent impressions the astute reader can gather from Coupland's work is that contemporary North American culture is a culture without stories, or without stories that have any real historical or cultural significance. Not coincidentally, at many points in his novels, Coupland also presents this is a world without meaning. This disconnected and fragmented world forms the essential background for Coupland's representation of the fundamentally divided nature of reality.

This thematic consistency is evident also in his choice of settings and in his overall tone. Coupland sets the vast majority of his novels in or around Vancouver, on Canada's rough Pacific coast. The city is indeed his favourite recurring character. Even when at its most alien and threatening, as in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, when the only survivors of an explained worldwide apocalypse haunt a dead and deserted city, Vancouver remains a comfortable,

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation A* (London: William Heinemann, 2009), p. 2.

familiar setting. In this, his treatment of the city is indicative of Coupland's unobtrusive style in general. His writing is playful without being overly clever, meditative without ever becoming distractingly obtuse, funny without being forced, warm and familial without being sentimental. Even at the darkest moments of his novels, Coupland's tone and voice remain familiar and ultimately forgiving. For the most part, Coupland builds his stories around ordinary people and the extraordinary, even supernatural, things that sometimes happen to them. His primary concern is with human relationships, often with damaged people finding each other and coming together in ways – though usually *not* in romantic ways – that allow them to become whole, or to at least begin to repair some of the damage that afflicts them. At the furthest extreme, in *Generation A*, the coming together of the novel's five narrators on a remote island – to tell each other stories, of course – not only offers them a chance to heal themselves but carries the promise of salvation for a dying world. Family, community, alienation, and loneliness are among the most consistent and important themes in Coupland's work. Throughout his narratives, Coupland weaves the constant search for something outside of the visible into the fabric of quotidian human existence.

Quite naturally, then, over the years, Coupland has had a good deal to say about religion. Many of his novels deal directly with religious ideas or feature characters that are invested in religion in one form or another. His work is likewise permeated with religious, particularly Christian, language. From a sociological standpoint, Coupland has a firm grasp of the realities of the religious milieu that his characters inhabit and out of which they must work out their own relationship to the religious. Coupland is, as Gordon Lynch quite rightly observes, “a particularly perceptive commentator on the contemporary search for meaning”.<sup>5</sup> Many of the characteristic and antinomian elements of the diverse and highly individualised religiosity that can be found among many educated Westerners in places like Vancouver – the suspicion of religious authority, the primacy of personal experience, the radical individualism, the neo-Romantic elevation (even sacralisation) of the natural world – are apparent even in the short passage from *Life After God* cited above. To come to terms with his own sense of loss, Scout does not embrace an existing institution, but performs his own baptismal ceremony alone in the wilderness. Here, as so many practitioners of this kind of religiosity, Scout is both working within and challenging traditional religious structures.

Despite the wealth of religious material in his books, Coupland's attitude toward traditional religion as represented by organised Christianity is

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon Lynch, *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), p. viii.

deeply ambivalent, enough to undermine any straightforward interpretation of his use of religious imagery and religious language. The relationship between Coupland and the Christian tradition is, if anything, complex. At times, his attitude is largely dismissive, an attitude that becomes more pronounced whenever he or his characters encounter social or theological conservatism. In a 2003 interview, Coupland said of organised Christianity: “I just can’t bring myself to be part of the revival tent. There’s so much abuse or corruption. You can make any word or passage of the Bible mean whatever you say. It’s so binary: it’s like, you’re either with us or against us. There’s going to be a mass abandonment”.<sup>6</sup> We can find a similar condemnation of institutional Christianity in a fictional setting in several of Coupland’s novels, from *Life After God*’s dismissal of evangelical radio programming – “The stations talked about Jesus and salvation and I found it was pretty hard listening because these religious types are always so whacked out and extreme... [T]hey take things too literally and miss too many points because of this literalism”<sup>7</sup> – to *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003),<sup>8</sup> which features the character of Reg, whose unyielding, fundamentalist Christianity leads him to neglect his family in their hour of need with disastrous consequences.

Despite this evident suspicion of organised Christianity, Coupland’s view of religion is by no means entirely negative; indeed, he often presents what he perceives as the absence of cohesive religious frameworks in the contemporary world as a *loss*. To take one of what could be a great many examples, Bethany, a young woman in *The Gum Thief* (2007), writes to a friend, “I truly wish I’d had religion growing up, because believing in something might shut off my inner voice – and maybe so that I feel like I shared something with my family, a common vision”.<sup>9</sup> Though Coupland revisits this point in many different ways over the course of his work, this sense of loss perhaps comes across most clearly in *Life After God*, which theologian Kelton Cobb describes as “the plea of an unshaped religious consciousness, aware of its own aimless desire, craving an ultimacy that is more satisfying than pure irony can be”.<sup>10</sup> Scout, whose act of self-baptism ends the novel, recalls his experiences in high school:

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Draper, ‘Novelist Who’s Telling us a Mystery’, *Church Times* 23 (September 2003), at <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=20903>. Accessed 27/12/09.

<sup>7</sup> Coupland, *Life After God*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Hey Nostradamus!* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Coupland, *The Gum Thief* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 248.

<sup>10</sup> Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 136.

Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere in a televised non-paradise; death was something similar to recycling. Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of the children of the children of pioneers – life after God – a life of earthy salvation on the edge of heaven. Perhaps this is the finest thing to which we may aspire, the life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life – and yet I find myself speaking these words with a sense of doubt. I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God. But then I remind myself we are living creatures – we have religious impulses – we *must* – and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion? It is something I think about every day. Sometimes I think it is the only thing worth thinking about.<sup>11</sup>

To give a more specific example, hinted at in the passage above, death and the afterlife, with all of the conscious and unconscious religious connotations they carry with them, make recurring appearances in Coupland's work, again frequently couched in terms of *absence*. In *Microserfs* (1996), the narrator Daniel writes of his brother Jed, who drowned when they were both children:

I'd like to hope Jed is happy in the afterworld, but because I was raised without any beliefs, I have no picture of an afterworld for myself. In the past I have tried to convince myself that there is no life after death, but I have found myself unable to do this... But I just don't know how to begin figuring out what these pictures are.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth elaborating on this point, especially considering that the acknowledgement and acceptance of death serves as an important example of the way Coupland's work explores the esoteric dimensions of human living. In *Polaroids from the Dead* (1996), an early anthology of journalistic and personal writings, Coupland tells a parabolic story about an 'enchanted' city, a city charmed but without rain, and a visit paid to it by a skeleton. The story is a scathing condemnation of contemporary culture, and particularly its ignorance of the possibility of an afterlife and its studied dismissal of the enigmatic figure of death. Here Coupland compares the enchanted city (which is in reality a highly *disenchanted* place, in the sense that Max Weber used the word) with the genuine enchantment that the interloping skeleton, as both a metaphor for the hidden and as the literal presence of death, brings with him. Using language

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<sup>11</sup> Coupland, *Life After God*, pp. 273-274.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Flamingo, 1996), p. 15.

that mirrors that of the passage from *Life After God* quoted above, the skeleton tells the city's people, who plead for help in making it rain:

It is simple... While you live in mortal splendour – with glass elevators and grapes in December – the price you pay for your comfort is a collapsed vision of heaven – the loss of the ability to see pictures in your heads of an afterlife. You pray for rain, but you also are praying for pictures in your heads that will renew your faith in an afterlife... I am the skeleton that lies deep within each and every one of you. I am the skeleton just underneath your lips, your eyeballs, your flesh – the skeleton that silently carries both your heart and your mind.<sup>13</sup>

The people repeatedly cast the interloping skeleton out of the city but the king is forced to call him back when the drought continues. The king tells the skeleton, “We are losing our soul. We realize now that our city's splendour has tricked us into forgetting about death and the afterlife, and that we have secretly prayed for those images to appear to us and remind us of what lies beyond”.<sup>14</sup> The skeleton leaves the city with a final message: “Accept the fact that as we live, we are also dead and all of your other prayers will be answered”.<sup>15</sup> And, in true fairy-tale fashion, they are; rain fills the city, and the inhabitants dance “in honour of all that is good in this world and all that is good in the next”.<sup>16</sup> This enchanted city, and by extension the contemporary Western city as a whole, Coupland tells us, *needs* death. This acknowledgement of the ultimate importance and unknowability of death within Coupland's novels is deepened when read against his vision of the world, which often flirts with the conviction that living anaesthetised to larger metaphysical realities is a kind of *living death* that is comfortable but, in the end, is both dishonest and overly insular. This world needs a vision of something beyond its visible, tactile surface, something hidden but profound which lies outside or beneath or within the mundane surface of the world. It needs this something in order to be whole.

The interplay between this perceived absence of religion and the search for meaning permeates his novels and forms an important part of the fabric of their setting and tone. Theologian Andrew Tate nicely captures some of the spirit of Coupland's attitude towards religion:

as a writer from an avowedly secular background, Coupland's relationship with the religious tradition is neither one of disillusion nor one of reclamation. Rather, his work seeks a new sacred

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead*, p. 61.

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vocabulary constructed from the detritus of an obsessively materialist culture and represents a serious attempt to read an apparently godless world in spiritual terms. For Coupland, this unfocused spirituality is the consequence of an anxiety of choice and the lack of coherence at the heart of the postmodern world. Spirituality, he implies, has not been erased but rewritten by the command economy of consumerism.<sup>17</sup>

Tate gets at an important aspect of Coupland's treatment of religion when he writes of his 'unfocused spirituality'; however, there are a number of other ways to approach this question. Coupland's work exists in a perpetual moment of indecision between Christianity, with its suspect institutional forms, and a vision of the world as enchanted by something beyond the visible. As we can see in Harj's musings in *Generation A*, this tension manifests itself often in relation to story and storytelling; however, it resurfaces throughout Coupland's work in a variety of other ways. As Harj also tells us, this central tension does not undercut the possibilities for salvation that Coupland seems determined to offer many, if not all, of his characters. This salvation, if it is granted within Coupland's diegetic worlds, comes almost always through an act of personal choice and occurs almost exclusively without explicit institutional intervention. Again, Scout turns not to doctrine or to the churches, but he turns at once inward to his own resources and outwards to nature. Given this, it makes little sense to read Coupland's use of Christian language literally and the question remains as to how to read religion in Coupland's fiction. Placing Coupland against the long and varied tradition of Western esotericism allows us to draw new, more specific and decidedly less orthodox conclusions about Coupland's reading of religion.

### **Reading Paradise: Western Literary Esotericism**

She was saying that most of us have only two or three genuinely interesting moments in our lives, the rest is filler, and that at the end of our lives will be lucky if any of those moments connect together to form a story that anyone would find remotely interesting.<sup>18</sup>

In the interests of working out more precisely where to situate Coupland's work in the contemporary religious landscape, we turn now to Arthur Versluis' discussion of the esoteric tradition in the West, within which Coupland and his vision of a secret world find a rather more comfortable home than they find in

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Tate, "'Now – Here is My Secret': Ritual and Epiphany in Douglas Coupland's Fiction', *Literature & Theology*, vo. 16, no. 3 (2002), pp. 327-328.

<sup>18</sup> The character Andy, in Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 23-24.



institutional Christianity. Though it may seem at first glance an awkward gesture to write of contemporary literature in relation to more esoteric forms of religion, there is a natural fit between Coupland and the varied traditions that make up Western esotericism, which has taken Gnostic, Masonic, cosmological, magical, and metaphysical as well as religious forms. We will take our cue from Versluis' argument, from his book *Restoring Paradise*, that "the Western esoteric traditions, despite their often almost bewildering variety, are fundamentally about reading: about reading nature, about reading the stars, about reading as discovering esoteric knowledge about ourselves and of the cosmos".<sup>19</sup> It is crucial to underline the fact that esotericism has appeared in many guises over the course of Western history, often in forms only tangentially related to more established, more mainstream religious traditions. Such esotericism has manifested itself, and indeed continues to manifest itself, in the West in forms that are highly varied. Versluis writes:

The term *Western esoteric traditions* is broad, of course, but necessarily so: it defines a vast range of traditions, including alchemy, astrology, Christian gnosis, Freemasonry, Jewish Kabbalah, magic, mysticism, Rosicrucianism, theosophy, and related currents of hidden knowledge in the European inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this diversity, esotericism above all involves secret knowledge, truths hidden from much of the world but accessible to individuals who are, for whatever reason, able to access that truth. Accessing this esoteric knowledge often involves a process or at least an act of *initiation* that allows the practitioner to enter into this secret world. In many forms of Western esotericism, this initiation has often, but certainly not exclusively, been tied to entry into secret societies or religious organisations; however, Versluis notes that such initiation has often been imagined as the product of an encounter with a work of art.

Though there is a great deal to interest us in his history of esoteric religion in the West, what is most compelling about Versluis' argument for our current purposes is the connection he draws between Western esotericism and literature:

in Western esoteric traditions, literature and art play a very special kind of initiatory role... What makes Western esotericism different above all, I believe, is the pervasive lack of initiatory lineages and thus of the immediate reproof or approval of a living teacher. In the absence of a well-recognised line of historical masters, the weight of

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, p. 2.

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initiatory transmission is transposed to literary and artistic works, and thus also to the individual.<sup>21</sup>

Even these literary forms of esotericism are tied up with secrecy and with the transmission of hidden knowledge. For esotericism, as Versluis argues, is fundamentally concerned with *gnosis*, a specific kind of *knowing* rooted in individual experiences of or insights into the hidden depths of the world. Inasmuch as he toys with ideas of hidden worlds, initiations into secret knowledge, and lineages which transmit this *gnosis* through the crucial act of storytelling, Coupland's works fall into a long tradition of literary initiations into secret *gnosis*, forming a contemporary part of a long continuum of what Versluis calls Western esotericism's "uniquely literary paths toward paradise".<sup>22</sup> This is not to claim a direct historical link between Coupland's novels and any particular stream of Western esotericism, but to argue for something more diffuse. Versluis notes that there is a tendency within Western esotericism for "ahistorical continuity", which "refers to the continuation of a specific esoteric paradigm precisely without any direct historical lineage".<sup>23</sup> In contrast to historical chains or lineages of initiation, such continuity implies a far looser and far more precarious process of the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of esoteric ideas and practices through history. Given this, it would be a mistake to attribute too much to this sense of connection. Coupland is not, after all, a practitioner of or an apologist for Theosophy or any other specific form of esotericism any more than he is an advocate for traditional forms of Christianity; however, his work has unmistakably esoteric elements, both in its diegetic focus on *gnosis* and in its insistence that such *gnosis* is available only to those who have experienced this knowledge directly.

### **Douglas Coupland's Secret Worlds**

I said that this was truly random coincidence, except Ethan said I was not only being redundant ('random coincidence'), but that he didn't believe in randomness, which is, I imagine, a tacit admission of religiousness.<sup>24</sup>

With a close reading across the breadth of Coupland's work, the connections between Coupland and this esoteric inheritance are clear. This is most apparent in the way that Coupland presents the tensions between the visible and the hidden worlds, which collide in many of his novels. In *Eleanor Rigby* (2004),

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<sup>21</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> The character Daniel, in Coupland, *Microserfs*, p. 326.

Coupland's middle-aged narrator Liz Dunn is given a key to the secret world, an initiation if you will, when she first meets her wayward son Jeremy, a young man afflicted with Multiple Sclerosis and given to prophetic, ecstatic visions of a world divided between what is visible and what is hidden. Early on, Liz confesses to the reader that metaphysical questions had, until her encounter with Jeremy, never really penetrated her consciousness. She describes her first knowledge of these visions as nothing short of an 'awakening'. These visions inspire her to look at the mundane world with a new attention to the inherent mystery that Jeremy's *gnosis* grants her:

I looked over at the kitchen wall. I looked at the paint, and it struck me that between that paint and the kitchen wall there had to be a space of some sort – even if it was a millionth of an inch thick. I tried to imagine being in a microscopic spacecraft, digging into that paint, searching for that secret charmed space. Perhaps it only exists as a concept, but maybe it's real, too. But I suppose to hunt for it is to kill it. You can only feel it surround you, feel it cover you, feel it make you whole.<sup>25</sup>

While *Eleanor Rigby* is perhaps Coupland's most systematic and thorough exploration of the split between the visible and the esoteric and the healing potential that access to this knowledge can bring, Coupland's diegetic worlds are frequently interrupted by fleeting glimpses of the secret world that exists underneath or alongside the surface of the mundane world. This other level of reality is accessible only to a select few through varied processes of discovery, or to use traditional esoteric language, of *initiation*. The most important path of initiation for Coupland's characters is the direct experience of this world when the surface of the banal world is ruptured by an extraordinary occurrence. Though they are more important and more visible in his early works, these ruptural or initiatory moments appear in many – if indeed not *all* – of Coupland's novels. Though these moments are painted as extraordinary, they are paradoxically built into and *out of* the structure of everyday life. In *Life After God*, which is not coincidentally both Coupland's most complete meditation on religion and the place where the borders between the different levels of reality and meaning are the most permeable, the narrator recalls taking a walk with a neighbour:

Once, on a morning after a particularly noisy night, Cathy and I were walking down Drake Street and we saw a crow standing in a puddle, motionless, the sky reflected on its surface so that it looked as though the crow was standing on the sky. Cathy then told me that she thinks there is a secret world just underneath the surface of our own world. She said that the secret world was more important than

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<sup>25</sup> Coupland, *Eleanor Rigby*, p. 153.

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the one we live in. 'Just imagine how surprised fish would be', she said, 'if they knew all the action going on the other side of the water. Or just imagine yourself being able to breathe underwater and living with the fish. The secret world is that close and it's *that* different'.<sup>26</sup>

This world may be as close as the next puddle; however, in Coupland's novels, not everyone is willing or able to acknowledge that this world exists. Like all esoteric knowledge, access to such hidden truths is for the few rather than for the many. It is for those who, through whatever agency and for whatever reason, have been initiated into this secret world. These ruptural moments act as an initiation into this hidden *gnosis*, but these moments are available only to those people who, as we shall see, *choose* to see this world. These moments take widely varied forms, from an attack by a dive-bombing egret,<sup>27</sup> to a flash of lightning on a lonely desert road,<sup>28</sup> to a bedroom suddenly filled with wild animals.<sup>29</sup> We can see the diverse forms that such initiatory moments can take by considering two characteristic examples, taken from two novels separated by eleven years. In *Life After God*, the narrator recounts a ruptural moment in the decidedly mundane setting of a petrol station:

I stopped at the Husky gas station to pick up a map, checked at a pay phone for my messages back in Vancouver and then returned to my car. As I did this, two glossy smooth old [Volkswagen] Karmann Ghias, like M&Ms with wheels, pulled up to the pumps from each direction, one red and one yellow. There was a startled awkward moment as the two drivers noticed each other's car. And then the woman at the cash desk said to me from behind, 'Think of what lovely orange babies they'll have'. I laughed and for a brief moment I felt I was part of something larger than just myself, I felt like I had entered a world of magic.<sup>30</sup>

It is crucial here to look in some detail at Coupland's language, which touches on 'magic' and the intimation of a larger – and, we are given to assume, far more interesting – world that is only visible to some, and then only visible for the briefest of moments.

Another of these moments, in *Generation X*, has become what may very well be the most discussed scene in Coupland's whole *corpus*, though the novel contains a number of other initiatory moments. As a surprise for his family on Christmas morning, Andy, the novel's narrator, places "hundreds, possibly thousands" of lit candles of every description in his parent's living

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<sup>26</sup> Coupland, *Life After God*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>27</sup> See Coupland, *Generation X*, pp. 176-179.

<sup>28</sup> See Douglas Coupland, *Miss Wyoming* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1999), pp. 310-311.

<sup>29</sup> See Douglas Coupland, *Shampoo Planet* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992), pp. 298-299.

<sup>30</sup> Coupland, *Life*, pp. 236-237.

room, where the family has gathered for the holidays. All of the candles are sitting on pieces of tinfoil, which reflects the firelight back into the room. Andy creates what he describes as a “molten living cake-icing of white fire, all surfaces devoured in flame – a dazzling fleeting empire of ideal light... we enter a room in which bodies can perform acrobatics like an astronaut in orbit, cheered on by febrile, licking shadows”.<sup>31</sup> When faced with the spectacle, Andy’s mother says, “‘Do you know what this is like? It’s like the dream everyone gets sometimes – the one where you’re in a house and you suddenly discover a new room that you never knew was there. But once you’ve seen the room, you say to yourself, ‘Oh, how obvious – of course that room is there. It always has been’””.<sup>32</sup> This is not a *different* world, just one that remains hidden until revealed suddenly in such initiatory moments. At the same time, this hidden world is both eternal and stable within itself, a fixed but dynamic point above which the chaos of everyday life endlessly flows and eddies. These moments, the paradoxically ordinary/extraordinary moments that are spread across Coupland’s novels, are crucial elements to Coupland’s literary esotericism and it is worth noting that a number of other studies of Coupland have noted their importance. Lynch writes of these ruptural events as “fragmentary experiences of meaning”.<sup>33</sup> G. P. Lainsbury calls them both “magical gestures” and “transcendental moments”.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Tate calls them “epiphanies”, though he later admits that, given the ambiguous nature of traditional Christian motifs in Coupland’s work, this kind of language is inherently problematic.<sup>35</sup>

Understanding these as ‘initiatory moments’ in an esoteric sense, rather than as epiphanies or gifts of grace or any other specifically Christian form of knowing, not only allows us to avoid the problems that Tate admits to having in describing Coupland’s religious consciousness, but it also allows us to understand that such fleeting experiences have continuing consequences. Within the novels (and outside of them, if we are to go by the critical literature), these initial glimpses into the secret world are not easily forgotten. Indeed, they go on to inform the lives of the characters that experience them. These experiences are of profound metaphysical and even ontological significance for those who are granted access to them, or who seek them out. These events are initiatory in that they force the initiate to try to make new

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<sup>31</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, p. 146.

<sup>32</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>33</sup> Lynch, *After Religion*, pp. 97-99.

<sup>34</sup> G. P. Lainsbury, ‘Generation X and the End of History’, *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (1996), p. 186, p. 229.

<sup>35</sup> Tate, “‘Now – Here is My Secret’”, p. 331.

sense of a world that has been suddenly split in two. In *Life After God*, the narrator reflects on his experience at the filling station:

I thought of how every day each of us experiences a few little moments that have just a bit more resonance than other moments – we hear a word that sticks in our mind – or maybe we have a small experience that pulls us out of ourselves, if only briefly ... And if we were to collect these moments in a notebook and save them over a period of months we would see certain trends emerge from our collection – certain voices would emerge that have been trying to speak through us. We would realise that we have been having another life altogether, one we didn't even know was going on inside of us. And maybe this *other* life is more important than the one we think of as being real – this clunky day-to-day world of furniture and noise and metal.<sup>36</sup>

For Coupland's characters, the unmasking of a secret world is often a fleeting and bittersweet experience, as we can see when *Generation X*'s Andy reflects on his experiment with the candles. His direct experience of the secret world in that burning moment forces him to reassess his whole consciousness of the world and his own place within it:

But there is a problem. Later on life reverts to normal. The candles slowly snuff themselves out and normal life resumes... And the small moments of intense, flaring beauty such as this morning's will be utterly forgotten, dissolved by time like a super-8 film left out in the rain, without sound, and quickly replaced by thousands of silently growing trees.<sup>37</sup>

Andy's final evocation of silent trees is a reminder that many of these initiatory moments take place explicitly in relation to the natural world. Coupland frames these encounters with the secret world in sharply drawn images of birds, flames, water, sunlight, rain, mountains, and stars visible during daylight. If we take Versluis' concept of ahistorical continuity seriously, it is possible to read Coupland's neo-Romantic elevation of nature as a contemporary iteration of the same drive that motivated Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, an important part of the modern Western esoteric tradition.

This *gnosis* of the secret world is, like all esoteric knowledge, something available only a select group of people. Some of these moments happen by accident or are, as in the case of *Eleanor Rigby*'s Liz, result from abilities inherited from other people. Even then, the characters that experience these ruptures are *already open* in some way to the possibility that the world is more than it seems on the surface. In this way, initiation within Coupland's worlds is in an important sense a matter of individual *choice*. In *Eleanor Rigby*, Liz

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<sup>36</sup> Coupland, *Life After God*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>37</sup> Coupland, *Generation X*, p. 147.

addresses this choice in the novel's opening lines, which are reflected thematically and metaphorically throughout the course of the novel:

I had always thought that a person born blind and given sight later on in life through the miracles of modern medicine would feel reborn. Just imagine looking at our world with brand new eyes, everything fresh, covered with dew and charged with beauty – pale skin and yellow daffodils, boiled lobster and a full moon. And yet I've read books that tell me this isn't the way newly created vision plays out in real life. Gifted with sight, previously blind patients become frightened and confused... In the end, those gifted with new eyesight tend to retreat into their own worlds. Some beg to be made blind again, yet when they consider it further, they hesitate, and realise they're unable to surrender their sight. Bad visions are better than no visions.<sup>38</sup>

When Jeremy dies and leaves Liz his visions, she is forced to make her own decision between sight and blindness. In *Life After God*, which lacks the magical or supernatural element of *Eleanor Rigby*'s visions, Coupland frames this choice between the two competing views of the world in slightly different terms. These visions are for those few people who have are neither “unable to connect with the profound” nor those who once knew profoundness but who have “closed the doors that lead us into the secret world – or who had the doors closed for them by time and neglect and decisions made in time of weakness”.<sup>39</sup> There is in all of this an implicit claim that such access is both a matter of chance and a matter of will, a choice to believe that the world is more than it seems.

This fundamental act of choice is one of the central themes of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, where it intriguingly gets tied up almost inextricably with images and narrative tropes derived from the Christian tradition. Of all of Coupland's novels, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the one that seems to cry out the most for a theological, even Christological interpretation. The story is littered with the language of miracles, blessings, sacrifice, offerings, salvation, the loss and regaining of faith. It is a story of fall and redemption, of apocalypse and revelation. It is, as Veronica Hollinger writes, nothing less than “neoconservative salvation history complete with a ritual sacrifice”.<sup>40</sup> Karen, the titular character, serves as this sacrifice. Tellingly, it is also Karen who has access to the secret world. Karen finds, or is given access to, this world through

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<sup>38</sup> Coupland, *Eleanor Rigby*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Coupland, *Life After God*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>40</sup> Veronica Hollinger, 'Apocalypse Coma', in *Edging Into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, eds Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 168.

a visionary experience she has the day before falling into a seventeen-year coma. Jared, the ghost of a long-dead friend and one of the novel's narrators, tells her upon her reawakening that her coma was something she had chosen for herself: "you accidentally opened certain doors. You were taking all those diet pills and starving yourself. Your brain did somersaults; you saw things; you caught a glimpse of things to come... *You* chose this, not me or anybody else".<sup>41</sup> As the novel closes, the spectral Jared gives his living friends an insistent and necessary task, one which Lynch quite rightly notes is "reminiscent of the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel".<sup>42</sup> What Jared demands is that his friends go out into the world and force other people to open themselves to the vague, always undefined, likely indefinable *something more* that constitutes Coupland's *gnosis*:

Well, now it's going to be as if you've died and were reincarnated but you stay inside your own body. For all of you. And in your new lives you'll have to live entirely for the one sensation – that of imminent truth. And you're going to have to holler for it, steal for it, beg for it – and you're never to stop asking questions about it twenty-four hours a day, for the rest of your life. This is Plan B. Every day for the rest of your lives, all of your living moments are to be spent making others aware of this need – the need to probe and drill and examine and locate the words that take us beyond ourselves. Scrape. Feel. Dig. Believe. *Ask...* Grind questions onto the glass of photocopiers. Scrape challenges onto old auto parts and throw them off of bridges so that future people digging into the mud will question the world, too... Make bar codes that print out fables, not prices... You must testify. There is no other choice.<sup>43</sup>

There is doubtless a missionary aspect to Jared's demand that his friends go out into the world and act as agents of initiation, forcing open the doors to the secret world so that more people are willing to acknowledge its existence and its power to heal their damaged lives. With the echoes of the gospels that ring through this passage, we see again that perpetual indecision, the perpetually liminal state between traditional forms of Christianity and Coupland's esoterically structured vision of a divided world.

Before drawing this discussion to a close, it is worth extending our argument into more concrete territory by making one brief final point about Coupland's work as an iteration of esotericism. To do this, we must return briefly to Versluis' work on this tradition of *gnosis* and the act of reading in the West. He writes, "Esoteric works draw upon this fundamental participation or

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<sup>41</sup> Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, pp. 214-215.

<sup>42</sup> Lynch, *After Religion*, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, p. 273.



sharing between the creator and the audience in order to entice, guide, or provoke the reader toward a gnostic shift in consciousness, toward perceiving the world in a fundamentally new way".<sup>44</sup> With this in mind, I want to suggest that Coupland's work itself can be seen as an agent of initiation. It is no mere conjecture to suggest that Coupland's work can be seen as a method of transmission; in an uncharacteristic act of hubris in his 2006 novel *JPod*, Coupland makes such a claim himself. The novel finds Coupland picking up threads from his earliest novels by inserting a slightly fictionalised version of himself into the story that he is telling. The world the characters inhabit in *JPod* is one in which Coupland's novels and Coupland himself play integral roles, in the end helping to connect the characters to different levels of meaning and reality. Coupland appears bodily in the novel at intervals to lambaste the narrator Ethan for being shallow, blinkered, callously flippant and ultimately hopeless. Coupland first appears in the novel sitting next to Ethan on an airplane to China, after which Ethan recalls: "I remember Bree in the coffee room once, talking about Coupland's books as I was waiting for some soup to heat. She said that Coupland said that unless your life was a story it had no meaning, that you might as well be kelp or bacteria".<sup>45</sup> Coupland, after a brief and antagonistic conversation with his leading man, leaves the reckless Ethan a message obviously engineered to push Ethan into a new awareness and a new way of being:

Fuck, I feel like Lisa Simpson giving you an on-the-spot quickie analysis but... are you a moron? How damaged are you? You live in a world that is amoral and fascinating – but I also know your life is everyday fare for Vancouverites, so there's no judgment that way. But, for the love of God, grow up. Or read something outside your normal sphere or use what few savings you have... and go to a college or university and rebuild your hard drive. This is weird diagnostic shit coming from a stranger, but, Ethan, you're on a one-way course to utter fuckedupedness. I'm not suggesting you stop – but I am saying *wake up*.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of the novel, after a series of convoluted events involving stolen laptops, an interactive globe, drug-dealing, and an inconvenient corpse, the fictional Coupland has helped his protagonist to open up the doors into the secret world and to experience at least a degree of wholeness. He has, in short, forced Ethan to wake up. There can be little doubt that Coupland, out in the real world, has also done this to at least some of the readers of his literary initiations.

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<sup>44</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Coupland, *JPod* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 256.

<sup>46</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, p. 259, second ellipses in original.

## Conclusion

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only in that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.<sup>47</sup>

On a broader front, Coupland's implicit claim in *JPod* that his stories can act as an initiation into the secret knowledge that the world is more than it seems on the surface has some support in the real world. There is at least anecdotal evidence that Coupland is an important figure in the contemporary religious landscape of the Western world; indeed, there is evidence that Coupland's work *has* acted as an agent of initiation in the lives of people outside the pages of his novels. Lynch writes:

In fact, one researcher looking at emerging trends in the Christian Church said to me that young people he had met as part of his research were more likely to cite Coupland's novels as important influences for them than the writing of any traditional or mainstream Christian theologian.<sup>48</sup>

Moving out into still broader concerns, in closing, I want to suggest that Coupland's work offers us a privileged place to observe the never-ending struggle between the desires of many in the contemporary world to redefine their relationship with religion (often by simply calling it 'spirituality') in a culture that remains utterly informed by its Judeo-Christian inheritance. That Coupland, a self-confessed agnostic, often situates his esotericism in relation to explicitly theological language, as he does in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, is revealing as to how deeply this inheritance is rooted in what is so often and so simplistically considered a secularised age.

Coupland's esotericism also raises intriguing questions about the nature and character of modernity itself. That Coupland can be seen as a contemporary iteration of the Western esoteric tradition raises questions as to the debts that modernity might owe to such currents of thought and their continual reappearance on the cultural scene. Versluis' identification of literature as an important element within Western esotericism suggests an even more radical idea; esotericism is at least partially *constitutive* of modernity, for the rise of the novel and of more secular forms of literature played a crucial role in defining the mood and character of modernity. Historian Mark

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<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 90.

<sup>48</sup> Lynch, *After Religion*, p. 90.

Sedgwick indeed makes this connection explicitly when he writes, “although Western esotericism has often been ignored by scholars embarrassed at this survival from earlier times, the emergence of modernity itself is in fact intertwined with this history of esotericism”.<sup>49</sup> Reading Coupland in light of this history of hidden *gnosis* and secret worlds can help us to reveal these hidden debts within modernity and, ultimately, arrive at a more accurate and convincing understanding of where we stand today.

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 13.