

TEXTUAL UNRELIABILITY, TRAUMA, AND THE FANTASTIC IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *LULLABY*

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Introduction

A detailed analysis of Palahniuk's early novels, from *Fight Club* (1996) to *Choke* (2001), shows the existence of a number of motifs that are systematically repeated from book to book. A pattern emerges with one or several traumatized protagonists who willingly inflict pain upon themselves; the resulting effects of such action are understood by the characters as a necessary ritual of passage to rid themselves of their previous identities. Furthermore, Palahniuk's protagonists choose to rebel against social conventions and embrace the old ways of the questing hero, a mythic figure now filtered by contemporary American culture, especially by its patterns of video clips and the road movie genre. Accordingly, his main characters begin a journey of initiation, either psychic or physical or both, hoping to develop a new identity (compare Campbell 45-233). But always at the end of the novel the reader is left with the impression that, in contrast to the old mythic models, good has not finally overcome evil, and that everybody, actual reader or fictional character, still remains trapped in a condition of ethical inconclusiveness. Nihilism is frequently counterbalanced by the new, apparently better identity but it is never clear that the hero's new identity is leading her or him anywhere. Strategically, the inconclusive condition of his protagonists' quest keeps readers questioning the writer's ultimate moral aims.

The early novels also elicited strong reactions from readers and critics on account of the excessively grotesque and sordid nature of some scenes and themes. Additionally, Palahniuk's books seem to follow his self-imposed norm to write a type of fiction that fits within the literary parameters of realism and minimalism. On several occasions, the author has described his minimalist style as necessary for the "transgressional" quality of his fiction. He has praised Amy Hempel's works explicitly and also confessed his attraction to

Tom Spanbauer's "dangerous writing," a style that demands the author express his own fears of embarrassing sentiments and themes by adopting a minimalist approach (*Stranger Than Fiction* 141-46).

However, in 2002 Palahniuk published *Lullaby*, the first in a sequence of novels that incorporates overt fantasy elements. The writer describes in it an unnerving, fantastic reality, opened to the manifestation of ghosts and magic spells, supernatural features unknown so far in his fiction but which will reappear in later books such as *Diary* (2003), *Haunted* (2005), and more recently in *Damned* (2011). This paper analyzes both the narrative techniques and the main themes the writer deploys in *Lullaby* with a double aim: first, to describe the structure of the novel and evaluate whether the intrusion of explicit fantastic elements in *Lullaby* really represents a departure from Palahniuk's earlier fiction; and secondly, to interrogate the importance that critics, readers, and Palahniuk himself have given to the deadly power inherent in language as the central theme in this novel. The following analysis shows that the power of language to kill is only one of the two main subjects of *Lullaby*. Eventually this power gives way to the spell of occupation, an attribute from the fantastic that symbolically condenses narrative anxieties about free will, identity, and ethics in contemporary society. In order to carry out the analysis, the following features will be examined: the narrative structure of the novel, the role of the narrator as traumatized personage and his use of well-known critical and cultural theories, the function that unreliability and uncertainty play in the narrator's understanding of reality, and the significance that magic and witchery achieve in the qualification of *Lullaby* as a socially committed novel that pursues a moral aim.

The condition specifically new that distances *Lullaby* from realist fiction is not the protagonist's traumatized distortion of a believable reality in his role as narrator—an elusive gothic trait that Palahniuk has used before—but the presence of some elements both in the story world and in the act of narrating that intrude *visibly* from the gothic and, more specifically, from the fantastic mode.¹ These new features combine with the author's stylistic use of the grotesque in a narrative that some critics soon qualified as neo-gothic. In fact, *Lullaby* became a best-seller, earning for Palahniuk the 2003 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, as well as a nomination for the Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel in 2002, as recognition that his fiction had embraced explicit gothic characteristics.

Frequently regarded as a symbolic manifestation of psychic and social disturbances, traditional gothic writing has been understood also as a cultural reaction to the project of the Enlightenment. It is a type of literature in which critics have recognized an impulse of individual and social subversion that opens unnerving spaces in our rationalized understanding of reality (Jackson 171-80, compare to Clemens 5-11). Although they do not specifically focus their interest on the fantastic elements intruding in *Lullaby*, some critics have

understood the use of the gothic in the book as a metaphoric strategy aimed at different political meanings. So, while Peter Mathews stresses the novel's attempt to call our attention to the difference existing in language between what is legal and what is moral (160-69), Lance Rubin convincingly associates *Lullaby* with the political and moral effects of 9/11 and the risks of portraying explicit manifestations of terrorism, as Palahniuk had done abundantly in his previous fiction (161-63). However, as the following pages will show, in *Lullaby* the fantastic does not simply replace manifestations of terrorism but opens uncanny areas in current reality where the ghosts of human slavery come back to life. As happens in many classic narratives of the fantastic, the bridge between the worlds of familiar reality and the supernatural is built in the narrator's mind, and from there it seeks to spread and contaminate the readers' minds.

Narrative Techniques, Unreliability, and Authorial Irony

As with many other novels written by Palahniuk, *Lullaby* features a narrator who is also the protagonist of a story he tells to an indefinite *you*, who could be himself or an actual narratee present in the telling of the story or, by extension, the reader. Addressing the story to an undefined *you* is a traditional narrative strategy but, as Joshua Parker contends, Palahniuk accelerates it by "substituting pronouns for each other in such rapid succession that the identities of the reader, narrator, and characters are often completely transposed" (89). The technique may produce confusing effects sometimes, but it clearly seeks to reduce the emotional distance between narrator and reader, a distance also minimized by the narrator's abundant use of the present tense while reporting past events. In line with such a strategy, in *Lullaby* the story starts with a prologue in which the narrator introduces the figure of "*our* hero, Helen Hoover Boyle" (2, emphasis added). However, Helen is a rather un-heroic person who, as readers are informed early in the narrative, makes a wealthy living from selling and reselling houses that are allegedly haunted by ghosts; later, readers are informed that she also makes a fortune as a contract killer. Her behavior is clearly more questionable than heroic. Besides, the prologue does not fulfill its typical literary function of establishing the settings and background of the story but is limited to describe Helen's (immoral) character and to report on one of the events of the plot, trapping readers by beginning *in medias res*, a device that Palahniuk had already used in *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. Thus, temporality soon becomes a significant aspect of the book: the narrator-as-alleged-editor of the story relates mysterious events that demand subsequent reports of previous events to help readers make sense of the story. His peculiar prologue is followed by chapter 1, typographically written in italics to mark a temporal jump. However, this chapter actually functions as a true editorial prologue, presenting the narrator's background while also exposing his beliefs in the power and deceit involved in telling stories. Chapters 18, 27, 32, and 44

are also written in italics and refer to events much closer to the time in which the narrator is reporting his story, in this way enhancing the impression of temporal immediacy that, in its turn, is expected to bring the reader emotionally closer to the world of the story.

The addition of the italicized chapters indicating temporal jumps in the narrative presentation further impedes the reader's traditional and chronological understanding of the events, whereas both the deceit of writing a prologue which is not a prologue and the use of chapter 1 as an actual prologue not only disclose the narrator's confused mind, but also his attempt to write a self-conscious literary report that openly denies its own accuracy. The beginning of chapter 1 thematically focuses on the narrator's metafictional perception of his literary task: "*The problem with every story is you tell it after the fact....Another problem is the teller. The who, what, where, when, and why of the reporter. The media bias. How the messenger shapes the fact*" (7). The narrator's words reveal a self-conscious understanding that he is fabricating a narrative in which objectivity is continuously at risk. Thus, from the beginning of his story the narrator explicitly refers to his own narrating role as nonobjective and manipulative, disclosing for the first time his belief in the association existing between power and language, one of the two main themes of his story. Accordingly, readers are expected to start doubting the truth of his report from its very beginning—a game of explicit unreliability with which Palahniuk had already experimented in *Choke*.

Moreover, *Lullaby*'s narrator sticks to a major minimalist rule that Palahniuk employs in his four preceding novels: he provides readers with his sole perception and interpretation of the events he reports. There is no apparent attempt to present or assume other characters' opinions or thoughts, a feature that clashes with the manifestation of the other key theme in the novel: *surrogation* or the mental and bodily enslavement of people by other people. In fact, *surrogation* is one of the main features that mark the entrance of *Lullaby* in the category of fantastic fiction, and it directly affects the narrator's emotional life—or so he believes—by the end of his story, while also adding to his unreliability.

Narrator Carl Streator's explicit unreliability is further marked by the main disturbing characteristic Palahniuk has invested on him: he suffers from PTSD and becomes a serial killer despite the fact that he is frequently invoking God and his religious convictions. Similarly, female protagonist Helen Hoover Boyle is not only a professional killer who sells and resells houses allegedly occupied by ghosts, but she also paradoxically confesses that she does not believe in the supernatural—"There are no ghosts," she says, "When you die, you're dead. There's no afterlife" (128). Both characters are strongly contradictory, continuously denying with their actions and words the values and beliefs they seem to support. Furthermore, Streator's report is saturated with ghosts, spells, magic, and supernatural events that frequently point to the

disturbed condition of his psyche. In addition to its explicit gothic elements, the story itself offers clues that allow readers to rationalize the narrator's contradictions and unreliable behavior.

Streator's Traumatized Condition and the Intrusion of the Fantastic

The writer's capacity to analyze reality from a multiplicity of updated critical angles, relying on but also questioning the critical schools that provided the theoretical support for the postmodern paradigm and its cultural aftermaths stands out among the factors that may explain the popular success of Palahniuk's fiction. As the following pages will disclose, critical perspectives coming from the views defended by Baudrillard, Lacan, Derrida, or Foucault frequently appear in Streater's narrative—as well as in Palahniuk's previous novels (see McKinney 76, Slade 233-37, Schuchardt 157-74). However, in his double role as narrator and protagonist, Streater can be best defined as a severely traumatized man, a condition that necessarily affects his views about life.

The beginning of Palahniuk's career as a fiction writer roughly coincides with the development of Trauma Studies. Since the late 1980s, a growing number of critical theorists and literary critics started to focus their interest on issues that Freud investigated as "traumatic neurosis," resulting in what still now is a significant critical framework. Resembling the literary universe that Palahniuk has progressively created with each of his novels, Trauma Studies begins with the recognition of a negative aspect affecting the human being: the patient is described as victim of a psychic (and often also physical) injury, the trauma itself, motivated by one or several experiences that have not been fully and consciously assimilated and understood by the victim's rational capacity (Caruth 4-6). In addition, as also occurs in the case of gothic literature, trauma narratives center on the representation of the incomprehensible, the irrational, and the forgotten or never memorized traumatizing event that blocks the victim's recovery. In this context, the traumatic event needs to be remembered, to be assimilated and therefore rationalized, as the only way for the patient to recuperate the self-confidence that allows her or him to reactivate a story of personal heroism. In the history of ideas, the notion that we perceive life as a narrative in which everyone is a protagonist is an old one, going back at least to Plato's well-known allegory of the cave. More recently, its sociological importance was pointed out by poststructuralist thinkers—Derrida's criticism of teleology or Hayden White's notion of *narrativity* easily come to mind, together with the extended use of metafictional practices in postmodern literature. When, as happens in gothic literature, the normal flow of a personal narrative is interrupted by a tragic event or by the shock produced by an illogical factor, trauma theorists contend that it is necessary to reestablish the narrative flow to alleviate the victim's suffering (see Felman 16-43 and Laub 61-65). In the last few decades, the field of Trauma Studies has understood

narration as a therapeutic means to make sense and recompose the story of the events that motivated the trauma. Simultaneously, this interpretive approach has reinstalled powerful links between psychology and critical theory. Possibly aware of such a link, Palahniuk provides in *Lullaby* a controversial and untrustworthy narrator who is a conscious manipulator of language but who is also in the process of rebuilding a personal story (the plot of the book we are reading) that may help him to reconstruct some sense of his own identity years after having been the victim of a terrible event.

The use of a traumatized protagonist is a familiar feature in Palahniuk's fiction, but what makes *Lullaby* different from Palahniuk's previous novels is the assumption that the protagonist's trauma results from the entrance of the supernatural into his life. Gradually among doubts and temporal gaps in his report, as befits a trauma narrative (Caruth 4-6), Streator discloses the terrible event of how he lost his wife and little daughter: "Maybe I used to have a wife and a daughter. What if I read the damned poem to my own family one night with the intention of putting them to sleep? Hypothetically speaking, of course, what if I killed them?" (84). At the moment of this confession in the narrative, there is no way to know whether Streator might be only thinking those words or whether he is telling them to Helen, his inseparable companion in the quest to follow and the woman who also twenty years earlier killed her son and husband by reading them the same magic culling song. Man and woman initiate their quest—as a parodic road movie adventure—to destroy all the existing copies of the deadly lullaby, while they also start to build up a surrogate, grotesque family life.

Readers only know the reasons Streator allegedly has for destroying the poem and his own opinions about the other characters. His own minimalist story is full of indications of the narrator's therapeutic attempt to make sense of his life and progress from his present traumatic tendency to repeat some things compulsively.² The narrative offers abundant examples of Streator's symptomatic traumatized condition; he is trapped by his past but narrates his story using the present tense, his nerves are on edge, leading to fits of rage, and he experiences moments of nihilism while compulsively repeating the same ideas and phrases. It is clear that he has not fully worked through or achieved effective mourning for his loss. His report, the story in *Lullaby*, becomes his best attempt at working through the effects of trauma even if it is ironically enclosed in the pattern of the parodic road adventure to destroy the culling song.

To be added to his incapacity to present the story in clear chronological terms, soon in his narrative Streator explicitly confesses his (transferred) phobias against people who are constantly producing noise, "sound-oholics" and "quiet-ophobics" (15), and as soon as he finds out the killing power of the lullaby his first victims become his purportedly noisy neighbors. However, the most striking manifestation of his anger also represents an attempt at self-

punishment in order to cope masochistically with the manifestations of his guilt: he builds models of houses, hospitals, and churches and then crushes them under his bare foot. He builds the models in the dark, the results being frequently faulty—“No matter how you put it together, you’re never sure if it’s right” (18). Alleviating his anger by crushing the models in a compulsive way results in injury to his foot, such that he starts limping about with the remains of the little models encrusted in his flesh. Obviously, this defense mechanism to relieve his anger also offers a metaphorical reading suggestive of the past he tries to abolish due to the emotional pain caused by the deaths of his wife and daughter, for which he blames himself. Nevertheless, this mechanism of self-inflicted pain is not enough to mitigate his anger and, after having tested the power of the spell on his neighbors and then on his editor, in a matter of minutes he invokes the culling song to kill four more people who merely cross his path on the way to the office (68-69).

Surprisingly, despite the fact that Streator is a highly cultivated man, it should be noticed that he never seems bewildered by the intrusion of supernatural elements in his life. On the contrary, his ample knowledge serves only to activate the compulsive manifestation of some historical and cultural notions he insistently repeats in his report, as one more symptom of his acting out period.

The Narrator as Cultural Critic and the Lack of Ontological Anchors

Characteristic of Palahniuk’s fiction is also the reiterative presence of, at least, one personage—narrator or character—whose didactic purposes become rather noticeable. This personage-as-teacher may help readers to fabricate bombs (Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*) or to have a much better knowledge of human anatomy (Victor or Dr. Page in *Choke*). In any case, the device seems to point to Palahniuk’s conviction that literature is and should be a source of learning (see Harner 184). In *Lullaby* two of the four main characters visibly share the role of teachers: the narrator himself, and Mona, the young witch who worked as a receptionist for Helen, although the other two protagonists, Helen and Mona’s boyfriend Oyster, also show their didactic aims on some occasions.

In his attempts to make sense of his life and work through his traumatic symptoms, Streator offers readers a hyper-documented, updated and didactic understanding of reality, which gradually becomes subversive of the status quo. As a trained research journalist, the narrator shows in his report fluctuating convictions that are systematically mediated by postmodern and poststructuralist thinking. Written in the early years of the new millennium, when postmodernism was understood as a cultural period already commodified, the narrator’s report is rich in repetitive ideas that are both a manifestation of his obsessions and an attempt to break through the discursive trap of the postmodern ethos and its resulting condition of skeptical cultural relativism.

Lullaby draws a mental portrait of the narrator as somebody who is trying to escape from the postmodern effects that resulted in nihilist and cynic views.

Streator's views show the workings of a confused, traumatized mind, where different versions of reality amalgamate to suggest that clear answers are never found in our contemporary understanding of life, reinforcing his conviction that reality is a chaotic ground where patterns can be found. His demands for patterns that may illuminate the meaning of his life and bring him out of the grips of nihilism are a mixture of modernist epiphanic expectations and contemporary notions in chaos theory that became rather fashionable among cultural and literary critics by the end of the twentieth century (see Hayles, "Introduction"). "Pattern" is itself a recurring word in his report. Streator systematically connects the term to his profession as a reporter, but it also affects his credibility as narrator of the story. Chapter 2 centers on his investigations to find out the reasons existing behind many unexplained infant deaths; all doctors can do, he says, "is gather statistics and hope someday a pattern will emerge" (12). So far, all "we know about sudden infant death is there is no pattern," he claims next (13), but he repeats the same sentence much later in the narrative (216), even if by then he had often revealed his belief that the culling song was the reason of the infants' deaths, a belief that is also the main reason for the protagonists' quest. From patterns that may emerge by looking at the garbage and taking notes (24), to patterns connecting some infant deaths to the weather (35) or to the same book of poems (36), to patterns that result in the discovery that Helen's planner is a book of spells (202), Streator's report functions as a pervasive warning about the nontested ways we frequently use to represent and understand reality. By the end of his unreliable report, he finally realizes and is ready to confess the reasons why he decided to act out his trauma by constructing models to destroy: He had built a little house for his daughter's second birthday, a "masterpiece to outlive us" (217) that his pathology activates as a model for his past life, where "everything I hoped would outlive me I've ruined" (217). At that moment, he is left with no more models: "I've run out of parts...this is what I've made of my life. Right or wrong, it follows no great master plan...All you can do is hope for a pattern to emerge, and sometimes it never does" (217).

Within his chaotic understanding of a reality that increasingly demands the search for meaningful patterns, Streator's narrative is also framed by other, more specific poststructuralist notions. He seems to be a convinced Baudrillardian journalist who systematically understands contemporary life as the third stage of simulacra, a commodified copy of a copy of a reality that had never existed (Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations"; see also Blazer 146-49). As happened to some of Palahniuk's previous characters—such as Durden in *Fight Club* or Shannon in *Invisible Monsters*—the narrator in *Lullaby* also believes that the human being has become a commodity, whose body and soul are inescapably trapped by power structures. Additionally, in his views the

social trap cannot be avoided only by acquiring more knowledge; “some people still think knowledge is power” is a sentence that Streator repeats *three times* in his narrative (35, 179, and 188), denying the validity of Michel Foucault’s popularized views. For the narrator, in our present situation knowledge is tightly controlled by Big Brother, as happened in George Orwell’s renowned novel—and, again, as denounced by Baudrillard (see Lockhart 167-74). However, now Big Brother does not manifest his power by means of surveillance but as an instrument of entertainment, to keep the people drugged and trapped in the various addictions created by the media:

Big Brother isn’t watching. He’s singing and dancing. He’s pulling rabbits out of a hat. Big Brother’s busy holding your attention every moment you’re awake. He’s making sure you’re always distracted. He’s making sure you’re fully absorbed.

He’s making sure your imagination withers. Until it’s as useful as your appendix. He’s making sure your attention is always filled. (18-19)

Actual knowledge is thus blocked from most people, who become puppets caught in Big Brother’s addictive net. “With the world always filling you,” he warns his readers, “no one has to worry about what’s in your mind. With everyone’s imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world” (19). Additionally, the phrase “Big Brother [is] singing and dancing” recurs also three times along his report (75, 158, and 246). However, the narrator and the other three protagonists in the story are not politically atrophied. Far from it, they openly engage in the pursuit of power, each one for her or his own purposes, but in all cases ultimate power means for them the possession of the culling song and having control of the *grimoire* or book of spells from which the lullaby was originally translated and copied. Questing for a book that Helen inadvertently had from the beginning in her possession (it was her planner) further suggests that Palahniuk was ironically playing with the old patterns of the mythic hero (the aim of the hero’s quest was within himself from the beginning of his adventure, Campbell 138-58), but also that the writer wanted to highlight the power that is invested in language, a tool that everybody acquires for the apparently innocent purpose of communication.³

Along the quest to soothe his traumatic condition, Streator frequently questions the morality of the protagonists’ actions in their attempt to destroy all the copies of the culling song, and discusses the issue several times with his three companions. The paradox of their quest does not escape him: in the process of destroying the poems they are actually killing people to save lives and burning books to save civilization (160). On three occasions he refers to their peculiar ways as “constructive destruction,” this time echoing Derrida’s views. He first uses the phrase to refer to Helen’s job as professional killer: her job is a remedy to displace her own anxieties to kill the people she knows, including Mona, Oyster, and Streator (148). He uses the expression a second

time when he wonders whether to tell the truth to a poor man who has killed his child with the culling song, but instead Streator starts to cry sympathetically (173-74); the episode also represents a turning point in his own fight against his compulsive acts, and from this point on in the narrative emotions start to play more intensely in his report. However, eventually he kills again using the spell, this time the detective who wanted him for questioning: "I've killed my savior," he confesses, "Constructive destruction" (184).

As mentioned above, the obsession Streator manifests for the number three connects him to Baudrillard's emphasis on the subject's triple separation from reality but also hints at his influential predecessor Jacques Lacan, whose most well-known views are also traceable in the narrator's report. Lacan conceives of the human subject as an entity strongly mediated by language and, as happens in Baudrillard's writings and in Streator's story, the number three plays also an important role in his views about the subject and the world. Lacan bases his understanding of being in the existence of three different ontological orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real (see Ragland-Sullivan 130-34). For this critic, the preliminary overcoming of the order of the imaginary supposes the arrival of the human being to the stage of the symbolic, and therefore his [*sic*] constitution in language as a social subject, but this happens only when the individual has successfully passed along the three different phases that constitute the Mirror Stage. Along the phases of this stage of ego formation there is an unavoidable misrecognition of the self: the individual sees himself as a subject and becomes conscious of it only in the other (Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" 2-5). The Lacanian theory of the specular (mis)formation of the self in the Other has offered for the last decades an influential psychoanalytical explanation for the relevance that mirrors, reflections, and speculation (from the Latin *speculum*, mirror) have in cultural manifestations. But, more important for tracing the notion of the subject that Streator's report portrays in *Lullaby* is the connection that Lacan draws between the misrecognized self of the individual and the latter's necessity to recuperate his previous sense of unity with the Other in the lost order of the imaginary. Once in the order of the symbolic, the Lacanian subject, already constituted in language, is structurally traumatized; there is always the sense of the loss of being, motivated by the resolution of the Mirror Stage: the individual feels the partition from the Other (first represented by the mother), and such loss inaugurates the desire to recuperate it, a notion that Lacan denominates the Phallus (which means both what is absent from the self and the self's desire to recuperate it, "Signification of the Phallus" 220-22).⁴ Along the pages of *Lullaby*, Streator increasingly becomes a confused blender of cultural theories and topoi about the human condition. Once they have localized the grimoire, Helen translates and uses several spells from it, and eventually Mona informs Streator that she has cast a love spell on him. The narrator then starts to collapse again, and his words point to a bleak Lacanian understanding of life: "Spells to fix spells to fix spells

to fix spells, and life just gets more miserable in ways we never *imagined*. That's the future I see *in the mirror*" (231, emphasis added). At this point of the narrative, Streator is conscious that he has been exposed to a process of emotional invasion since the early moments of his road quest, in which he overtly recognized in the other protagonists the image of a surrogate family. Centering his attention on Mona, he realizes that she is "the age my daughter would be, if I still had a daughter" (101). Then he turns his attention to Helen, and material and imagined Lacanian mirrors filter his thoughts:

Over the glass, she watches the room. She watches Oyster circling me.
 He's the age her son, Patrick, would be.
 Helen's the age my wife would be, if I had a wife.
 Oyster's the son she would have, if she had a son.
 Hypothetically speaking, of course.
 This might be the life I had, if I had a life. My wife distant and drunk.
 My daughter exploring some crackpot cult. Embarrassed by us, her parents.
 Her boyfriend would be this hippie asshole, trying to pick a fight with me, her dad. (102)

His negative understanding of a hypothetical future where his wife and daughter would still be alive, reflected in his surrogate family, signals once more Streator's structural traumatized condition and his nihilistic states of panic, situations that recur in his narrative as symptoms of his trauma but that also remove from him, even if only provisionally, the necessary (phallic) desire to go on along his quest.

Certainly, readers may agree with Peter Mathews's illuminating view that *Lullaby* represents a "complex meditation on the moral relationship between voice and politics" (157), and also with Lance Rubin's understanding of the novel as a warning against the Bush administration. *Lullaby*, in this second meaning, reads as an allegory of the power that political language had "to shape the discursive framework of the so called 'war on terror'" (Rubin 163). We may also take into consideration the author's comments at the time of completing the novel—when he was following the trial against the man who murdered his father—and his evaluation of the enormous judicial power represented in the use of words (Mathews 157). In any case, the insistent depiction in the book of the lethal power of words to create and annihilate life cannot be underestimated: all along Streator's unreliable report, knowledge, reading, and speaking enclose the ultimate power of death and life, just as in real life, outside the limits of the novel. Political and judicial decisions that affect millions of people are dictated every day, and language is the instrument that creates and carries them. However, *Lullaby* also invites readers to evaluate the forces hidden in the human being since primitive times and the basic ways in which our species envisioned life at a time when magic was believed to rule the earth. In this sense, the book also functions to assess whether the

human race has evolved much since then. As expected from a novel written by Palahniuk, the answer is rather negative. In *Lullaby*, every protagonist who controls the culling spell only brings about death and misery: Streator becomes a serial killer; Helen is a professional assassin and a cheater, while Oyster becomes a dangerous and egotistic eco-terrorist. Only Mona is devoid of evil purposes. In the book of Genesis God creates the universe by naming it. In *Lullaby*, filtered by his narrator's knowledge of George Orwell, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, or Michel Foucault, Palahniuk warns readers about the immense, "magic" power the Word still has to destroy it.

Uncertain Speech, Uncertain World: Naturalized Magic in *Lullaby*

The narrator's unreliable presentation of a story perceived through the lenses of relativistic poststructuralist thinking and of his own traumatized condition leaves readers without any sound anchor from which to evaluate the truth of his report (or any truth whatsoever). As mentioned above, in his role as a cultivated research reporter, Streator soon discloses his beliefs in the lack of objectivity existing in any report, including his own. Additionally, as a traumatized victim the narrator offers hints that his mind is strongly troubled, to the point that it could be inventing or imagining everything or, at least, a substantial part of his story—as the narrator in *Fight Club* did. By the end of the book, his combination of relativistic views, chaos theory, and traumatized victimhood resolves in an understanding of life as a hybrid ground in which everywhere "words are mixing. Words and lyrics and dialogue are mixing in a soup that could trigger a chain reaction. Maybe acts of God are just the right combination of media junk thrown out into the air" (245).

As the narrative progresses, Streator's sense of being suffocated by the media and his resulting mental confusion increase, and with them the apparent difficulties he has to control his own report—"On the radio waltz music runs into punk runs into rock runs into rap runs into Gregorian chanting runs into chamber music. On television, someone is showing how to poach a salmon. Someone is showing why the *Bismarck* sank" (216). The narrator's postmodern insistence on contemplating life in hybrid terms, his belief in the enslavement of stupefied humans by a continuous mass media brain-storming, together with his relativistic critical views and his own traumatized condition result in a perception of life where a painful picture emerges: humans have no free will, they are always physically and mentally *occupied* by the hidden forces of consumerism and also by other humans. Accordingly, in Streator's narrative of his present condition the pervasive power of language to kill eventually gives way to the power of language to enslave people, a notion symbolically represented by the spell of occupation; magic thus becomes the strategic feature Palahniuk uses to displace the main role of language from killer to enslaver.

Magic invades the novel as one of the causes that explain the narrator's mental condition and unreliability, but it does so in a way that soon becomes devoid of any supernatural mystery. "The story's still unfinished" (216), Streator comments by the end of his report; but at the very beginning of it he had already warned his readers that "[w]e're all of us haunted and haunting" (6). Progressively, Streator's story discloses that emotional contagion is responsible for such an overwhelming situation but also that "haunted and haunting" are severed from their traditional magical meanings. The intrusion of the supernatural conceived as such in *Lullaby* does not last long because of the other main character-as-teacher that Palahniuk portrays in the novel: Mona. She is not only a young witch that somehow knows the art, but she is also a person vulnerable to mass media rattle. In her double condition as expert in witchery and attentive radio listener, she is capable of offering Streator a satisfactory answer to the mystery inherent in his capacity to kill people by mentally reciting the culling song. Ironically, her answer to his puzzlement is rooted in the thermodynamic transmission of energy: "She says, 'All a spell does is focus an intention.' She says this slow, word by word, and waits a beat. Her eyes on mine, she says, 'If the practitioner's intention is strong enough, the object of the spell will fall asleep, no matter where'" (77). The young witch further explains that the most traumatized characters in the story, Streator and Helen, are the best and fastest killers because they have more emotion "bottled up."⁵ However, Mona's thermodynamic principle is complemented by her beliefs in media popular knowledge. She has also fallen into what Streator considers Big Brother's trap and when the narrator asks her about the source of her knowledge she says that she learned it from Dr. Sara on her radio program (78).

From the moment in which the natural roots of magic are explained by Mona, the fantastic, manifested in the use of different spells, becomes naturalized in the narrator's report. Streator, like the average reader, has been so frequently exposed by the media to the ordinary and naturalized character magic has acquired in contemporary culture that there is no further questioning on his part or any surprise about the manifestation of the fantastic in his narrative.

On several occasions, Mona offers Streator lessons about how the power of magic works, always sticking to the two basic rules explained by James Frazer in his influential work *The Golden Bough*: the Law of Contagion and the Law of Similarity (12-14). However, in his story the narrator subverts the chronological order in which Frazer presented the development of human societies. Following his extensive anthropological research, the British scholar concluded that in a first stage primitive humans believed reality to be ruled by the spirits of Nature, spirits that could only be conjured by the magic of wizards and witches—who would apply the two laws above mentioned to do so. The stage of magic was replaced in time by the rule of religion, a second era where

power was conferred to invisible gods, whose designs could be communicated to the faithful only through the gods' human representatives, priests and kings. But finally humanity reached the present stage of development thanks to science, which offers a paradigm based on the power of human reasoning to understand and control natural forces. However, in his significant study Frazer also opened the breach that crystallizes in Streater's belief that (naturalized) magic has come back into our lives. The influential anthropologist realized that some beliefs from one stage made their way into the following one, contributing to a mixed understanding of reality, where features coming from magic could coexist with religious and even scientific characteristics (56-68, 812-23). Furthermore, Frazer also noticed the similarities existing between magic and science:

Thus the keener minds, still pressing forward to a deeper solution of the mysteries of the universe, come to reject the religious theory of nature as inadequate, and *to revert* in a measure to the older standpoint of magic *by postulating explicitly, what in magic had only been implicitly assumed, to wit, an inflexible regularity in the order of natural events*, which, if carefully observed, enables us to foresee their course with certainty and to act accordingly. In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science. (825, emphasis added)

However, although in Frazer's view science has much in common with magic, the latter functions "by false analogy, of the order in which ideas present themselves to our minds," whereas "the order laid down by science is derived from patient and exact observation of the phenomena themselves" (825). In his own mind, Streater has abundantly made good Frazer's connecting links between magic and science but also the famous scholar's warning that remains from one stage may infect the next one. The narrator frequently invokes God despite his enraged and deadly deeds but, in a more radical stance, he regresses mentally in time to the stage of magic in order to understand, once he has naturalized magic forces, his present reality. In other words, his personal poststructuralist views mesh together with Mona's teachings on magic, resulting in Streater's own cultural trap. As happens to the *pharmakon* in Derrida's analysis of Plato's dialogues (95-117), culture becomes for the narrator the disease but also its cure, an autoimmunity mechanism that both suffocates and soothes Streater, thus allowing Palahniuk to play with the Derridean notion of *undecidability* and stress his protagonist's morally uncertain condition. The narrator's Big Brother rattle may be more sophisticated than the one affecting most people, but it has also *occupied* him.

Accordingly, although the deadly culling song seems to be the most powerful spell mentioned in the narrator's report, the spell of occupation has already displaced it in importance by the end of the book. The spell of occupation also fits in the interpretation of magic provided by Frazer in his path-breaking study, where he explicitly refers to the transference of power

and evil among living beings when analyzing some archetypes that also recur in Palahniuk's earlier fiction: saviors and scapegoats (see Frazer 626-33). The use of the occupation spell explicitly signifies at some moments in the novel the wish for immortality and absolute power (52, 228, 240-43), a notion that resonates again with the quest for the Lacanian missing phallus. But, more specifically, the spell means the impossibility that free will may exist in the narrator's interpretation of life. His troubled mind takes Streator to a final obsessive state that increases when Mona reveals that Helen has trapped him with a love (occupation) spell:

What I'm talking about is free will. Do we have it or does God dictate and script everything we do and say and want? Do we have free will or do the mass media and our culture control us, our desires and actions, from the moment we're born? Do I have it or is it my mind under the control of Helen's spell? (228)

It should be noticed that the narrator's flow of thoughts has oscillated from religion (with God as a writer) to culture, to emotional relations, and to a magic spell as factors that may "occupy" his self, in this way practically denying any possibility of free will. In his perception, religion, culture, or affects function as magic, by contagion and occupation, therefore endangering his role as a free subject in society. Not surprisingly, what in the quotation above are still doubts becomes a conviction only two pages later in Streator's report when, by resorting to an image that recalls classic horror movies, he concludes that Helen is "planting her little seeds. Colonizing me. Occupying me. The mass media, the culture, everything laying its eggs under my skin. Big Brother filling me with need" (230). His paranoid understanding of reality has displaced for good the importance that the deadly culling song had for him earlier, and the narrative turns into a grotesque ending with a shocking twist—a strategy also used by Palahniuk in his earlier novels. Following a hasty number of occupation spells (Helen occupies Mona, Oyster occupies Helen, Helen occupies an old policeman) and the escape of the two younger members of the surrogate family with the grimoire, Streator is literarily violated by the fist of the Sarge, the policeman whose body is now occupied by Helen. At this point, the narrator obsessively repeats the central notion of his desolate worldview: "Helen's inside this man the way a television plants its seeds in you. The way cheatgrass takes over the landscape. The way a song stays in your head. The way ghosts haunt houses. The way a germ infects you. The way Big Brother occupies your attention" (243).

Paranoia, Chaos theory, Frazer's Law of Contagion, Derrida's pharmakon or Lacan's quest for the missing phallus provide different angles to understand a complex novel that deals with the dangers implicit in the social and political use of language, while denouncing a modern form of human enslavement. Although the unveiling of human immorality and depravity stands at the core

of the social diagnosis in *Lullaby*, Palahniuk also leaves a dubitative little hope for love to restore balance to the protagonist's life: Streator ends up involved in a second road quest, chasing evil Oyster in an attempt to recuperate the book of spells. He is in the company of his lover, now turned into an old policeman with big hands and a craving for sex, but the doubt remains that Helen might have occupied Streator's emotions with a love spell. In both a metaphoric and a literal sense the fantastic in *Lullaby* has become a powerful device in Palahniuk's fiction to develop further his bleak evaluation of the human condition, a locus where only affections might eventually play a soothing part. The writer's aims do not seem to depart much from his earlier fiction and the moral of his book still remains inconclusive: his protagonist, turned into a serial killer, feels again an anxious need to escape from the traps of a society where people are nothing better than commodities. However, as shown in *Lullaby* through the metaphor of magic, one should think twice before starting a quest to find a new identity because while doing so you may become as depraved as the system that enslaves you.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Professor John Swales and the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan for their continuous support. The writing of this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education (project FFI2012-32719) and the Aragonese Regional Government.

¹ I use the term "fantastic" here as a mode, in the sense provided by Rosemary Jackson who, borrowing from Todorov's classic study, defines the term as the uncertain area where elements of the marvelous (or supernatural) and the mimetic (or realist) are confounded; the fantastic, she contends, "exists in the hinterland between 'real' and 'imaginary,' shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy....Unlike the marvelous or the mimetic, the fantastic is a mode of writing which *enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure*" (35-36).

² The concept of *acting out*, introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1914 essay "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," refers to the often impulsive and aggressive enactment rather than recollection of past events, especially enactments relating to the transference during therapy. More recently, Dominick LaCapra revised the Freudian notion to deal with repetition as a symptom of traumatic experiences. In his own words: "There are two very broad ways of coming to terms with transference, or with one's transferenceal implication in the object of study: acting-out; and working through. Acting-out is related to repetition, and even to repetition-compulsion—the tendency to repeat something compulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. They tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks; or in nightmares; or in words that are compulsively repeated, and that don't seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they're taking on different connotations from another situation, in another place" (qtd. in Goldberg 2).

³ The creative but deceiving power that language offers to traumatized protagonists is already a noticeable theme in *Choke*. It becomes a relevant issue also in later novels such as *Snuff* (2008) and *Pygmy* (2009).

⁴ Lacanian loss can be associated with Dominick LaCapra's definition of structural trauma. For LaCapra structural trauma results from the realization of the intrinsic mortality of the human condition; it may happen *prior* to any specific traumatic experience of individual character or be the result of several traumatic situations (76-81).

⁵ No wonder, then, that in a parody of a Western duel, Streater is much faster than Nash, who also knows the spell, in using the culling song and killing him mentally (236-37).

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