OF MONSTERS AND GROTESQUES: STUDYING THE ELEMENTS OF MONSTROSITY AND GROTS QUERY IN

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ABSTRACT
The study seeks to analyze Jeff Vander Meer’s ‘Borne’ (2017) and ‘Dead Astronauts’ (2019) to describe how the shaping power of monstrosity, weirdness, complexity, and grotesquery in a post-apocalyptic setting can best be appreciated once one applies certain religious tropes for the analysis of the unfolding of the events in the novel. In post-apocalyptic settings of the novels mentioned above, Biblical tropes can help connect the present situation to a past that otherwise exists as a dead and desolate wasteland devoid of any meaning. For the purpose of formulating the theoretical framework, the study employs Foucault’s and Negri’s ideas of monstrosity and Bakhtin’s idea of grotesque as its mainstay.

Keywords: Post-apocalyptic, Dystopian, Posthumanism, Biblical, Religion

I. INTRODUCTION
Defining post-apocalyptic and separating it from apocalyptic literature are quite problematic tasks. The term post-apocalyptic especially when considered from traditional Biblical perspective implies a paradox, since the apocalypse means a literal and final end, not a temporal pause or a symbolic end. So, the very notion of a post-apocalyptic work contains an inherent contradiction since it seeks to undo the very end. As DiTomasso opines, ‘There cannot be anything ‘postapocalyptic’ in the classic apocalyptic texts, or in the mode in which they are expressed’. However, in various futuristic, speculative fictions and science fictional works, we see post-apocalyptic emerging as a powerful subgenre depicting a restart after an end. In this regard, Claire P. Curtis has stated that ‘I define postapocalyptic fiction as any account that takes up how humans start over after the end of life on earth as we understand it’. In the present study too, we shall engage with two post-apocalyptic fictions from this particular point-of-view which implies a starting over post the end. The next problem is the construction of a meaningful worldview which is generally not possible without grounding the present state of experience of the protagonists on certain ideas and symbols of the past and since the past itself ceases to exist in a post-apocalyptic setting, no meaningful reconstruction of a worldview based on ideas or memories from the past seems possible. But, this too can be challenged and countered once we desist seeing the apocalypse as something permanent and instead choose to follow Curtis for whom the catastrophic events are not something akin to the classical, Biblical end, rather they can be ‘a disastrous, violent and catastrophic end event’ and so the end ceases to be a literal end anymore. The present study wants to show how cultural-religious tropes like biblical ideas and symbols can still indirectly function to help the post-apocalyptic present reconnect back to the past which is otherwise effaced and erased. James Berger in his After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse (1999) supports this idea and feels that there is a hope for reconnecting the present signifiers to their historical/past signifieds. While Heffernan in her Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel (2008) posits that post-apocalyptic does not only subvert the traditional linear narrative structure of the apocalyptic texts, but also makes it impossible for the events to reconnect to any of their traditional, past signifieds. In this article, contrary to the claim of Heffernan, we shall endeavor to show how even in post-apocalyptic world, certain religious symbols can help one to ground his complex and chaotic experiences on some meaningful basis. However, monstrosity and grotesquery will reign supreme and they will supplant the roles of traditional religious ideals of hopefulness, redemptive grace and salvation. Also, post-apocalyptic setting will be shown as capable enough in facilitating the emergence of posthumanism via dissolution of binaries, hierarchies, homogeneities and closed and well-defined wholeness and rejection of ‘autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin’ (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 57).
II. DISCUSSION

(a) Attempts to Connect to the Past:

Jeff VanderMeer’s novel Borne (2017) is the first novel in our discussion. The novel is set against the backdrop of a natural world that has been modified beyond recognition by a biotech conglomerate’s indiscriminate act of dumping dangerous biotech waste on the unnamed city. However, even before the actual onset of this anthropic calamity, the people in the city were made to become passive consumers as the Company kept filling their minds with demands for all sorts of things that the latter never really needed: ‘The Company had come to the city unbidden, when the city was already failing and had no defenses against the intruder’ (VanderMeer, Borne 24).

The Company initially touted to be the “saviour” of those people later turned out to be an engenderer of untold horrors. The buildings, the warehouses and their rusted doors in the bleak and desolate landscape of the city stand testimony to their greed and betrayal: ‘In that tangled mass of warehouses and rusted industry lay every excuse and promise of a death foretold’ (VanderMeer, Borne 91). The Company proves itself to be a curse as their wanton acts of environmental degradation provokes an apocalyptic response from nature. The company simply drains the city dry of its resources like a ‘white engorged tick on the city’s flank’ and then uses it as a dumping ground and finally leaves it with absolutely nothing (VanderMeer, Borne 26). The city along with all its places has lost its identity: ‘The original name of the place, on the rusted placard in the subterranean lobby, was unreadable’ (VanderMeer, Borne 8) and is transformed into something strange and grotesque: ‘The city turned into a vast laboratory and now half destroyed, just like the Company’ (VanderMeer, Borne 9).

In Dead Astronauts (2019), which reads like a prequel to Borne, the Company is depicted as having assumed a godlike status in the eyes of the City dwellers. The human researcher Charlie X seems to be descending into a non-human state of indifference as a result of his inability to engage with the past, while the monsters appear more humane than their creator when they dream about a past, long for a God and search for an identity. When the Company first created the prototype Behemoth, other creatures of its kind were also born, but as the struggle for existence grew harder, almost all the other Behemoths died and only the present one remained. It is in his dreams that the Behemoth feels like he is listening to the voice of God while also imagining that it must be like the voice of the Company since the voice of the Company too ‘would boom through like God’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 168).

The entire post-apocalyptic condition has been brought about by man’s cruelty, callousness, and carelessness towards life and nature in general. In the novel, the inanimate objects including the City along with its tunnel assume a hybrid and monstrous dimension: ‘Devoured. Digested. Broken down for parts. Nothing human. Nothing real, flesh-and-blood. Just a witness to atrocity’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 183). The entire City becomes an amalgamation of a post-apocalyptic graveyard and an exotic, carnivalesque hotspot where some of the most chimerical and monstrous beings come to being. It strikes us as a ‘liminal space where ‘the law’ is overturned’ and where ‘nonexclusive oppositions collide.’

In Dead Astronauts, we get detailed descriptions of how the Company with its failed and diabolical researches, has succeeded in creating only grotesque monsters that defy all our attempts at categorization and hierarchization. The master of this “death cult” is the bat-faced scientist Charlie X whose sole aim was to extract and exploit both animal and non-animal beings without showing any concern for their well-being. Charlie has been taught all his life that ‘Plants couldn’t feel pain, animals were objects to be manipulated as products or resources’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 104). The Company has created all sorts of monsters ranging from ‘vast monsters with glittering eyes’, to ‘digging gap-jawed leviathan that ate the soil and vomited it back out’, or a ‘flying (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 15) all of which are both unbelievably grotesque and impossibly weird in their own unique ways: ‘The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden.’ Many of them possess human qualities of sentience and intelligence and yet are utterly non-human. Yet, the monstrosity and grotesquery seem to be paving the way for connecting the referents of the present to the religious, Biblical signifieds of the pre-apocalyptic era. The most prominent example is that of Botch and his incarnations in the form of Behemoth and Leviathan. Behemoth, the terrestrial monster is mentioned in the Old Testament’s Job 40:15–24 and Leviathan, the sea-monster in Job 41, Psalm 74:14, Psalm 104:26, and Isaiah 27:1. Both these overwhelmingly powerful monstrous creatures have been mentioned in those books to bear testimony to God’s creative as well as destructive and even regenerative power, while in the post-apocalyptic age they symbolize only the Company’s hubris which is the cause of their birth. So, the Company is described as playing the role of God before the hapless people of the City, only till the monsters arrived in their true forms to expose the all too human vulnerability and powerlessness of the Company. However, the experiments in the post-apocalyptic context are portrayed as being able to give birth to a whole host of entities who dissolve and destroy the barriers between living and non-living, man and animal as well as sublime and the bestial.
As the novel Borne progresses, we see that from this abysmal pit of darkness and chaos, any hope for deriving meaning from a past with its repository of meaningful referents and closely interlinked chains of signifiers and signifieds becomes impossible. The past proves to be too lost and fragmented to help the present shape a meaningful narrative of its own: ‘...the young were often the most terrible force in the city...They had no memories of the old world to anchor them or humble them or inspire them’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 30). The memories or whatever is left of those memories also appear to haunt the characters in peculiar ways in Dead Astronauts. Since the coherent, linear and stable picture of the past has been replaced by an incoherent and chaotic post-apocalyptic present, not too many meaningful referents in the past now exist with which one may hope to comfortably fashion the experiences of the present; rather, it is through the fragments of incoherent visions and feverish dreams of the monsters and the dim recollections of homeless and destitute Sarah, that the novel helps us to get some glimpses into the dead and buried past. The creature Nocturnalia lodges itself inside Behemoth in one of the Chapters titled “Leviathan” and fills Behemoth’s mind with invasive dreams where the scenes from the cruel past and the thoughts of the Company keep hunting the titanic creature’s mind. The creature Nocturnalia is a monster of a strange type which can change shapes and give rise to nightmarish visions in the hosts’ mind. In its dreams, ‘Behemoth dove and held his breath, to drown whatever clung to his head. Behemoth drifted like a dead thing at the bottom, among the skeletons of its prey’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 150). In the real world, Behemoth is a true monster, he ‘had fought much mightier beasts and won, faith and fate, shaped by scarring, a history of broken ribs, of fins turned misshapen like crooked oars, of a leer to the left side of the mouth caused by a claw ripping through and past’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 97), but once he drifts away to the land of nightmares and hallucinations, all his defense mechanisms give way to lay bare his scarred and splintered self. Just as the characters impress us as lacking in any definite structural integrity, so are the chapters in the novel which also lack structural integrity in any formal sense. The entire narrative is full of such hallucinatory visions, dreams, chimerical hybrids shape-shifting across both space and time, and humans and non-humans both struggling to find an identity for themselves amidst all the mindless chaos. Among the trio whose aim is to defeat the Company and its monsters in Dead Astronauts, this dissolution of structures and indefiniteness of form is most prominent. Among them are the leader Grayson, a black woman with a blind eye who can see things that nobody else can, Chen who understands things in terms of abstractions, probabilities, and mathematical equations while frequently morphing into a hive-mind of salamanders, and Moss who can shift her gender according to her wish and can switch between many selves. The trio itself was the result of some biotechnological experiment of the Company gone wrong and when Rachel discovers them, they were nothing but ‘three dead people in the hazard suits so familiar because all three had worn them. Skeletons within’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 122). The portrayal of the trio reminds us of Agamben’s picture of the Muselmann, ‘an improbable and monstrous biological machine’, whose death ‘cannot be called death’. In Borne too, the inhabitants of this world feel so utterly and overwhelmingly bewildered with the complexity and chaos of the present that trivial things like remembering the names of people and places prove a burdensome task to them: ‘Names of people, of places, meant so little’ (VanderMeer, Borne 7). It reminds us of Jameson’s idea of blank parody where ‘the past as referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether’. TizianaTerranova has described this condition as a critical moment when ‘the social universe emerges as a fragmented aggregate of individuals in a void without historical and material constraints’. People seem too afraid to engage with their past and consequently seek to escape the horrid reality by immersing themselves in simulacra of memories. The “memory beetles” help them to suppress not only their bad memories but also partake in the simulated happiness of others ‘from long ago, from places that didn’t exist anymore’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 8). Since the inhabitants of the city are incapable of fashioning representations of their current experiences they have to adopt simulacra and false representations to make sense of their situation. In Dead Astronauts, too, we see how the characters fail to distinguish between genuine and artificially induced memories since the characters are both physically and mentally unhinged in time and space and to make sense of their world they have to rely on fabricated webs of memories.

The post-apocalyptic discourse, even while seeking to do away with the entire act of constructing a grand vision based on the traditional assumptions of teleology, linearity, universality, and continuity of experiences, which once made a meaningful engagement with the past possible, by choosing to engage with the biblical-religious tropes it can effectively reframe its otherwise complex and bewildering continuum of experiences more coherently or at least in a way which is comprehensive and relatable to the readers. However, this new mode of engagement depends on monstrosity, hybridity, and grotesquity for connecting to the past and refuses to acknowledge the existence of any transcendent or redemptive qualities embedded within those aspects which used to be considered as some of the most defining traits of various traditional religions. So, even though the
post-apocalypse seems to separate itself clearly from the pre-apocalyptic past, with the help of Biblical paradigms, it is possible to create a meaningful medium for refashioning its own set of experiences.

Even though there is no organized religion in the novels, the hope for establishing a connection with the past remains still alive as can be seen by analyzing the events through the framework of Biblical apocalyptic tropes. In Borne, some of these groups believe in the character called Magician as a deity of some sort while others are in awe of the truly devastating capabilities of a flying bear named Mord. The magician is swift, deceptive and sinister in her ways, and armed with the latest biotech inventions she casts a strong spell on her followers: ‘Her signs and symbols were everywhere’ (VanderMeer, Borne 91). The City in Dead Astronaut also appears to harbor only ‘broken cults that couldn’t contain itself’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 224) and ‘death cult(s)’ (103), and instead of any true messianic figure or prophet, we find exotic and biotechnologically manufactured creatures like the blue fox as a prophet while one has to rely on ‘Moss’s senses, Grayson’s eye, Chen’s prophecies’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 37) for making sense of the non-linear order of events unfolding in the narrative. In the salamander’s (or Moss’s) gaze one can find ‘prophecy there. What it means. How it means. Why it means. When it is meant’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts, 191). The blue fox’s messianic prophecy in the very beginning of the novel seems to herald the arrival of monsters on the scene and in a way strikes us as a grotesque and even parodical rendering of the genuinely prophetic biblical verses like Isaiah 35:8, Acts 2:16-21, Joel 2:28-32, Matthew 24:7 and 24:21, Luke 21:11 and Revelation 22:5. Blue fox prophesies, “There shall issue forth from the Company beasts and monsters and creatures that shift their form in ways that you cannot imagine” (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts, 11).

In Borne, anything associated with Mord is interpreted by his followers as signs or portents of something otherworldly. Rachel feels that previously people used to impose meanings on astronomical objects like comets but now it has become all about Mord and other hybrid creatures: ‘Once, comets had appeared in the heavens and people mistook them for celestial creatures. Now we had Mord, and salamanders. What did they portend?’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 17). Even in a post-apocalyptic era, people seem to be searching for ways to connect their present chain of signifiers to some past signifieds and it is only through the Biblical paradigm that we see the complexity of the post-apocalyptic and posthuman world can be meaningfully addressed, probed, and even resolved. However, as these novels repeatedly seem to convey, the redemptive, graceful and sublime aspects of the traditional religions will be replaced by a most relentlessly gloomy vision of death, destruction, and disorganization, while monstrosity and grotesquery will continue to exert the most dominant influence eventually making the way for the emergence of posthumanism. In Dead Astronauts, the novel depicts how Behemoth/Botch is dreaming about the voice of God commanding him in heaven even though, in reality, this is the voice of the Company that Behemoth is remembering in his dreams. Also, we see how children are taught by their mothers about demons being not ‘just demons but retribution from God. Purposeful. Punishment’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 175). So, religious tropes, more specifically, the Biblical ones continue to provide the much-needed grounding for the articulation of the experiences of the characters and monstrosity and grotesquery instead of posing threats to this quest for connection to the past seem to function as catalysts in this process.

So, figures like Mord, the Duck, and Behemoth as the symbols of terror and death and the blue fox, the Trio and Borne, as emblems of weirdness and hybridity seem to get transformed into some superhuman, semi-divine entities even though they lack all sorts of graceful and redemptive qualities which set them apart from the figure of the divinity in traditional religion. Furthermore, with their monstrosities, weirdness, strangeness, and resistance to binaristic categorization, they strike us more as posthuman entities in the making than any post-apocalyptic divinity.

Mord can be seen as a parodical and subversive reimagining of the vengeful aspect of the traditional Judeo-Christian God in a world ravaged by the apocalypse, with the exception that the former does not possess any of those redeeming qualities with which God is normally associated. In several books of the Old Testament namely, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua and 1 Samuel, we find a wrathful God ordering the destruction of the Canaanites, the Midianites, the Amalekites and the inhabitants of Jericho, which can be said to bear close parallels to the type of violence that Mord exerts on his hapless victims. Mord eviscerates and extinguishes everything that comes in his way without a second thought as if he is fulfilling God’s commands as found in verses like 1 Samuel 15:2-3 and 15:3, Joshua 6:21 and Deuteronomy 20:16-17. Mord rips through the flesh of not just puny creatures but also gigantic animals like the great grey shark in the beginning and towards the end, he is seen tearing off ‘great curving slices’ from his opponent. While Mord can reduce living beings ‘to a red mist, a roiling wave of…blood,’ the Mord proxies are no less violent. Mord proxies get ‘drunk-stumbling in their own
Another important aspect consists of mimicking the act of miracles performed by the prophetic figures from the religious traditions of the past. In this post-apocalyptic wasteland, simulations seem to be functioning as the substitutes for miracles, and for the characters, these become more real and believable than their genuinely religious counterparts. The Magician’s visions entirely rely on sophisticated pieces of technology and carefully controlled and brilliantly hidden mechanisms of deception that seem to possess no trace of the pure miracles that used to be performed by the prophets in the Bible. She has the power to conjure eerie imageries and do magical acts that others find impossible to compete with.

The binary divisions between nature and man, nonhumans and humans all dissolve very rapidly as chimeric and substitutes for miracles, and for the characters, these become more real and believable than their genuinely religious counterparts. The Magician’s visions entirely rely on sophisticated pieces of technology and carefully controlled and brilliantly hidden mechanisms of deception that seem to possess no trace of the pure miracles that used to be performed by the prophets in the Bible. She has the power to conjure eerie imageries and do magical acts that others find impossible to compete with.

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(b) The Emergence of Posthumanism Through the Transgression and Disruption of Boundaries:

The binary divisions between nature and man, nonhumans and humans all dissolve very rapidly as chimeric and complex creatures take center stage in the unfolding of the events in both these novels. In Dead Astronauts, to understand the monstrous, gender-fluid nature of Moss, we may use Foucault’s words to understand ‘monstrosity as the mix of sexes, as transgression of everything that separates one sex from another, disappears’. The novel states: ‘Moss remained stubbornly uncommitted – to origin, to gender, to genes, went by ‘she’ this time but not others. Moss could change like other people breathed…’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 15). Moss, in a way, has embedded herself into the structures of the world around her and in a Bakhtinian sense she can be said to embody the grotesque principles by becoming ‘never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it.’ Moss exists in a state of flux, she is never complete, never finished, rather her grotesque self ‘outgrows itself’ and ‘transgresses its own limits.’ Moss blends ‘with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world…’ Moss operates both ‘a conduit as well as a person’ who evolves and outgrows herself by means of an accumulation of her past selves, through which her several selves encounter and merge across different timelines to give rise to her present but not finished self: ‘she was an accumulation of Mosses, all of whom lived inside her’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 35). In Braidotti’s words, Moss’s self is ‘recast in the nomadic mode of collective assemblage.’ To Chen, the entire world is like a manifestation of some great abstraction where equations of probabilities radiate out of the surface of physical objects to project a vision before her. To Chen, ‘Grayson was a single circle from which radiated calculations like the sun’s rays and a latticework of numbers between each ray’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 25). For Chen, Moss also appears to be ‘a wall of circles or zeros tumbling over one another, and from each a different Moss’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 27) coming into being. This also subverts and distorts the binaries between concrete reality and abstractions, numbers and objects, equations, and entities in inconceivable ways. The trio comprising of Moss, Chen, and Grayson itself can best be understood not as a group made of three separate individuals, but a hybrid superorganism composed of three parts with a shared consciousness. In case of both the half-human and non-human characters, in both reality and dreams and past and present, we see differences between the human and the animal gradually becoming increasingly thin to the point of becoming non-existent: ‘nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal.’ In fact, the experimentations of the Company and the resultant creation of the monsters possessing morphological abnormalities and embodying extreme grotesquility also remind us of the constructedness and artificiality of the very concept of species. As John Gray observes in his Straw Dogs (2015), the Darwinian theory posits that ‘species are only assemblies of
genes, interacting at random with each other and their shifting environments. Species cannot control their fates. Species do not exist’. Current researches in Stem Cells and gene engineering are also opening newer avenues for the creation of hybrid, chimeric interspecies entities. In the post-apocalyptic environment, the creatures appear to be deriving their defining features of existence mostly as a result of their interaction with the other members of their species or different species altogether thus paving the way for a ‘simultaneous and repetitive constitution and breakdown of the boundary between the human and the animal.’

In Borne, the more the eponymous character grows to a size of an average human, the more alien he becomes, and yet his mastery over human skills like the fast acquisition of linguistic abilities presents him as a paradox. Rachel describes its dynamic and complex nature thus; ‘he was again a six-foot hybrid…He never looked so alien as he did in that moment […]. Nothing and nobody has ever looked more like it didn’t belong’ (VanderMeer, Borne 76). Borne gradually assumes a dimension of being which is at once highly complex, exceedingly anti-anthropomorphic, and totally anti-identitarian and he impresses us as one for whom the defining features are ‘randomness, ambiguity and disorder’. He strikes us simultaneously as being highly human in many respects while keeping the impenetrable armor of inscrutable alienness intact. Borne quite surprisingly seems to be totally at a loss when asked to grasp the meaning of basic concepts like death.

From a posthuman perspective, we can interpret Borne not as a fixed or unitary entity but a complex amalgam of various features always undergoing endless amounts of re-embodiments, constructions, and reconstructions. For Borne, ‘there was no death, no dying’ (VanderMeer, Borne 222). For him, being is not enough, rather he is always in the process of becoming and as such following Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘creative involution’, we may state that like a posthuman entity Borne cuts across phyletic barriers and establishes transversal communication across species to move beyond death in his attempt to continually express itself in the act of becoming. This form of ‘creative involution’ is also manifest in the case of the Trio in Dead Astronauts. Each of them knows what it feels to be the other and each is caught in a strange loop of self-annihilating labyrinthine with the other in an exponentially increasing intimacy but a shared core of being: ‘Chen had killed Chen. Moss had absorbed Moss. Grayson had killed them both. Moss had killed Chen, Chen Moss’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 26). Quoting Braidotti’s words, we may say that the trio exists across time and space by ‘forming anomalous and inorganic alliances’ with each other. Borne is not a human, but something beyond it and is almost infinite in his capabilities of continuously transforming himself into any shape he desires. The posthuman aspect of Borne can be summarily described in the words of Hayles, according to whom a posthuman ‘is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction’.

(c) Possibility of Emergence of Posthumanism Through Complexity, Monstrosity and Grotesqueness:

In fact, the ideas of monstrosity and monstrousness embody the essential aspects of post-apocalyptic since both exist and operate beyond the physical, biological, linear, and hierarchically organized discursive limits. To put it in Foucault’s words, ‘The monster is the limit…The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden.’ Monstrosity also invariably accompanies and gives rise to the posthumanism, since like the latter, even when monstrosity is subjected to discursive construction, it always eludes its grasp by seeking to go beyond the scope of the ordered discourse as envisioned by the knowledge –power binary. The monsters in the novel can be said to remind us of the highly complex aspects of the monster as a ‘living potential, a body without organs, flesh not functioning in hierarchies, eluding the mesh of power/knowledge that would want to exclude it, manage it, or control it.’ Foucault also opines that ‘The monster is the fundamental figure around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized.’ The monstrosity existing in the form of both morphological aberrations, as well as monstrousness of minds, compel us to embrace the possibility that disorder and chaos might truly be the primary driving forces behind the post-apocalyptic worldview. This is the view shared by George Canguilhem as when he states that ‘The existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order’. Also, by taking a cue from Negri and Hardt’s study of Shakespeare’s Caliban, we may state that VanderMeer’s novels attempt to show not just the ‘savage power of monsters’ but also ‘the monster’s power of transformation’. Negri’s work (2009) is important in more than one respect especially in the present context of our analysis of VanderMeer’s Dead Astronauts, for in his work Negri has analyzed the political implications of the two Biblical-mythological figures of Leviathan, the enormous sea monster, and Behemoth, the terrestrial monster under the light of Thomas Hobbes’ work. According to Hobbes’ vision of power, the Leviathan represents the absolute state power and Behemoth is the symbol of anarchy and civil unrest and together they help create order out of chaos and thus convey to us a sense of indivisible and invincible power structure operating from beyond the outward manifestation of chaos and conflict. So, Negri feels that one of the
most important attributes of the monster/monsters is the assemblage or multitude: ‘Multitude is monstrous because it is always constituent’. This is quite evident in the portrayal of the semi-human or non-human characters in both novels. Many of the monstrous creatures portrayed in Dead Astronauts are hybrid and combine in them traits of multiple animals and could even transform into even weirder states of being if they wish. The giant duck is simply not a duck but an amalgamation of several entities which ultimately is monstrous and category-violating: ‘More reptilian than duck. Saurian. Teeth. Simbance of a duck. But only from afar. Up close, all that registered was monster’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 18). The duck’s identity cannot be pinned down to a specific one, rather it represents “a paradox”, since it cannot be determined if the duck patrols for the company or avoids it or whether it stands for the trio or is against them. It has been called by various names like ‘Schrödinger’s duck’, ‘Heidegger’s duck’, ‘Swedenborg’s duck’, or ‘Seneca’s duck’ and, at its worst, the duck can assume horrid forms which is ‘Carnivorous, enflamed’ with ‘cruel lizardous eye’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts, 60). Foucault says, ‘Paradoxically, the monster is a principle of intelligibility in spite of its limit position as both the impossible and the forbidden’. The duck can become a horror and death incarnate just like Mord in ‘Borne’ and it is clear in the brutal description of its evisceration of the fox: ‘the duck did bring down its head like a hammer that became an ice pick that split the fox’s head in a crack and splatter of blood and brain matter’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts, 62). The duck was designed purposefully with a broken wing by Charlie X so that it could not fly and thus, from the moment of its creation, the duck was fated to be a reject, a prey, an outcast much like Frankenstein’s monster: ‘As low and cast out and as prey’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts 61). The Behemoth or Botch is also another nightmarish creation of the Company that is monstrous not just by virtue of its size, shape, and stature but also because of its highly complex and hybrid nature. Botch’s murderousness resembles that of Mord’s, both of whom kill when they please and it pleases them to kill: ‘the ways of rollick slaughter and slaughterous rollick’ (VanderMeer, Dead Astronauts, 134). Though the traditional idea of a religion centered around an omnipotent God becomes distorted in the post-apocalyptic era, still the religious tropes seem to be quite potent in giving shape to the unarticulated experiences and unfulfilled desires of both the City’s men and its monsters. The hybrid and the grotesque fit quite well with the post-apocalyptic paradigm and even complement it, since both involve the realization of such ambiguous, embodied subjects that derive their essence from dissolution of closed-off, well-defined and well-equilibrated structures, dismantling of hierarchical relations based on binary oppositions, corruption of the discursive-rational framework of thought, and celebration of heterogeneity, excess and plurality to their extremes. In the words of Wilson Yates, grotesque embodies ‘distortions, exaggeration, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a fashion that it confronts us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down’. In the novel Borne, Borne exemplifies what nature can design from scratch when threatened with the upsurge of toxicity and pollution at an alarmingly unnatural level. Borne is the essential posthuman, post-apocalyptic aspect of this incomprehensible power of nature which can mold creatures not just by a gradual accumulation of changes over vast stretches of time but also cause unexpected changes in response to external stresses. Borne lives on the intersection where the depths of the familiar and unfamiliar collide. The evolution of Borne makes us wonder at the level of complexity and this emergence of complexity is one of the most important steps in moving towards a posthuman stage.

Borne possesses the power to become what he experiences since his existence is distributed across several modes of becoming. When he watches the stars in the night sky, his ‘many eyes became stars as he watched them, and his skin turned the colour of velvety night, until he was just a Borne-shaped reflection’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 109). Stacy Alaimo refers to this as ‘a sense of immersion within the strange agencies that constitute the world’. In the novel, Rachel gets to experience the true nature of Borne’s irreducible complexity for the first time when she actually touches it: ‘[…] it was through touch that I began to understand his complexity’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 148). In one occasion Borne seems to be undergoing a human-like ‘painful and sludgy transformation into a terrestrial octopus with four legs instead of tentacles’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 85), while in another occasion he starts growing clothes from his own skin and the hat ‘was his head and the stars were his eyes, transformed into a pattern’ (VanderMeer, Borne 76). Borne is the post-apocalyptic re-embodiment of Deleuze and Guattari’s “Body without Organs.” His body contains ‘enthralling promises of possible re-embodiments and actualised differences’ and his ‘Multiple, heterogeneous, uncivilized’ nature always carries with it “multiple virtual possibilities”.

Elizabeth Grosz also states that the Darwinian mode of evolution creates new species but the new species are always the ‘generation of a productive monstrosity’, and this is best exemplified by none other than Mord. The 18th century French philosopher and mathematician Maupertuis considered monstrosity as not just a transitive stage in the process of creation of new beings but monsters themselves, he held, could become new beings. Foucault too in his The Order of Things quotes J.B. Robinet to stress this raw, generative power of monstrosity:
‘by dint of producing monstrous beings (…) nature succeeds in producing beings of greater regularity and with more symmetrical structure’. Borne himself is a grotesque entity that defies all sorts of rules and disrupts all boundaries. He does not even realize that the things he seems to be eating are actually dying. Its appetite is insatiable at times and when hungry, Borne can eat anything and everything: ‘[…] he would eat just about anything’ (VanderMeer, Borne 23). Borne’s organic growth, despite his extremely alien appearance, seems to blur the distinction between human and no-human, since instead of going through a totally transgressive kind of growth, he seems to be growing like a human child who grows to become an adult in a quite predictable way. In fact, as Foucault opines, the monster challenges the laws of nature and society, transgresses and violates them only to grow more natural and orderly in the end: ‘the monster is, so to speak, the spontaneous, brutal, but consequently natural form of the unnatural’. Rachel feels threatened with Borne’s transgressive nature since the latter keeps outgrowing himself: ‘although the process had been gradual, I could no longer deny that Borne had tripled in size’ (VanderMeer, Borne 24). According to Foucault, the monster threatens our worldview and fills us with anxiety because ‘it violates the law while leaving it with nothing to say’. The complex and outgrowing nature of Borne calls for seeing it in the light of the Bakhtinian grotesque placed in a post-apocalyptic paradigm. Borne like a grotesque body is never finished; it outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits, and evolves through parts by which the world enters it and it also opens out onto the world around it.

Now, Mord on the other hand is an absolute terror incarnate. He is the byproduct of the biotechnological corruption which has engulfed the city in endless waves of terror and darkness. The Company once created the creature to fend off its protesters and detractors only to later realize that ‘Mord would transform from their watchdog to their doom’ (VanderMeer, Borne. 4). The figure of Mord becomes one and the same with the post-apocalyptic atmosphere of unnatural terror. The description of the mindless carnage that Mord wreaks on the world wherever he flies is blood-curdling and mythic. The narrator is both ‘mesmerized and horrified’ by the profusion of violence and bloodshed exerted by Mord. Often his atrocities assume religious proportions which Rachel beholds as ‘the most miraculous true thing,” progressing ‘from myth to mythic, which no retellings can embellish’ (VanderMeer, Borne 158-159). Mord is also the living, breathing symbol of the darkness, deceit and destruction lurking in the deepest recesses of man’s heart and in the corners of the city. The novel clearly intends to present it as the ‘purer reflection’ of the city since his ‘was the greater darkness’ and his form could produce unspeakable terror in the hearts of the beholders (VanderMeer, Borne, 111). There are moments when Mord impresses Rachel as one who has not yet lost all traces of his humanity, ‘the great bear that might once have been human; (VanderMeer, Borne 160). Even though Mord has evolved to impress us as a posthuman creature, yet the latent humanness in him craves for connection with the past. So, the post-apocalyptic phase quite unlike the Jamesonian “blank parody” lacking in meaningful referents seems to be paving the way for the creatures to regress to their now lost humanity or to a more animalistic state of being.

The post-apocalyptic era is built from the ashes of the pre-apocalyptic phase where the past has mostly if not entirely ceased to function as a meaningful collection of referents, it is merely a ‘blank parody’ now: ‘There was nothing human in his gaze in that moment, just the kind of hunger that could never truly be satiated’ (VanderMeer, Borne, 159). Mord has become a posthuman entity as the result of some sort of hybridization and by ‘becoming-other-than-human being’ (Herbrechter, 2013, p. 2), albeit one reeking of pure bloodlust and terror. He is more in an intermediate stage on man’s journey towards posthumanism. Still, Rachel admits that she in fact wants Mord to become something totally different from the rest of humanity in this post-apocalyptic world. Mord is an anomaly, a multi-storied tall, pure Frankensteinian terror but still not without some trace of those intrinsic human qualities which used to be his defining traits in the past and this is what troubles Rachel. She says, ‘The truth was…I wanted him to be less like us…a creature without the possibility of redemption, with no humanity in him. I wanted something to be the same in the old world as in the new’ (VanderMeer, Borne 251). So, despite the increasingly forceful bracketing and effacing of the past, we find an irresistible urge driving the characters to discover meaning and purpose in their chaotic world of the post-apocalyptic setting. It is this thirst for meaning that unconsciously drives the characters to attempt to connect their worldview to the past, and it is here that religious ideas or tropes become important in helping us discover the influence that religious tropes have in shaping the collective experience of the characters. Both humans, as well as non-human creatures, feel the urge to connect to their past and their craving for meaning and rootedness is often expressed in the form of a desire to escape into the past and regress into their pre-eschatological selves. From another perspective, hybrid and chimeric entities like Mord and Borne could, with their combined activities, give rise to a more intelligent, wise, and self-aware race of posthumans in the future. In fact, if we trace the evolutionary timeline of speciation and emergence of novel body plans, it becomes clear that it is not just in the periods following the extinction events but also in the intervals between different extinction events that novel body plans seem to have emerged in a
comparatively short amount of time. So, the extinction event orchestrated by mankind in this novel can be said to have given nature another chance to tinker with its macroevolutionary dynamics, thereby giving rise to a series of novel and exotic species like Borne and Mord. In the post-apocalyptic age, the hope of connecting to the past in search of a collection of meaningful referents makes the posthuman monsters more human than their ordinary human counterparts. Charlie X, despite resembling humans superficially in his attempt to separate himself from his traumatic past embraces the post-apocalyptic present, while the non-human characters and monsters appear to impress us as more human for their longing after some meaning and a desire to return to their pre-apocalyptic self. If Mord represents the disastrous consequences of the misuse of biotechnologies, Borne represents the enormous complexity, ambiguity, and blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human which are the hallmarks of a posthuman culture. So, towards the end we see that the impossibility of making a true distinction between human and non-human becomes more prominent in this post-apocalyptic setting: “Wick never believed he was a person, was continually being undone by that. Borne was always trying to be a person because I wanted him to be one because he thought that was right. We all just want to be people, and none of us know what that really means” (VanderMeer, Borne, p. 320). It is this ‘fact that our own view of what constitutes a human being is now undergoing a profound transformation’ that Pepperell in his The Post-Human Condition refers to as one of the most defining characteristics of a posthuman culture, when ‘We no longer think about what it is to be a human in the same way that we used to’ culture, when ‘We no longer think about what it is to be a human in the same way that we used to.’

III. CONCLUSION

The study seeks to present the idea that even in a post-apocalyptic scenario, the religious tropes and cultural symbols of the past can provide one with a competing vision with which one may hope to fight back the chaos, doom and gloom of the post-apocalyptic. Here, through the detailed analysis of two of Jeff VanderMeer’s novels, namely, ‘Borne’ and ‘Dead Astronauts’, we have attempted to show that Biblical symbolism and ideas can still be applied to the post apocalyptic dystopian themes to bring out the hidden connections the novels might contain to the past even when most of such mediums for connecting the referents of the present to their traditional symbolism have been lost. Applying religious symbolism for analyzing the events in the novel not only helps us to bridge the gap existing between the events portrayed in these novels and our experiences but also enables us to foresee the emergence of posthumanism from the post-apocalyptic scenario.

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