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Nobody's Home:

The Spectral Existentialism of *The Graveyard Book*

Robert T. Tally Jr.

The climactic moment of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* is not a fierce duel between the forces of good and evil, a thrilling escape from the jaws of death, the solution to an enigmatic mystery, or a discovery of some long-lost treasure (although it is also all of these), but a simple statement, calmly spoken by the hero.

Bod felt the cold of the knife at his neck. And in that moment, Bod understood. Everything slowed. Everything came into focus. "I know my name," he said. "I'm Nobody Owens. That's who I am."¹

By asserting his evocative name and taking ownership of it, Nobody (or Bod, for short) asserts his own existence, his freedom, and his authenticity. His true name, which he now realizes is indeed "Nobody Owens," emphasizes that *who he is* is essentially a

matter of *not being owned* by anyone else. His essence lies in his existence, and he freely asserts the value of that existence. In this way, the boy who “would walk the borderland between the living and the dead”² becomes the hero of a spectral existentialism.

A living child who is raised by cemetery ghosts and the undead, Bod is able to exist in the space between worlds. Gaiman’s novels frequently explore this shimmering realm of the “in-between”: between the worlds of myth and reality (as in *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*), between alternate universes through the looking-glass (*Neverwhere*, *Coraline*, or *Stardust*), between the mundane and the otherworldly (*Good Omens*), or between the realms of the living and of the dead (here in *The Graveyard Book*). Often, this in-between space defines the horizon of being for the principal characters, who must actively engage in an exploration of their own sense of self. Put more succinctly, in many of Gaiman’s novels the hero’s journey is one of self-discovery, while also being a quest of *self-making*. In the case of Nobody Owens, the self-making project involves coming to terms with the ghostly world of the living as well as of the dead.

This spectral philosophy calls to mind the existentialist thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and of Martin Heidegger, while also adding the profound effects of the otherworldly. In Sartre, for instance, the imperative to live authentically, to understand one’s project in life, and to affirm one’s place in the world, underscores the very meaning of existence, meaning which is created by the individual subject itself. But this is occasioned by anxiety, a sense of the uncanny or of not-being-at-home with the situation one finds oneself in. This is the existential condition. In *The Graveyard Book*, however, Nobody’s *home* lies directly in this space between worlds, as his freedom includes “the Freedom of the Graveyard,”³ and his experience in this spectral, in-between zone makes

his existence all the more exemplary. If the project of one's existence is to make oneself "at home" in the world, then the tale of Nobody Owens offers a marvelously apt portrait of how to live well, by coming to terms with one's place in the world of the living, the dead, and those that lie in between.

Nobody but Himself

The Graveyard Book opens with one of the most frightening scenes in all of Gaiman's works, as a murderous "man Jack," wielding a razor-sharp knife and having already killed two adults and one child, methodically stalks his final victim, an unnamed baby who by chance manages to elude his pursuer by toddling up to a nearby cemetery. The infant is discovered and taken in by the ghosts of the graveyard, who are entreated to save the baby from the killer by a new, shrieking ghost (the just-murdered mother of the baby). The novel thus begins, literally, in the shadow of death, and emphasizes the fragility of existence from the start. Thrust into this precarious life, the boy called Nobody will have to make sense of his Being in the face of the nothingness confronting it at all times. In Sartre's estimation, so do we all.

In having its ghosts decide the fate of the boy, *The Graveyard Book* also begins to establish its existential themes. Those *who are no longer* take responsibility for *the one who is*, and this boy's identity is established at the get-go by his being *himself*. For example, when the ghosts are arguing over what to name the foundling, each suggesting the names of persons he looks like, his adoptive mother (Mrs. Owens) interjects: "He looks like nobody but himself [...] He looks like nobody." Silas, the mysterious figure

who becomes the boy's guardian, settles it. "'Then Nobody it is,' said Silas. 'Nobody Owens.'" Asked what kind of name that is for a boy, Silas responds: "His name. And a good name."⁴ The naming of Nobody, combined with the adoption by the Owens, provides the hero with a name that directly links his personal existence to its own unique condition. Who he is *is* who he is, to put it in a far too tautological form. Or, to put it another way, Nobody is himself unlike all others—"he looks like nobody but himself"—and his independence is underscored by his name, echoing the nursery rhyme Gaiman uses for the novel's epigraph: "It's only a pauper / Who nobody owns." The naming of Nobody Owens thus establishes the principal existential theme of the entire novel: one's essence lies in one's own existence.

Although existentialism is not really a formal school of thought with easily agreed-upon principles and established methods, one can identify a few recognizable features that characterize existentialism as a philosophy. The foundational observation by Sartre is that "existence precedes essence," a slogan derived from a phrase in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, "The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence."⁵ *Dasein*, a term that could be literally translated as "being-there" (but which is usually left untranslated), is Heidegger's term for what we might just call individual existence in a common-sense way—a person actually living in the world. Hence, what Heidegger means is that the fundamental or essential aspect of being-in-the-world, of actually existing people, is *that* they exist. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less either. In other words, there is no pre-existent essence (a soul, for example, that exists before we are born) of which existence is a mere secondary form or manifestation. Referring to this as the "first principle of existentialism," Sartre explains:

What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.⁶

For Sartre, it follows that, with no inherent human nature, no eternal or transcendent purpose with which to justify our existence—that is, no “meaning of life”—we must create our own meaning. With no inherent meaning to one’s existence, no essential being other than the *existing* being, one cannot look outside of actually existing reality for answers to the question of the meaning of life, and so on. Moreover, human beings are situated in the world and cannot stand outside of it, so all actions necessarily take place in relation to an actually existing world, without reference to an otherworldly ideal.

Gaiman’s spectral existentialism complicates this a bit, as the real world in which we exist is fundamentally tied to an otherworldly realm, which is nevertheless also a real plane of existence. In *The Graveyard Book*, this otherworldly world includes that of the dead, but also a liminal space between the realms of the living and the dead, a space occupied by Nobody Owens, as well as several other characters in the novel. In the graveyard, Nobody is free to choose his own path, but that path also leads him into encounters with specters. In evading the murderer in *The Graveyard Book*’s first chapter, Bod assures his continued existence by making a home of the cemetery, by living among the dead. What’s more, throughout the course of the novel, Nobody is emphatically a

person who forms himself, via his interactions with others—be they living, dead, or other—such as the Owenses, Silas, Scarlett, Miss Lupescu, the ghouls, the witch Liza Hempstock, his schoolmates, the Jacks, and the Sleer. Whatever identity he had prior to coming to the graveyard is simply not relevant. Indeed, we never learn exactly who the child had been before the night he came to the graveyard. Rather, we are to understand that *who Bod is* will be determined largely *by Bod* in the course of his ongoing education in the spectral realm between the living and the dead. The essence of Bod’s existence lies therein, and he “will be what he makes of himself.”

Fear and Trembling

A basic consequence of the existentialist worldview is that a person, who embodies no essential human nature and whose life has no essential or transcendent meaning, must have the freedom to create his own meaning. This is not exactly a process of self-*discovery*, which would assume an essence out there to be discovered, but a matter of self-*fashioning*. Who else could do it for you? In Sartrean existentialism, there is not Divine Plan or Supreme Being who can justify your existence for you, so you must have the freedom to do it yourself. And, even in those variations of existentialist thought that allow for a God, such as Søren Kierkegaard’s Christian philosophy, man remains free to act—owing to the God-given gift of freewill (or the curse of freewill, depending on how you look at it).⁷ Such freedom is not necessarily a blessing, and it is primarily experienced as a generalized mood of anxiety. We can understand this in the everyday sense, as when we have to make a tough decision and understandably feel anxious about

it, knowing that by choosing one path we are foreclosing the possibilities offered by other paths. In existentialism, this anxiety—*Angst* in German, though the word has entered English in this existentialist sense—becomes a condition of our lives, as we are always aware of this terrible freedom to make bad choices. In Sartre’s assessment, the anxiety or anguish one feels derives from the fact that “man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”⁸ Indeed, Sartre dramatized this anxiety as *nausea*, in his novel of that name, and being nauseated is certainly not a good feeling, as Bod discovers in the company of the ghouls.

In *The Graveyard Book*, Bod’s freedom is emphasized over his anxieties, partly because his “Freedom of the Graveyard,” along with his training in such spectral arts as Fading or Dream-walking, enable him to make more of his project in the world (as Sartre might call it) than others. As noted below, Nobody is “at home” in the graveyard, which is literally true in the story but which also suggests a level of comfort with the very phenomenon—death—that so many other humans are anxious about. Whereas others might find their experience *uncanny*, Bod is much more comfortable, and much more able to assert himself. Here is an example of Gaiman’s spectral existentialism functioning as a better philosophy of life, ironically perhaps, because it is a philosophy so in touch with the otherworldly realms of the dead. The fear and trembling that constitutes the basic human condition can be turned, by Bod, into a useful tool or even weapon (as when he uses his ghostly gifts of fear to teach his schoolyard bullies a lesson), which in turn provides a better life, both for Bod and for those he tries to protect.

In the anxiety of not knowing whether one's actions are correct, one thereby acknowledges (albeit negatively) that one must have the freedom to choose the right or wrong course of action. By feeling anxious about making a mistake, therefore, we acknowledge that we are free. Bod is not immune from this. His decisions are frequently wrong, in retrospect, and he learns from his mistakes along the way. In a sense, *The Graveyard Book* is a *Bildungsroman*, a "novel of education" in which the young protagonist moves from innocence to experience, becoming a wiser (and often sadder) person by the end. But, as noted above, *The Graveyard Book* also ends with Nobody Owens declaring his own name, *owning* it, and then setting forth on his own adventure of life. Hence, Bod is able to transform his own existential anxiety into a greater freedom by giving himself license to be himself. Despite, or rather because of, his rather uncanny childhood experiences, he is perfectly at home in his world.

The Uncanny, or, Not at Home

The anxiety which accompanies one's freedom, in existentialist theory, leads to a profound sense of alienation or of the uncanny. As Heidegger puts it, "In anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the 'nothing and nowhere'. But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home' [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]." ⁹ *Heim* means "home," so the German word for "uncanny," *unheimlich*, emphasizes the degree to which our feelings of alienation come from a sense of defamiliarization or not feeling "at home" in our world. (Notably, then, there is a Germanic origin to the ghoul's

capital city: *Ghûlheim* must mean “home to the ghouls” in *The Graveyard Book*.) On this basis, therefore, the practical advice in an existentialist philosophy of life would be to make yourself “at home in the world,” to live a life without anxiety, where you can be yourself and feel at home.

As Heidegger suggests, the sense of homelessness is part of the human condition, but many thinkers have emphasized how modern life has exacerbated this anxiety. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács argues that “transcendental homelessness” is the fundamental characteristic of life in the modern world.¹⁰ That is, without some vision of a unity of man and world (a vision that the ancient Greeks presumably held), one can no longer feel “at home” in the world. But this is not only the human condition; it is also the *inhuman* condition. Silas is perhaps the embodiment of a transcendental homelessness in *The Graveyard Book*. When Bod asks Miss Lupescu what kind of person Silas is, she replies hesitantly, “He is a solitary type.”¹¹ Earlier, Bod had said that he wanted to be like Silas: “‘No,’ said Silas firmly. ‘You do not’.”¹² Although it is never stated directly in the book, we are given enough clues to figure out that Silas is a vampire, neither living or dead, operating in the worlds of both, but belonging to neither. “‘It must be good,’ said Silas, ‘to have somewhere that you belong. Somewhere that’s home’.”¹³

The actual sadness implicit in this remark is only clear much later, as the reader gets a better sense of Silas’s own identity. Notably, during the *Danse Macabre*, as all the living and the dead mingle in a gloriously otherworldly ballroom, Silas is left out. As an *undead* being, he cannot participate in the dance, and his melancholy and longing are revealed when Bod tells him about dancing with the Lady on the Grey, who is Gaiman’s exquisite figure for Death. “‘I danced with the lady, Silas!’ exclaimed Bod. His guardian

looked almost heartbroken then, and Bod found himself scared, like a child who had woken a sleeping panther. But all Silas said was, ‘This conversation is at an end’” (164). That Silas is a heroic figure, not just a wise guardian of Bod, but a leading member of the Honor Guard, those who patrol the borderlands between worlds,¹⁴ perhaps makes the scene more touching. Silas has no home, not even in the graveyard, where he has “but the right of abode,”¹⁵ since the graveyard is home for the dead.

Of course, few types of places are as uncanny or *un-home-ly* as a graveyard. Although reverence and respect for the dead demand that cemeteries be valued, most of us would not feel at home there. Michel Foucault cites the cemetery as an perfect example of the *heterotopia*, a space that (unlike utopia) is real, but is also “different” from the other social spaces in which we live. “The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the citystate or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery. In western culture the cemetery has practically always existed.”¹⁶ Yet, in this space the connections between the living and the dead mark it with a profound otherworldliness, making it a site of imaginary fears and wonders. In the graveyard, one is certainly not at home.

Unless you are Nobody Owens, that is. Or a ghost. As Bod tells Scarlett, who marvels at his powers and his bravery: “‘This is my home,’ he said. ‘I can do things here’” and again “‘This is my home,’ said Bod. ‘I’m going to protect it’.”¹⁷ The anxiety that we feel in not being at home in a given situation, the alienation and fear that comes with being lost or homeless, is all the more heightened in the heterotopia of the graveyard. Even without Bod’s wielding of the power of “Fear,” such persons as Nick

Farthing and Mo Quilling are ill at ease in a graveyard. So are many people. Thus, for Bod to be at home there, to have homely (*heimlich*) feelings in the uncanny (*unheimlich*) places, creates a curious and powerful sense of self. As in the climax of the novel, Nobody Owens knows who he is, making him a real existentialist role model for us.¹⁸

Authenticity and Bad Faith

To summarize a bit: From the maxim, “existence precedes essence,” we understand the absurdity or fundamental meaninglessness of life, and we also understand that, with no inherent meaning, we must create our own meaning via our own projects, as Sartre would have it. This freedom to create meaning brings with it anxiety over whether we are acting appropriately. Compounding this angst is the overall sense of alienation from the world, from ourselves, and from the other selves we encounter. From these concepts follows the crisis of authenticity. In the existentialist lexicon, *authenticity* names the attitude in which one acts in accordance with one’s own self, rather than in accordance with what others similarly situated might do. The German term for authenticity, *Eigentlichkeit*, highlights the degree to which one is true to one’s own (*eigen*) self; a terribly inelegant translation of the term might be “own-ish-ness.” In other words, am I acting as *I* would act, or am I just acting as someone in general might act? For Sartre, because there is no essence that could serve as a standard of action, there is no transcendent purpose against which to measure our own actions. But through my interactions with the world, I can distinguish how I would act as myself from how I would act as merely anyone.

Authentic behavior, then, would refer to acts done strictly as myself, observing Polonius's famous advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*: "To thine own self be true." (Of course, in *Hamlet*, Polonius appears as a self-satisfied old fart, so Shakespeare is likely making fun of this trite slogan.) A better example may come from Mrs. Owens's observation about the toddler Nobody, insofar as he is "nobody but himself," which he subsequently proves through his own words and deeds. For Sartre, authenticity requires one to act according to one's true self; one must embrace one's freedom to act by "owning" one's acts. Be yourself, rather than being like what you think you'd be expected to be like by others. In Sartre's view, people who are inauthentic in their actions are acting in *bad faith*.

In *The Graveyard Book*, the sense of being true to yourself is made more interesting and more complex. In Chapter Three, "The Hounds of God," we are introduced to Miss Lupescu, who orders Bod to "Name the different kinds of people," to which Bod humorously guesses the living, the dead, and "... Cats?"¹⁹ Lupescu corrects him: "there are the living and the dead, there are day-folk and night-folk, there are ghouls and mist-walkers, there are high hunters and the Hounds of God. Also, there are solitary types."²⁰ In enumerating the "kinds of people," Miss Lupescu might be suggesting what the "true" nature of these types is, thus establishing what kinds of actions are authentic. For example, we learn that she is herself a lycanthrope or werewolf, who prefer to call themselves "Hounds of God,"²¹ and who or what she is also determines how she acts. Yet, as Silas notes towards the novel's end, and as we should always remember, "People can change."²² But there are also wonderful cautionary examples in *The Graveyard Book*, and my favorite is certainly the particular "kind of person" who is the most

inauthentic, whose identities and actions are merely scavenged or copied from others rather than created by and for oneself. Here we meet the very avatars of bad faith: the ghouls.

Bod meets the ghouls by their “ghoul gate,” a run-down looking grave that Gaiman says exists “in every graveyard.”²³ The first three that Bod meets are named the honorable Archibald Fitzhugh, the Duke of Westminster, and the Bishop of Bath and Wells. By seeing these derivative names, the reader is immediately aware that ghouls have no real identity of their own, but rather leech identities from others. Just as their names are scavenged from others, so too are their lives—if such infernal creatures may be said to live—entirely inauthentic, not their own. As if to underscore the point, the ghouls tell Bod that they do not even remember who they were before they became ghouls, and despite their encouragement, this is not as comforting to Bod as they think.

“Don’t take on so,” said the Duke of Westminster. “Why, you little coot, I promise you that as soon as you’re one of us, you’ll not ever remember as you even *had* a home.”

“I don’t remember anything about the days before I was a ghoul,” said the famous writer Victor Hugo.

“Nor I,” said the Emperor of China, proudly.

“Nope,” said the 33rd President of the United States.²⁴

The ghouls are avatars of bad faith inasmuch as their entire Being is bound up in *being-another*, as is indicated by their derivative names. By naming one of the ghouls “the 33rd

President of the United States,” Gaiman provides a small joke that also makes this point about authenticity and bad faith, for the 33rd U.S. President was Harry Truman, and it can be no accident that this inauthentic ghoul is no “true” man.

With his own very distinctive name, Nobody Owens is really an anti-ghoul. By being himself, he distinguishes himself from all others. Miss Lupescu gives Bod the nickname *Nimini*, which is actually Romanian for “nobody,” another of the wonderfully understated details in Gaiman’s fiction. A running gag in the novel has Bod correcting those who would call him boy: “‘Bod, said Bod. ‘It’s Bod. Not boy’.”²⁵ In his naming, Bod differentiates himself from any mere boy; in this, Bod also registers his fundamental distinction, rhetorically and in real life, from being merely any “man Jack.” Indeed, the real enemies in *The Graveyard Book*, somewhat like the identity-thieving ghouls, are the almost nameless “Jacks.” To be sure, each Jack is a unique personality, but by giving them this oh-so-common name, Gaiman makes “every man Jack” the counterpoint to Nobody Owens. Whereas the Jacks, like the ghouls, derive their power from other sources and draw their magical abilities from the deaths of others,²⁶ Bod forges his own way with the aid of his friends and family. Unlike Jack Frost, who actually revels in the deaths of his “friends” and desires to be the Master of the Sleer, Bod recognizes that he is master of only himself—he “owns” himself alone—and does not desire treasure or power over others. He remains true to himself.

Self-Possession

Nobody Owens's name is itself a homonymic allusion to the epigraph of *The Graveyard Book*, a "traditional nursery rhyme" (according to Gaiman): "Rattle his bones / Over the stones / It's only a pauper / Who nobody owns." Although the poem's origins are not entirely clear, a famous version with these lines as the refrain is memorialized in Mary Mitford's *Recollections of a Literary Life*, where it is attributed to Thomas Noel and titled "The Pauper's Drive." In that poem, the poet witnesses a horse-drawn hearse, speeding over the cobblestones with no regard for the solemnity of the event. The lines above are imagined as spoken by the driver, anticipating and answering the query of onlookers, effectively saying "Don't worry about the dignity of this corpse, since he's only a pauper with no family or friends." In the Noel version, several stanzas, each culminating with that refrain, describe the squalid and haphazard proceeding, before a final stanza turns the tables, as the poet himself (saddened by the events) provides his own alternative to the cab-driver's lines: "Bear softly his bones over the stones, / though a pauper, he's one whom his Maker yet owns."²⁷

In this sentimental poem, we see the wholly laudable view that each human life deserves to be treated with dignity because God, if no one else, "owns" it. But in the climactic scene of *The Graveyard Book* (in fact, at the moment of truth, which not coincidentally is also a moment of near-death), Nobody Owens claims the title of ownership of his self for himself. The Sleer had told Bod, "FIND YOUR NAME,"²⁸ and at the crucial instant, just as the vicious Jack Frost is about to tell Bod his "real" name, Bod instead "owns" the name—and moreover, the identity—he already has. "I'm Nobody Owens. That's who I am."²⁹ Indeed, that's what he is. By being someone whom nobody owns, by taking ownership of his own being, Bod demonstrates his fully

realized sense of self, with the freedom and self-determination that Sartre had insisted were the hallmarks of his philosophy in *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

During the “Danse Macabre,” Bod apologetically tells the Lady on the Grey, “I don’t know your name,” and she responds, “Names aren’t really that important.”³⁰ And this is true, of course. Death, here figured forth as the Lady on the Grey, does not care about names, and yet the naming in *The Graveyard Book* seems so important. The mystery is easily solved in the spectral existentialism I’ve been discussing, however, since it is less the name itself than the self-possession, owning one’s self, which is best represented by Bod’s name. This then holds for one’s entire life as well, as we are free to “make a name for ourselves” in our own projects in life, as when Bod sets off into the world in the final pages. As his mother, Mistress Owens, sings to him: “Sleep my little babby-oh / Sleep until you awaken / When you wake you’ll see the world / If I’m not mistaken ... / Kiss a lover / Dance a measure / Find your name / And buried treasure ... / Face your life / Its pain, its pleasure, / Leave no path untaken.”³¹ This is an aptly existentialist lullaby.

Learning to Live with Ghosts

Gaiman’s spectral existentialism, in the end, provides a most powerful philosophy of life, a practical philosophy of *how to live*, even if this counsel frequently comes from those who are dead. The cynical might even view philosophy itself as merely taking advice from the dead—the ghosts of Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche—but authentic and meaningful existence, as Nobody Owens demonstrates, derives from owning oneself,

which also means acknowledging the degree to which one's self is fashioned by and through those around us, including those who have come before and *are* no more. As Jacques Derrida puts it:

If it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between the two, and between all the “two's” one likes, such as life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can *only talk with or about* some ghost. So it would be necessary to learn spirits [...] to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better.³²

Bod, as Jack Dandy explains it, is the prophesied “child born who would one day walk the borderland between the living and the dead,”³³ but the Jacks did not reckon on the fact that the reason Bod becomes that child is precisely because the Jacks tried to kill him. In this, we see the “ruse of history” (as Hegel called it) or, better, the persistence of fate. By trying to avoid the foretold outcome, one in fact becomes an agent of fate, helping to fulfill the prophecy.³⁴ The seemingly immutable destiny is also self-made. In this, Nobody Owens reminds us of our freedom to act, and encourages us to be true to ourselves by being true to our ghosts, to our family and friends, as well as acknowledging what turns out to be our wonderful *gift* of mortality. As the Lady on the Grey “promises,” one day everybody gets to ride on her horse, who “is gentle enough to bear

the mightiest of you away on his broad back, and strong enough for the smallest of you as well.”³⁵ Facing our own ghosts bravely and hospitably, we live our own lives better.

In Gaiman’s works, life often involves juxtaposing our real world with a mirror world in which we must be made to fit with rather divergent realities—for example, one’s “self” is different in the London Below of *Neverwhere* or in the spectral “beginning of the world” in *Anansi Boys*. Hence, the existential crisis in Gaiman’s novels is simultaneously compounded and disarmed, where one’s anxious homelessness is also a coming home or being “at home” with one’s self. Nobody Owen’s victory comes with the climactic affirmation of his true name, which is also a no-name: “I’m Nobody Owens. That’s who I am.”³⁶ Gaiman’s *in-between* world becomes a new space for liberty, an *either/or* that is also a *both/and*, thus squaring the circle of alienation and self-knowledge. Gaiman’s spectral existentialism provides a way of securing one’s sense of self that does not rely on identity or authenticity; rather, it involves the joyous knowledge—*die fröhlich Wissenschaft*, as Friedrich Nietzsche³⁷ called it—of the very vicissitudinous nature of existence itself. Mother Slaughter, whose faded and weathered tombstone itself provides us with some very good advice (“LAUGH”), offers Bod even more valuable counsel at the end of *The Graveyard Book*, which we would also do well to remember: “You’re always you, and that don’t change, and you’re always changing, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”³⁸

Notes

¹ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 282.

² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 67.

⁶ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 22.

⁷ Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a mediation on the fearsome "leap of faith" required by Abraham in his decision to sacrifice his son Isaac in the Book of Genesis.

⁸ Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 29.

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 233 (bracketed terms in original).

¹⁰ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 121.

¹¹ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986), p. 25.

¹⁷ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, pp. 261, 264.

¹⁸ Perhaps it is then an acknowledgement of Bod's representative humanity that—at the very end of the novel, when it is becoming more difficult for him to see ghosts and it is

clear that the now young adult Bod must venture into the wider world—Bod understands that, like the rest of us, he will not longer have a “home” in the world, but must make his own way. After asking Silas whether he will be able to return to the graveyard, and before Silas can respond, Bod “answered his own question. ‘If I come back, it will be a place, but it won’t be a home any longer’” (p. 304).

¹⁹ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, p. 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 303.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

²⁷ See Mary Mitford, *Recollections of a Literary Life* (London: Bentley, 1883), p. 31.

²⁸ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, p. 251.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xviii.

³³ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, p. 271.

³⁴ The classic example is, of course, Oedipus, who was fated to murder his father and to wed his mother. Once his biological parents heard this prophecy, they attempted to have

their newborn son killed, sending him off to be sacrificed even before naming him (like Bod, Oedipus is named by later circumstances); so Oedipus is reared by foster parents whom he believes to be his “real” parents. But, in an example of what Aristotle calls *peripeteia* or “reversal of fortune,” this ensures the fulfillment of the prophecy, since Oedipus does not know his father (when he kills him) or his mother (when he marries her) *only* because he did not get to grow up with them.

³⁵ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, p. 161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³⁷ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974).

³⁸ Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, pp. 297, 298.

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