'Forever young': The eternal child archetype in the post-apocalyptic world of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010)

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Abstract: Using Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz's *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (2000) as a theoretical framework, the present article discusses the characters and the apocalyptic world of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) through the perspective of the archetype of the eternal child. The discussion focuses on the main characters' quest for immortality, the visibility of the individual among the masses, and the dangers of a cold, detached *Weltanschauung* in contemporary society. Additionally, it foregrounds interpretations of character behaviours, such as their infantile reactions to events and their relationships, which are presented in relation to the respective Jungian archetype.

Keywords: infantilism, Marie-Louise von Franz, Jungian archetype, apocalyptic literature, Gary Shteyngart.

'Eternamente joven': el arquetipo del niño eterno en el mundo postapocalíptico de *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) de Gary Shteyngart

Resumen: Utilizando como marco teórico el estudio *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (2000) de la psicóloga junguiana Marie-Louise von Franz, este artículo analiza los personajes y el mundo apocalíptico de *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) de Gary Shteyngart a través de la perspectiva del arquetipo del niño eterno. El análisis se centra en la búsqueda de la inmortalidad de los personajes principales, la (in)visibilidad del individuo entre las masas, y los riesgos de una *Weltanschauung* fría y distante en la sociedad contemporánea. Además, se subraya cómo los comportamientos de los personajes, en sus reacciones infantiles a los eventos y en sus relaciones interpersonales, ejemplifican el arquetipo junguiano.

Palabras clave: infantilismo, Marie-Louise von Franz, arquetipo junguiano, literatura apocalíptica, Gary Shteyngart.

1. Introduction

From its beginnings in New England Puritanism, its apogee with Cold War nuclear tensions, and its relevance to twenty-first-century existential threats, apocalypse is, in Hay's words, "the oneiric foundation upon which American realities have been built" and the locus of humanity's "apocalyptic anxieties" (Hay 4-5). Haunted by apocalyptic media's suggestion that apocalypse is not a distant hypothesis but a present, lived environment (Hay 9), we have been brought to an extreme

situation which may—true to the etymology of *apocalypse*—grant us a *revelation*, for "apocalypse [...] inspires transformation" and rebirth (Hay 6, 12). But while some apocalyptic stories use this revelation to celebrate human resilience and solidarity, others tell of inglorious descents into hopeless stagnation.

Taking John R. May's view that apocalypse "is a response to cultural crisis" (Foertsch 178) and Jane Fisher's assertion that the rhetorical form of the apocalyptic genre can bring awareness to how damaging current and future social problems can be (148), one can examine the apocalyptic future of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) not just as a national catastrophe, but as "a metaphor for personal pain/disaster" (Hicks 216). Within its apocalyptic vision of U.S. governmental and societal upheaval, the novel foregrounds a story of a personal apocalypse and what critic Irene Visser terms "cultural erosion" (311); of an arrested psychological development; of people taken by vast illusions, emerging from them only to sink back into unconsciousness. Within the novel's world and characters, there arises a pattern of thought and discourse corresponding to the Jungian archetype of the eternal child which, when examined in its various manifestations, can help to expound on this novel's apocalyptic vision of the future from the perspective of Jungian psychoanalysis. By tracing how *Super Sad True Love Story*'s characters and their behaviours correspond to the characteristics, symbolic analyses, and professional experiences presented by psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz's theoretical framework *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (2000), this article aims to illustrate a world beset by problems like the callousness of modern business culture and police states, concerns with the individual as a statistical figure, the discourse accompanying the futile grasping for immortality and godhood, and how they all relate to the psychology of the *puer aeternus*.

2. The psychology of the *puer aeternus*

Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious delineates innate patterns of behaviour, thought, and symbology called archetypes, which have loomed large in humanity's collective psyche since prehistory and inform an individual's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Main, "Carl Jung's Archetypes"). In *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (2000), Jungian psychologist and scholar Marie-Louise von Franz describes the

eternal youth archetype, or *puer aeternus*, which she noted as becoming increasingly common by the original lectures' presentations in the late 1950s (Franz 1-4). Taking after her insights, the American poet and essayist Robert Bly identifies the figure of the *puer* and its presence in Western society in *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) as stemming from the Industrial Revolution, reactions to World War II, and other twentieth-century conflicts like the Vietnam War (2). Having worked with various such youngsters, Bly affirms that society knows nothing about how to produce men: "we let it all happen unconsciously while we look away to Wall Street and hope for the best" (180).

On the road to adulthood, the young individual—filled with that vigour and potentiality often ascribed to the divine—accumulates wounds that damage self-esteem, curb enthusiasm, and especially hurt feelings of greatness, for these wounds render "our condition […] difficult to reconcile with our fantasy of princehood [and our] Infantile Grandiosity" (Bly 33). These wounds are often transferred unconsciously into adult life and lead to suffering but can be healed through personal effort or a mentor figure, for Bly believes that the latter's knowledge of stories within mythological and social systems can lead us intelligently and meaningfully into and through that suffering (226). However, without a mentor figure, a young man may become distracted by defective myths, popular culture's worn-out images of masculinity (Bly ix), and rapidly changing technologies and media, thus "[achieving spirit] at the expense of […] their own grounding in masculine life" (Bly 59). For the *puer aeternus*, responding to that archetype is not abnormal yet, despite their freeness and their ecological superiority to their predecessors, Bly stresses these "soft [males]" are miserable and lacking in energy: "life-preserving but not exactly life-giving" (58, 2-3).

Franz describes the characteristics of the *puer*'s neurosis as stemming from their aversion to the adult world (14), hence their inability to find a satisfactory compromise between a vibrant fantasy life and the mundane reality of adulthood. He is puzzled by how to accomplish this without losing the totalising freedom afforded by his childhood creativity and illusions, without sinking into disappointed cynicism (Franz 58, 35). By dithering between both extremes, the realisation that would allow him to "[grow] into the reality of things—[meaning] dis*illusion*ment" (Franz 35, emphasis mine) presents a great difficulty, which leads the *puer* to

play a dirty trick on himself in which he renders that essential realisation into a mere "intellectual idea" (Franz 43). He is cognisant of the problem but does nothing. In receding into their childlike curiosity and creativity (Franz 43), the *puer*'s cynicism, tendency to live detachedly, and inherent impatience emerge. This eventually contributes to what psychologist Dr. Dan Kiley calls the "unrealistic ego trip" that leads the *puer* to magical thinking and to follow their fantasies (Kiley xvi). When confronted by the tensions of daily life, his "weak personality"—a physical, not moral criticism—will squirm and take a "short-cut reaction," a mentality that manifests itself as an aversion to monotonous, disciplined work (Franz 45, 47).

Franz argues that avoiding adult responsibilities leads the *puer* to believe adulthood as hollow and meaningless (16), leading to a statistical outlook that relativises experience and damages both their own uniqueness and individuation, defined in Jungian terms as the realisation of one's potential, identity, and purpose. Citing the French writer Gérard de Nerval's "half-truth" problem that the woman he loved was both one-of-a-kind and one among thousands (Franz 92), Franz notes that by accepting a "falsified image of reality [based] on [average] probability," one ignores the unique irregularity of experience and is overwhelmed by life's mundanity and the perceived banality of the crowd (91). In this intellectual analysis, one must invest one's relationships, deeds, and one's very life with a determinately sure value by "allowing feeling its own place," thus rendering them unique and meaningful. Otherwise, a life viewed through a purely statistical lens is devoid of feeling (Franz 93) and marks the beginning of much suffering.

Habitual, statistical thinking exacerbates the "anxiety [and] rivalry [of] contemporary business life" (Bly 33) and feeds the *puer*'s fear of becoming assimilated into the crowd—to be a sheep, a symbol of blind faith in authority. Although ingrained in Christian tradition and embedded into political systems (Franz 40), Franz emphasises that part of the cure for *puer* mentality is this collective adaptation, to "accept being just somebody" who isn't special (42). However, the *puer*'s loathing of collectivity instead leads him to entertain false pretensions about himself, thereby becoming "collectivised from within" (Franz 125). Within corporate-dominated modernity, being treated as a mere numerical figure worsens the "overwhelming power of the State [and]

the devaluation of the individual" that make us feel like sheep (Franz 28). Thus, the *puer* clings to his identification with that one rare, sensitive, artistic, misunderstood soul among the mundane, unconscious masses, which keeps him from achieving a solid sense of humanity and renders him a mere copy of the *puer* archetype (Franz 125).

Bly observes that the *puer*'s false pretensions prevent him from experiencing humility and thus, like a child-god, he will "[identify] with all in him that can fly" (81-3) and keep his overblown grandiosity, which is alternatively symbolised by the figure of Peter Pan (Kiley 22). This inability to commit and his shielding himself with a comfortably self-important image characterises the *puer*'s "religious megalomania" (Franz 40) and leads him to lose his individuality as he further identifies with and embodies the divine youth (see Franz 2, 126, 140)

The *puer* squirms at the necessity of work and the impossibility of always doing what one wants in life, for reality disappoints before the product of his fantasies (Franz 160). This inflames his aversion to accepting himself as he is and his refusal to live in the present moment (Franz 135), leading to further destructive qualities like a haughty arrogance, an entry into a "savage mode" that does harm to others and themselves (Bly x), a need to obscure his sadness behind a fun-loving facade (Kiley 4), and a willingness to examine himself only to "exercise power over others"—a childish, egotistical trick (Franz 232).

Franz begins her discussion of the *puer*'s childishness, which originates from his perfect, nigh-deific image of the mother which he seeks in all women (1). In a further connection to the unreal, the *puer* will fantasise love affairs in excruciating detail while dismissing the present, lived experience, instead pining for the arrival of a perfect woman that will fulfil his needs, as she goes on to argue (153). At the same time, the guarantee of a mother's love leads the *puer* to take this and other kinds of love for granted, thus never learning how to correspond (Kiley xvi). Franz finds that he yields too easily and rarely stands up for himself in his relationships, and then suddenly—perhaps disappointed that the object of his fascination is totally ordinary (2) and thus just another statistic— leaves his partner (49), callously dismissing the entire experience (210). If he judges a woman in this way, her image becomes that of "a romantic goddess [and] a statue that is no longer alive" (Franz 91).

The *puer*'s "childish greed" awakens as he attempts to cause the positive feelings elicited by his past experiences and relationships to repeat, rather than forgetting them to focus on the present moment. Like an artist obsessed with a prior success, he succumbs to the pull of death and unconsciousness, contradicting life itself (Franz 115). This makes the *puer* a poor romantic partner, for he hovers between "passivity, naïveté, and numbness" (Bly 60, 62). He lacks what James Hillman calls the "natural brutality" (quoted in Bly 66) and honesty essential to functional relationships but, most of all, the *puer* fears being unable to escape a situation (Franz 2), hence why his fallibility and mortality are so frightening to him. To accept life is to accept death, but the *puer*, consumed by his identification with the immortal, recoils from "disillusion, stagnation and death" and holds life at arm's length to lessen disappointment and suffering (Franz 164, 168).

Here, then, is the crux of the *puer aeternus*'s neurosis, the culmination of the above behaviours, and the ultimate manifestation of the *puer*'s symbolic marriage to the unreal. This is what H. G. Baynes refers to as the "provisional life," an imaginary attitude to reality rooted not in the present but in the belief that true, lived reality will arrive in the future (quoted in Franz 2). Like the jaws of a great beast, the provisional life is the "[backwards-looking], regressive aspect of the unconscious" that devours one's personal development (Franz 15). The *puer*'s vivid fantasy life interferes with his ability to accept lived reality and turns people and experiences into mere placeholders bereft of his emotional investment (Franz 2). He thus feels cut off from life due to being unable to achieve what he wants, but cannot relinquish those unlived fantasies and unfulfilled possibilities, for it would narrow his life's paths. Intertwined with his expectations of future success is his belief in the "time illusion" (Franz 63), in which the plenitude of time excuses one from ambition and proactive action. Awakened from this comfortable stagnation, he hastily initiates his pursuits, suffers a nervous breakdown or, worse, experiences an *enantiodromia*, an extreme and sudden shift into an opposite psychological state where one drops off into cynical, disappointed banality that dismisses life-giving idealism, romance, and creativity as youthful distractions. By taking this intellectual shortcut, the *puer* lives a life spent scowling at the "same human dirt" and "just [existing], [curled up] in" mundanity (Franz 167-8). Life eventually catches up to these individuals who, in veiling themselves with detached

innocence, descend into a melancholic, even suicidal spiral. This depressive "nothing but" attitude (Franz 86, 89) isolates the *puer* from reality, for his pursuit of a purely objective existence renders him a mere consciousness trapped in a shell untouched by reality and divorced from the present. Cut off from life by an emotional membrane, the *puer* may hide his constant irritation and his sensitivity not just by assuming a mask of unfeeling chauvinism (Kiley 11), but by disregarding all experience through the morbid intellectual reflection of its inevitable end. Always aware of life's ephemerality, he is primed for disappointment before it happens and never immerses himself in it: "For anyone stuck in that situation, life no longer has any meaning" (Franz 36 and 6, 58-60, 62-5, 86-89, 112, 122, 154-5, 167-8 and 174).

3. The *puer aeternus* in Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*

The apocalyptic vision in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* is set in a time of "the utmost collective despair, aimlessness, and disorientation" (Franz 187). Having economically decoupled from the Chinese and the Europeans, this future America is nursing wounds gained in a catastrophic war with Venezuela (Shteyngart 11) and brutally suppresses armed protests held by its unpaid and neglected soldiers (Shteyngart 100). American citizens live under the constant scrutiny of Credit Poles—which publicly broadcast their credit ratings—the omniscient GlobalTeens network, and each other with the aid of their äppäräti, all-purpose handheld devices akin to smartphones that collect and openly distribute personal data to feed algorithms and programs that invade and dominate human interaction. There are whispers of mass deportations of "immigrants with weak Credit" (Shteyngart 11), and as the Bipartisan government's economic stimulus packages fail, many Americans slowly realise that they will become unemployed and discarded like trash (Shteyngart 86, 87). Later, anarchy erupts as the government collapses and is replaced by the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation, which plans to "divide the country into concessions, and hand them over to the sovereign wealth funds" (Shteyngart 257). As America becomes a volatile police state (Shteyngart 179) that rounds up and shoots its Low Net Worth Individuals (LNWIs) to avoid embarrassment before its Chinese creditors, American peoples exude an end-of-days "*tiredness* of failure […] imposed on a country that believed

only in its opposite" (Shteyngart 106, 130). Yet accompanying *Super Sad True Love Story*'s setting of cultural and national dissolution is a tale of "personal decline" (Shteyngart 85). Its main actors, Lenny Abramov, Eunice Park, and Joshie Goldman—all three *pueri aeterni* to an extent—are, in critic Jacqueline Foertsch's terms, "the true horror and despair of this dystopia," for their quests trace not only the fall of a nation but, and this is especially true for Lenny, the course of "an existential hero facing his own private annihilation" (Foertsch 176-7).

The novel, concerned as it is with "big" data, information technology, and its characters' places within a highly neoliberal environment, portrays a world dominated by statistical thinking, where the individual is insignificant as an individual, as a citizen, or as a human being. Most individuals exude a palpable anxiety for a person's visibility in the face of social upheaval, these being middle- and working-class Americans slated for forcible eviction as part of "Harm Reduction" (Shteyngart 95) or following the Rupture as Staatling-Wapachung usurps the Bipartisan government, when it becomes evident that "'No one care [sic] about the sick or the old anymore'" (Shteyngart 291).

The cold, callous attitude that reduces life and people to a merely numerical value is epitomised by the company's CEO Joshie Goldman in his appraisal of the chaos following the Rupture: "[This] is going to be good for us in the long run. This is a controlled demise for the country, a planned bankruptcy. Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate everything but real estate" (Shteyngart 256). This dismissal of the intricacies of human suffering, as people are merely "labor" to Joshie (Shteyngart 256), points to a dangerous mentality that emerges from statistical thinking which the English philosopher Alan Watts coined "the great 19th-century put-down of man" (Watts, "Power of Space"). Its supporters describe complex phenomena via their most simple constituents in order to belittle them, and thus make themselves appear as hard-headed realists (Watts, "Tao of Philosophy"). Watts highlights the dangers of this linguistic and intellectual trick at a political level—"Untrammeled violence, police states, and [a] shocking disregard for human existence"—because it enables one to do great violence to those deemed inferior (Watts, "Power of Space"). This disturbing puerile attitude pervades most of the characters' discourses throughout the novel. In the wake of the Bipartisan shooting of

LNWIs in Central Park, Joshie half-heartedly laments the bloodshed as he instals himself on his dais, but then voices his concerns on the loss of "prestige for the country, [tourist yuan and] face for our leadership," (Shteyngart 180) revealing his true colours. Howard Shu, Lenny's colleague and one of the superiors at Staatling-Wapachung, calls the Rupture "a realignment. [...] Just [...] some war games" (Shteyngart 213), while Joshie, moments after fighting erupts in the streets, excitedly celebrates how fortunate and blessed the company is (Shteyngart 241).

In the context of 1930s Germany, the characteristic false veneer of the *puer*'s sentimentality is replaced by a brutality epitomised by Nazi politician Hermann Göring, whom Franz mentions would alternate between ruthlessly ordering the deaths of hundreds and crying at the death of his pet bird (Franz 7). Echoing that manic extreme, Joshie's own cruelty is reflected in his branding the poor as "riffraff with no Credit," his disdain for the media profession, and his rationalization of the latter's deaths upon the ferry: "This town's not for everyone. We have to be competitive. That means doing more with less" (Shteyngart 257). Joshie chillingly uses this euphemistic, statistical language reminiscent of Nazi jargon, which punctuates the callousness inherent to his mindset.

Just as the *puer* encounters difficulty in reconciling reality with fantasy, *Super Sad True Love Story*'s "post-literate [...] *visual* age" (Shteyngart 277) raises concerns on the invasiveness of the äppärät and its fantastical, ephemeral, and endless "contacts, data, pictures, projections, maps, incomes, sound, fury" (Shteyngart 6). It has radically altered human life both linguistically, as with Noah's vulgar, primitive, and obnoxiously masculinist conversations with Lenny and Vishnu, and socially, reducing it to algorithms and social compatibility scores (Shteyngart 86; 89).

A world peopled by individuals with short attention spans who "just aren't meant to read anymore" (Shteyngart 276-7) points not only to that characteristic puerile impatience but—given their marked rejection of traditional, non-digital media—lend GlobalTeens, the äppäräti, and their constant data streams an illusory quality. These devices and services are all-encompassing yet never produce meaningful narratives—just vast quantities of hollow data—and, like soap bubbles, can burst when

they touch reality, thus breaking the comforting illusion (Franz 162). When GlobalTeens goes offline, the consequences are tragic:

> Four young people committed suicide [...] they couldn't see a future without their äppäräti. […] [One] 'reached out to life,' but found there were only 'walls and thoughts and faces,' which weren't enough. He needed to be ranked, to know his place in the world. (Shteyngart 270)

The ephemeral data and the fantasies of the digital world that define these characters' lives are more real than material reality and, when removed—like a drug-related withdrawal—can lead into a depressive, spiralling fall into banality and death.

Fantasies are especially prevalent for Lenny Abramov, the novel's narrative voice. His constant retreats from the immediate reality of the scenes he describes function as narrative reframings, lending him a provisionality that reveals a disconnect from the here-and-now, a further descent into ephemeral fantasy and an intellectual distancing from meaningful experience. One significant example is Lenny's intercourse with Eunice, where he can see himself from outside, "With my bald spot and, beneath that, the thick tendrils of Eunice's mane" (Shteyngart 168). This narrative provisionality appears at the Rupture's beginning, during the excitement of what Lenny calls being "in the middle of the movie" (Shteyngart 238), a distancing from reality that stands out in this epistolary novel, itself a reframing.

Lenny's fantasising also recalls that manipulative, compassionless *puer* coldness through his designs for his future relationship with Eunice and also, crucially, with "[baiting] her to New York," and making her his wife for eternity (Shteyngart 25). He is quick to a silent, vindictive anger, for when he sees a vulnerable Eunice post-Rupture, he bars himself from pitying her traumatised, nigh-comatose state, rationalizes the moment, and even stokes his own anger by recalling prior slights so as to spur himself into abandoning the weighty burden of "this eighty-six-pound albatross" (Shteyngart 260). These narrative asides sometimes border on the perverse as they ignite erotic fantasies of Eunice in public places, even detailing how these lewd episodes would elevate him to a higher social standing among the hypothetical onlookers.

Lenny's relationship with Eunice is defined by a characteristic, yielding naïveté resulting from him shelving his demands, needs, and dignity, suggestive of that typical *puer* weakness of personality. He exalts Eunice to the mother-figure's overblown, messianic proportions by claiming that she is his *raison d'être* (Shteyngart 5), yet he realises with fear that he could never leave her side, declaring that he can tolerate her abuse because he was habituated to her anxious, angry outbursts (Shteyngart 165). One's early relationship to their parents informs their later relationships, which here suggests a childhood wound that Lenny has ignored and let fester into a tolerance for that toxic, "infantile moodiness" that nevertheless attracts men like Lenny, who view it as catharsis by proxy (Franz 71). In preferring to maintain the relationship, he reinforces the yielding "good boy" (Franz 183) mentality and entertains hypothetical scenarios where he grovels before Eunice out of a twisted moral generosity, forgiving all transgressions (Shteyngart 311).

In a symbolic parallel to Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, Lenny projects his *puer* condition onto the elephant at the Bronx Zoo which, like him, is "at the middle of his lifespan, [lonely and] removed from his compatriots and from the possibility of love" (Shteyngart 119-20). He compares the animal's state to his condition as an Ashkenazi Jew, recalling core elements of the neurosis: "Mother, aloneness, entrapment, extinction" (Shteyngart 120). But like Saint-Exupéry's elephant swallowed by the snake, Lenny gains no epiphany regarding his state as a *puer*, and remains trapped in its stagnant, unconscious aspect (Franz 27). The elephant—in Franz's terms, a symbol of the ideal adult (16)—and its immobility in physical space and life therefore mirrors Lenny's own psychological paralysis.

Central to *Super Sad True Love Story* is the quest for immortality and the characters' fear of death, heralded by the title of Chapter One, "DO NOT GO GENTLE," a reference to Dylan Thomas's eponymous poem on resisting death. Lenny believes his desire for immortality stemmed from a passage from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which asserts the insufficiency of living just one life. This recalls the *puer*'s rejection of death and a separation from reality where nothing feels real, a sentiment echoed by Joshie: "Eternal life is the only life that matters. All else is just a moth circling the light." The ensuing feeling of being forsaken to nonexistence (Shteyngart 275) explains Joshie's

callous treatment of the "Low Net Worth Individuals," for it "is not unrelated [...] to [the feeling that the individual] doesn't matter, [a] reaction against the philosophy of life in which an individual [matters] too much in the wrong way" (Watts, "Power of Space").

Thus, Post-Human Services's quest for immortality can be examined via the *puer*'s identification with the divine, for posthumanism concerns the transformation of the subject into the divinity it would replace (Taylor 317). Where Joshie assumes this ideology through evolutionary terms—"You remind them of death [...] of a different, earlier version of our species" (Shteyngart 67)—Lenny's opening passage is saturated with divine pretension and the vague promise of a god-like status where he derides the pleasures of life as laughably primitive and assumes an infantility and naïveté befitting a self-proclaimed child god: "I will be the first to partake of [immortality]. I just have to be good and I have to believe in myself" (Shteyngart 5-6). The immortality programme can also be read as a stand-in for the coping mechanism of group identity that the *puer*—consumed by the need to be rescued from loneliness and the insecurity of his worldview—often turns to (Kiley 28-9), echoing Lenny's desire to deepen his standing in Post-Human Services and reap its rewards.

In a society that strives for god-like youth while the natural suffering and pain of life is invisibilised (Bly 81), there is also a rampant fear of death and ageing, hence Lenny's lamentations of the hardships posed by adulthood in such a world (Shteyngart 26). Lenny may be voicing how out-of-place he feels as a member of the previous generation or, alternatively, refer to his naïve, childish views on mortality. But while Lenny "[fears] the old people [and] their mortality" (Shteyngart 273) and recoils from artistic portrayals of death, Joshie condemns the old and infirm to be discarded at an abandoned site, claiming that he "can't exactly keep over a hundred unneeded people in New York" (Shteyngart 302).

Lenny's desire for youth and immortality characterises his discourse with a constant, near-pathological awareness of the transitoriness of time and the certainty of death. His desire for immortality is spurred by his fear of nullification, for he describes himself as living in "death's anteroom" and "barely [able] stand the light and heat of his brief sojourn on earth" (Shteyngart 25). His negation of death and non-

existence mirrors Peter Pan's own "militant refusal" to grow up, for they both inhabit that liminal space between "the man"—in Lenny's case, the mortal—"[they] didn't want to become, and the [boys] they could no longer be" (Kiley 23). Lenny's existential fear is reaffirmed as he reminisces that he could never reconcile with the certainty of death because it destroys his capacity to enjoy the present, thus encouraging a provisional life. Meanwhile, Joshie's first awareness of mortality is inspired by science-fiction works like *Logan's Run* and *Soylent Green*, which feature themes of *puer*-like renewal, thus marking his future obsession.

Although Lenny's opening proclamation casts his search for immortality as a way to escape the nullification destined for others, it is later justified on more democratic grounds. Because of the eventual loss of the self and its attendant emotions and desires, immortality means the "selfishness [of *my*] *generation's* belief that each one of us matters" (Shteyngart 70-1, emphasis mine). This existential fear of being forgotten and condemned to insignificance pervades much of his discourse and informs many rationalizations following traumatic events in the novel. The brief empathy and fear that he feels for the "Low Net Worth Individuals" shot in Central Park "was replaced by a different knowledge [...] that it wouldn't happen to us. [...] That these bullets would discriminate" (Shteyngart 157). These soothing lies are soon challenged by rapid societal change, both at the corporate level through Lenny's outrage at his perceived in-group becoming less exclusive and on the level of status and privilege, as Staatling-Wapachung's harsh working conditions for surviving citizens sets off Lenny's anxiety for the continued safety and comfort of people in his position. Lenny is later absorbed into the crowd, noting "the hipsterish [component's]" distance "from the blacks," but resignedly admitting that "it didn't matter [...]. We were finally one. We were all condemned" (Shteyngart 246). Joshie, meanwhile, never has this realisation that would dismantle his puerile pretensions and self-righteousness, demanding that Eunice devote herself to him and treat him as he sees fit (Shteyngart 303). Joshie feels threatened by a Eunice who dares to be independent from him, and thus projects his insecurities by rejecting a relationship on equal footing—a sign of the chauvinism that can sometimes accompany the *puer*'s neurosis. (Kiley 12, 31).

Within *puer* psychology, *Super Sad True Love Story* portrays what happens when the *feeling function*—that conscious process that invests our experiences with and assesses their personal value—is repressed at the societal and personal levels (Franz 237). Joshie's contempt for the humanities that he deems worthless and part of the "Fallacy of Merely Existing" (Shteyngart 67) he so reviles exemplifies what happens when apathetic, statistical thinking runs rampant. When it is devoid of love for humanity and its irregularities, society's veneers of rationality and good will struggle to hide a festering, "old animal ape-circus" that surfaces in times of political uproar (Franz 237). The novel bears out a development of this kind in the brutal treatment of the elderly and the destruction of the ferries, implied to be orchestrated by Joshie, the *puer*-turned-tyrannical enforcer (Franz 173).

On the personal level, the repression of the feeling function, which severs one from the present moment (Franz 97), can lead one to take destructive intellectual shortcuts to explain trauma away rather than facing it. When Eunice writes to herself before deciding to have an affair with Joshie, she justifies not seeking happiness by citing Freud's suggestion to convert personal misery into "common unhappiness" (Shteyngart 297). Eunice's assimilation of this unfeeling Freudian viewpoint thus completes the "intellectual trick" that closes her off to unknown possibilities or interpretations. In precisely defining her bleak, inflexible outlook on life, she creates an intellectual cage in which to comfortably trap herself in and excuse herself from further doubt and introspection.

From there, Eunice experiences an *enantiodromia* from an idealism and activism concerning her sister and ex-National Guardsman David into a cruel, compassionless, and disillusioned pragmatism eerily resembling Joshie's. Her cold rationality represents a switch from a catatonic, paralysing fear for her loved ones and her country to another, equal form of madness (Franz 266) as she assuredly and without compassion dismisses the cruelty and apathy of the upper classes to which she now belongs (Shteyngart 314). This oscillation from one extreme to another without a reasonable middle ground is typical of the *puer* and conforms to the tragedy of the novel: both Lenny and Eunice reach an extreme, yet drop off into unexamined banality. Eunice is marked by her weak personality's identification with generational collectivity (Franz

173) as she accepts the righteous punishment of growing older while Joshie's treatment allows him to become younger. She further resembles Joshie through her "making the most out of the least" (Shteyngart 311), a wording that becomes sinister when juxtaposed with Joshie's own reasonings on the deaths of the media people aboard the ferry. Her friendly mask now hides "her usual face [of] grave and unmitigated displeasure" (Shteyngart 315). Lenny's disillusionment, meanwhile, negates his proclamation at the novel's beginning by stating its antithesis: "Today I've made a major decision: *I am going to die*. Nothing of my personality will remain. The light switch will be turned off. My life, my entirety, will be lost forever. I will be nullified" (Shteyngart 304). He appears to accept death superficially, but his resignation carries little enthusiasm for the present and instead seems to illustrate a lament for his inability to affect positive change in the world. It then metastasises into an unconscious gravitation to the deathly, unconscious banality (Franz 115) of old habits, as suggested by the pathetic fallacy of the grain fields "arrested by winter, [dreaming] of a new life," which again recalls the *puer*'s desire to escape the present by indulging in fantasies of a tomorrow that never comes. The depressing finality of "For a while at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black and complete" (Shteyngart 331) alludes to the thwarting of the maturational process and the loss of the wisdom that the *puer* desperately needs, and heralds a retreat into a state where the flow of life stops altogether.

4. Conclusions

Echoing their inability to prevent or act against the crumbling fabric of their society, the characters in *Super Sad True Love Story* are fated to become passive, impotent witnesses to their country's decay as they themselves become stuck in the destructive psychological mire of the *puer* mindset. In Lenny's case, this is epitomised by the partial awakening of his fear of death that is nonetheless punctuated by a final, paralytic surrender, thus reiterating the *puer*'s concern on the inseparability of pleasure and life from pain and disappointment.

The narrative strategy of paralleling physical and institutional destruction with the psychological stagnation corresponding to the *puer* archetype enhances the novel's apocalyptic vision of the future.

Shteyngart's raising of issues regarding the damage caused by late capitalism's blatant disregard for people and the environment, the invasiveness of technology and its relationship to mass surveillance and police states, together with the key enabling of puerile responses to the fear of death through dysfunctional immortality programmes, represents the nullification of the potentially transformative quality of apocalyptic events by depicting the *puer*'s arrested development as widespread and deeply embedded in society. Shteyngart proposes that these issues are linked to our contemporary first world society's inability to properly raise children—specifically, boys—into adulthood, and that our social and technological systems merely exacerbate the problem. This is demonstrated by how the fear of death and the obsessive clinging to youthfulness leads to a demonisation of the elderly and the infirm, which emerges as Lenny's disgust at helping the old widows of his apartment complex, and their cruel and callous deportation to abandoned housing. This puerile negation of the natural processes of ageing and death leads not only to the effacement of Lenny's present moment by his knowledge of the certainty of death, but also to the quest for its complete abolishment. This panicked pursuit becomes a business at Post-Human Services where, in a cruel twist, years are added to a life that is lifeless and unreal. Lenny and Joshie entertain fantasies that neglect the present and look to a future where their problems are solved, and they are elevated to fully realised, god-like individuals that rise above the masses, and so ward off the existential dread of living in a world where one's existence can be reduced to the binary language of ones and zeroes. This fervently convulsive reaction to technological advances in instant communication and globalised interconnectivity exacerbates the *puer* mentality, for the novel suggests that when our lives are dominated by statistics, we become cold, callous pragmatists, devoid of empathy and capable of inflicting vast horrors upon our fellow humans. In this state, one loses touch with and deprioritises reality in favour of digital worlds that feel increasingly real. As the line between reality and illusion blurs, we see—as per Lenny's writings—a tendency towards naïveté and impermanency that points to an ungrounded, indifferent, alienated personality that struggles to form genuine attachments with people and is politically uninvolved, thereby inviting more dangerous personalities to take charge. Rather than confronting adversity, this individual represses and shelves away personal pain, lives in a continually depressed state and, as with Eunice, fetishises that suffering.

When contextualised with Shteyngart's apocalyptic concerns, the framework of the Jungian eternal child archetype leads to the equation of the *puer aeternus*'s damaging behaviours with societal disaster. This could supplement trauma studies as a subsidiary perspective for narratives concerning globalisation, advancing technologies, and their relation to the individual across generations. Rather than what would traditionally be referred to as a "traumatic" event, the neurosis of the *puer aeternus* is unrelated to a specific historical event that carries ethnic or strictly genealogical significance and is instead more akin to a psychological reaction to the cumulative effects of massive and rapid cultural and social upheaval that is nonetheless "unconsciously transmitted through the generations," as Claire Stocks states (79). Despite this relative detachedness from traumatic events, future avenues for research in this field might scrutinise the characteristics of the *puer* condition as accompanying additional literary representations of traumatic events and describe their interactions in various contexts, or else further document how the *puer* neurosis disrupts one's "psychic life" (Stocks 79). As a relatively modern psychological phenomenon, the *puer*'s influence on society is not yet fully understood. As our understanding of the human mind improves, apocalyptic representations such as Shteyngart's should encourage us to, in the style of Franz and Jung's frameworks, look inward to recognise these psychological patterns in ourselves and society.

Notes

[1] Franz draws here from Erich Fromm's *Zum Gefühl der Ohnmacht* (The Feeling of Being Incapable of Doing Anything).

[2] The novel's narrative form, which is temporally displaced from the here-and-now, more effectively represents how this provisionality affects one's perception of reality than the more traditional third-person, limited perspective. Combined with Lenny's provisional asides, the resulting narrative 'telescoping' causes the immediate reality of the novel to recede from the reader, echoing the *puer*'s intellectual isolation from lived experience.

[3] Michael Anderson's science fiction film *Logan's Run* (1976) and Richard Fleischer's film *Soylent Green* (1973) portray dystopias which commonly envision the wilful termination of human life to prevent overpopulation or solve a food crisis, respectively.

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