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That "Barton Fink Feeling" and the Fiery Furnace: The Book of Daniel and Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*

Abstract

This paper explores the use of the Book of Daniel in Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*. While some critics have noted the film's "apocalyptic" dimension, and have even mentioned the movie's two explicit mentions of the Daniel story, none has studied the close relationship between the biblical text and the film. This article argues that the Book of Daniel is central to the structure of *Barton Fink*, by arguing that the movie both presents the crisis of Barton's visionary attempt to deliver both a dream and its interpretation (Dan. 2:5), and offers an apocalyptic "cure" to correct his vision.

Introduction

The king answered the Chaldeans, "This is a public decree: if you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins.

--Daniel 2:5¹

When Barton Fink (John Turturro), the protagonist of the Coen Brothers' movie of the same name, finds himself lost and alone, he turns to the Bible. Across the continent in Hollywood and out of his New York element, facing a deadline on his screenplay and stricken by severe writer's block, disillusioned upon having found the "great American author" he had admired reduced to "a great souse" whose partner Audrey (Judy Davis) "edits" his books and screenplays, frightened upon awakening after sleeping with Audrey to find her now mysteriously dead, and forlorn after his neighbor and friend Charlie (John Goodman) disposes of Audrey's body and leaves town, Barton picks up the copy of the Bible placed in his room at the Hotel Earle by the Gideons, and "opens... randomly" to the second chapter of Daniel.² In his fear and uncertainty, the vanguard of the "theater of, by, and for the common man"—who has to now been unable to deliver the "important," "really big" vision that the "working stiffs" need to see—finds a revelation in

Nebuchadnezzar's threat to "cut in[to] pieces" the Chaldean magicians if they cannot reveal to him both the dream that is troubling him and its meaning.³

While Barton's discovery of this prophetically pertinent reference may or may not be divinely ordained, The Book of Daniel resonates with the Coens' *Barton Fink*. The first six chapters, in which the title character, exiled from his homeland, serves Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who conquered Israel, are especially important to the structure of the film. Daniel is a visionary who maintains his fidelity, in exile from Israel, to "the God of gods and Lord of kings" and, thus, not only is granted the ability "to reveal mysteries" (Dan. 2:47), but wins promotion by Nebuchadnezzar to "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all [its] wise men" (Dan. 2:48; my emphasis). Barton has risen from New York's Lower East Side to become "the toast of Broadway" on the acclaim of his first play, *Bare Ruined Choirs*, which is billed "a triumph of the common man." An idealistic, left-wing, Jewish intellectual leading "The Life of the Mind" in the early 1940s, with big dreams of establishing a theater company whose plays would instill revolutionary consciousness among the oppressed and downtrodden, Barton makes the Faustian bargain of abandoning his roots in New York and heading for the big money of the Hollywood studios. ("The common man," jokes his agent Garland, "will still be here when you get back."). Jack Lipnik (Michael Learned), owner of Capitol Pictures, hires him to inject "that Barton Fink feeling" into the "simple

morality play" of a Wallace Beery wrestling movie, lauds Barton's reputation for intimately knowing the "poetry of the streets," and promises him that at Capitol "The writer is king!" Yet isolated from the socio-cultural matrix (both the fishmongers of Fulton Street and the bourgeois "phonies" of Broadway) that shaped him, and finding no warmth in the scorching heat and blinding sun of the Los Angeles climate, Barton fails to comprehend how such a trite, stock, B-movie vehicle as the one he has been commissioned to write, will allow him to create the dramatic masterpiece that will galvanize rather than stultify the masses. Will he, in his exile, be able to keep the faith in order successfully to "make known [the] dream, and its interpretation"? Or will his aspirations be "cut in pieces" before his eyes, and his prophetic project "be made a dunghill"? (screenplay).

The extent to which Daniel informs Barton's narrative has been only superficially treated in past criticism, much of which focuses on the movie's play with the history of America in the first half of the 1940s—and especially with American popular culture, the "Golden Age" of Hollywood, the Second World War, and the Holocaust—or with its intertextual referencing of the works of writers who did wartime tours of duty in the film studios.⁴ Barry Laga notes that the movie's resolution "is a parody of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who withstand the fire which surrounds them."⁵ Michael Dunne invokes with certainty Roland Barthes's argument about the "Death of the Author," and suggests that "since few

of the Modern Cineliterates in the Coens' probable audience would immediately recognize the Biblical reference to Daniel," one must assume that "something other than a literary allusion connecting Fink to Daniel" is at work.⁶

While this paper does not disparage such "post-historical" or "postmodern" interpretations of the film—especially given the focus of such interpretations on the film's "dream" theme—it does suggest that the allusion to Daniel is not merely tangential but crucial to the structure of *Barton Fink*. Daniel's story plays a foundational role in *Barton's*, for it provides both an anchor for the movie—especially with the theme of exile and the trope of the pious visionary who ascends to fame through his proper discernment and interpretation of a dream—and a vehicle for its ultimate resolution—which, in this case, is announced by an angelic figure who protects Barton in the fiery furnace.⁷ *Barton Fink* should be understood as a text that invokes Daniel, with a predominant focus on its second chapter, in order to present an apocalyptic solution to a crisis. As John J. Collins writes in *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, such a solution or "cure" comes in the form of a "revelation that provides a comprehensive view of the world, which then provides the basis for exhortation or consolation" in the face of a crisis.⁸

Unlike that of Daniel, which was composed during the second-century B.C.E. Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes,⁹ the crisis in *Barton Fink* is not a "historical" one. Despite the movie's setting on the eve of World War II,

and certain blatant references to the rising Fascism and Nazism in Europe—the bigoted detectives whose respective German and Italian names invoke the two main European Axis powers, and who comment that only an "unrestricted dump" like the Hotel Earle would admit a Jewish writer¹⁰--*Barton Fink* is not a warning about the rise of totalitarianism and genocide. Why then would the story of the writer who cannot write be central? In his review, which connects the "apocalyptic vision of blood, flames and ruin" to "Nazi evil," Roger Ebert notes that Barton is left at the end "unable to influence events with either his art or his strength."¹¹ Here Ebert grazes the mark even though he misses it. While the Daniel story presents a visionary figure who is able to face the absurdity of his task (of revealing both the dream and its meaning), *Barton Fink* presents a would-be, want-to-be visionary who, when faced with suffering and given a commission to provide the revelation that could alleviate it, cannot read the situation and deliver the "apocalyptic cure" of hope to the suffering because of his inability to recognize suffering when he sees it. As his sojourn in the Hollywood Babylon veers toward the absurd, his receptivity to the advice he receives from the people he meets dulls, and his ability to harness his alleged visionary powers falters, Barton's block solidifies. The Coens' use of Daniel establishes a descent into the fiery furnace as the only way to disabuse their protagonist of the "Barton Fink feeling" (screenplay).

Mantic Wisdom and the Life of the Mind

In the second chapter of Daniel, the title character defuses an immediate crisis by revealing hidden wisdom. Disturbed by a dream, and fearing what it portended, Nebuchadnezzar assembles the magicians and sorcerers of Babylon to decipher what it meant. Wary of their soothsaying capacities, concerned about the dream's meaning, and determined to get the "right" answer, Nebuchadnezzar raises the stakes. "If you do not tell me the dream [as well as the interpretation] there is but one verdict for you," he tells the wise men. "You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation" (Dan. 2:9). Upon being told that only "the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals" could execute his request, Nebuchadnezzar "decrees" that the wise men of the kingdom be "destroyed" (Dan. 2:11-12). Frightened, they turn to the pious Daniel, who intercedes that he and his "companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish." Granted a stay, Daniel tells his friends to "seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery" (Dan. 2:14-18).

Why Nebuchadnezzar would grant Daniel's request is unclear. Aron Pinker suggests that, as a kingly decree could not be revoked once issued, Nebuchadnezzar was frantic for a "face-saving" resolution to the "tight bind" in which he had rashly placed himself and all of Babylon's wise men. Further, "it was thought" in ancient Babylon "that for the dreamer to tell the dream was part and parcel of the process

for mitigating its effects." Having refused to disclose the content of his dream, Nebuchadnezzar "subvert[ed] the normal process of dream handling," thus having exacerbated the situation and made himself hungrier for a resolution.¹² Jack N. Lawson points out that, in the mind of ancient Babylonians, "civilization itself was the product of divine revelation." "Human inventiveness" is ultimately ineffective, for "all knowledge is the product of supernatural revelation." Civilization lives and dies according to the proper "transmission and implementation of the knowledge given [to humans] by the gods."¹³ The moral of this tale within the framework of the Book of Daniel, set within the context of "the Babylonian interest in dream interpretation," is the superiority of Israel's god, and the necessity of a pious life before God. As Collins notes, the "sheer impossibility of the king's demand" necessitates "recourse" to the most "superior means of access to revelation, by prayer [to] God." The structure of the story preserves the aura of "mystery" even while the interpretation—with God's help—is made public. Not "proverbial" but mantic wisdom—in this case concerned not only "with dreams and mysteries" but revealing the "determinism" of the Lord's plan for the world, and especially for Nebuchadnezzar—serves as the only truly effective way of knowing within an exile setting that God is in control of history.¹⁴ Upon hearing the interpretation that the dream of a statue of four materials "crushed" by a "small stone" reveals Israel's ultimate victory over Babylon and three subsequent kingdoms (Dan. 2:36-45), Nebuchadnezzar tells Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings

and a reveal of mysteries,” and promotes him and his three friends above the other wise men of the kingdom (Dan. 2:45 ff). Fidelity to God, even in exile, provides not only the surest means of practical success at court,¹⁵ but the only sure way of keeping the channels of connection with the divine clear, and one's interpretive faculty attuned.

Certain connections between Barton's situation and that of Daniel are blatant. There is, of course, Barton's turn to the story of Daniel at Nebuchadnezzar's court. As mentioned above, Barton is in exile, albeit a self-appointed one, from his homeland, which is also the wellspring of his ideas and his connection to the material for his plays. Told by his producer, Ben Geisler (Tony Shalhoub), to speak to a writer for guidance on his screenplay, Fink has a chance, seemingly auspicious, encounter (in the men's room of a restaurant) with W. P. Mayhew (John Mahoney), who later autographs a copy of his novel, *Nebuchadnezzar*, for him. Barton's first encounter with Lipnick recalls both Nebuchadnezzar's promise of "gifts and rewards and great honor" to whomever could both describe the content of his dream and reveal its interpretation (Dan. 2:6). When Fink arrives at Lipnick's estate for their first meeting, he finds that his newfound fame has preceeded him, for one of Lipnick's agents saw Barton's play and, despite its being "a little fruity," found it "pretty damn powerful." Lauded for knowing "the poetry of the street," promised that "The writer is king at Capitol Pictures," given "a crack" at setting up a plot for

a wrestling picture that has no treatment, and told that Lipnick wants to know the "hopes [and] dreams" of the protagonist, Barton has his visionary "heart" praised, and is given the injunction to produce (by the end of the week) "great things" (screenplay).¹⁶ Jorn K. Bramann draws the connection between Barton's story and Daniel's: "If Barton can be Daniel, he will deliver what Lipnik wants, and he can look forward to an honored position at the mogul's studio court."¹⁷

But Barton has his sights set on a different kind of "glory." A self-appointed "poet" of the streets, he sees himself as a visionary who will create a theater "of, by, for the common man," as he tells Charlie. He wants—as fits someone who deals in visions—to live what Charlie first refers to as "the life of the mind." As "we all have that Barton Fink feeling" (Lipnick proclaims), Barton sees his job as "plumb[ing] the depths" to "dredge up... something honest," a "pain that most people don't know anything about." "The hopes and dreams of the common man," he interrupts Charlie—who, at this stage of the movie, appears to be one of the most "common" of men, and is about to "tell you some stories"—"are as noble as those of any king." Thus the "theater for the masses"—which Barton quite triumphantly (even imperialistically) calls "our theater" when unfolding his dream before Charlie—would portray "real" people in "real life" situations, instead of "regress[ing] into [the] empty formalism" that makes the common man's "but sore just hearing about it" (screenplay).

As Bramann notes, "The way Barton thought about the life of the mind was, of course, the way the proverbial intellectual would think about it: as a rational discourse... based on verifiable knowledge, logical exchange of thoughts, and a reasonably extensive familiarity with ideas that comes from frequent reading and the regular practice of critical communication." Barton's view of the world is strictly black-and-white: The common men and women suffer because they are being oppressed; a vanguard from the masses arises, realizes this, and needs to present the vision to wake the rest up from their slumber; real theater—having nothing to do with "The Fifth Earl of Bastropp" or "Lady Higginbottom"—is an effective medium with which to do so (screenplay). As "reality" is "ultimately" "intelligible," says Bramann, those who have most sharpened their intellectual powers are those best-suited rationally to study the "structure" of the plight of the masses and, thus, to deduce the contours of the peoples' hopes and aspirations.¹⁸ Had Barton learned anything at all from the story of Daniel, he would have learned that the wisdom accumulated through the exercise of one's reason is no match for the mantic wisdom provided through direct revelation.

Barton's reservoir of material is earthier than the "worthless manuals of dream interpretation" used by the diviners of Babylon¹⁹—his is an experiential and empathetic rather than a "religious" connection to his intended audience. Yet unlike Daniel, Barton could hardly be held to be an exemplar of fidelity or piety. "Many

writers," Barton interrupts Charlie, "do everything in their power to insulate themselves from the common man" (screenplay). But Barton himself, as Charlie later and dramatically points out, never listens to anyone's stories, and walls himself off from any meaningful connection with the "great inner pain," common to all, from which he professes to write and which he believes he represents. Many of the movie's scenes, in fact, take place within Barton's room at the Hotel Earle, and Barton's self-imposed isolation within his room and before his typewriter reflects his intellectual and emotional isolation from others—his spare room is very much the projection and externalization of the life within his blocked-up, walled-in mind.²⁰ Perhaps had Barton read farther in Daniel, he would not have cut himself off from the direct source of inspiration. "Mired in his gloomy sense of self-importance,"²¹ and failing to understand that his ambitions are grandiose for one who works in a genre that is "entertainment,"²² Barton is wholly unable to empathize because he cannot, as Audrey reminds him, understand (screenplay). Because he cannot—or will not (it is difficult to say; the two go hand-in-hand)—understand that life does not fit the simple formula that clearly distinguishes oppressed from oppressor, that deep pain may be more commonly "known" than people are willing to discuss publicly, and that some writers may perform their craft not to unveil and crack the mystery of human suffering, but to instill within themselves (and, possibly, within their readers or viewers) a "deep sense of peace," Fink proves himself an unworthy medium to deliver the message about "that Barton

Fink feeling” that “we all have” and share. “Until” he “grow[s] up a little”—until his isolation from the suffering and inner pain that are his subjects, is broken down, Fink will be more a “write-off” than a writer (screenplay).

Fiery Furnaces and Tourists with Typewriters

In the later chapters, Daniel himself is “terrified” by “the visions of my head” (Dan. 7:15), and has a dream that requires divine interpretation. At the end of the movie, immediately before Charlie makes a reappearance when detectives arrive at the Earle to arrest Barton for the murders of Audrey and Mayhew, Barton asks the detectives whether they could “come back later” because “My head is killing me” (screenplay). In each case, the visionary finds that his own power of interpretation does not extend far enough: Both the latter half of Daniel and Barton Fink place their respective visionaries in situations in which they themselves receive “a revelation... mediated by an otherworldly being [and] disclosing a transcendent reality.”²³ “The dream-vision,” writes Collins about Daniel's situation in which he is now “the dreamer” seeking interpretation, “has become an apocalypse, where the mysterious revelation must be explained by a supernatural being.”²⁴

The same is true for Barton's situation as well. Having completed his script, and awaiting confirmation from Lipnick of how “important” and “big” it is, and having recently discovered that not only Audrey but Mayhew is dead, the “Life of

the Mind" no longer allows Fink to say for certain what is actual and what is not. From the moment he wakes up the morning after having slept with Audrey—who in a sense, as Mayhew's "editor," helped him with his interpretations of his "visions," and was on the verge of doing the same for Barton—and finds her dead, Barton cannot be certain of what reality is. He does not allow this to affect his work, once he gets going, however. Like Daniel, who incorporates "his" dream into the fabric of his revelation,²⁵ Barton incorporates his own "dream" of what a working-class lifestyle (based on the Fulton Street tenement in which he grew up with his family of "fishmongers") should be, into his screenplay for *The Burlyman*. Having literally shut out the world (ultimately by plugging his ears) as he typed furiously at his script, and retreated into his own mind, Barton "represses the real" to such a degree that, Laga writes, it is uncertain at this point whether not merely the screenplay but Barton's own life is now "dream-work."²⁶

The boundary between vision and reality is in fact broken when Barton takes the advice before Charlie parted for the first time: "Make me your wrestler... Then you'll lick that screenplay" (screenplay). Already a paradigmatic "common man," Charlie is magnified by Barton into the archetype for all common men. Barton's craft, for all its faults, converts Charlie's struggles with the oppression of a society stacked against him (so Barton interprets Charlie's story) into a triumphant gospel of the eventual victory of the downtrodden over the heel that grinds them

into the dirt: The wrestler's father feels that "we'll be hearing great things from that crazy wrestler—and I don't just mean a postcard" (screenplay). Charlie's story also has a dark side: Charlie Meadows is actually Karl "Madman" Mundt, a serial killer who lops off the heads of his victims (the bodies of Audrey and Mayhew were discovered in Mundt's calling-card style). Barton discovers this in the course of completing his screenplay, and comes to wonder whether or not Audrey's head might be in the mysterious box that Charlie left with him before disappearing. Charlie thus symbolizes, along with the good news of the common man's triumph, the chaos and darkness that sunny exteriors belie. The Burlyman, completed after Barton discovered Charlie's true identity, oddly does not factor into Barton's screenplay, which delivers a happy ending to the "simple morality play" that Lipnick commissioned (and appears a regurgitation of his *Bare Ruined Choirs*). Holding fast to his deep faith in the function and power of art to uplift the masses, Barton yet again compromises the integrity of the vision for the satisfaction of "that Barton Fink Feeling." Only upon returning from a USO dance (at which he delivers to the "monsters" in the Army and Navy who are shipping out in the morning, a scathing tirade about how his head is his "uniform" with which "I serve the common man!") and finding the detectives waiting for him does his certainty collapse and, noticing how "hot" his room, from which the wallpaper is peeling and the glue is melting, is, does he realize how great his headache has become (screenplay).

The stage is then set for Charlie's reappearance. The conflagration at the Earle that marks the film's climax has been widely interpreted as Barton's symbolic descent into Hell: This could then mean that Charlie—who appears in a vision of flames and ventilates both detectives with a sawed-off shotgun—is the Devil. This would, however, attach a negative value to Charlie's character, when the role he plays, along with being necessary to the story's resolution, is positive at least because he exculpates Barton of complicity in Audrey's killing and Mayhew's murder (Audrey's death remains a mystery; Charlie himself is shocked and disgusted, and likely did not cause, her death). Palmer suggests (assuming that the blurring of the boundary between art and life is ruptured, and that Charlie, the model for the "burlyman," is in a sense Barton's brainchild) that Charlie is a Golem from Jewish legend, an artificial human that once unleashed becomes instantly, violently destructive, and must ultimately be destroyed by its creator.²⁷ This is a creative interpretation, but it lacks an appreciation for the fact that Charlie leaves a calling card drawing the police to Barton (by making Audrey's killing look like one of his murders, and then killing Mayhew in the same fashion) in order to deliver a vision that Barton had never dreamed. Bramann is closer when he suggests that Charlie is Barton's "introduction" to the darker, "Dionysian" dimension of human nature of which Barton seemed blissfully unaware, so long as it fit his vision of his own importance—but mainly because Bramann identifies Charlie's role, however much death and destruction it brings, as constructive and instructive.²⁸

The key to an understanding of this scene is, once again, the Book of Daniel. Along with the story of Daniel's need for an interpreter of his own vision, the story of the three young men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who are sentenced by Nebuchadnezzar to death, is important. After receiving the interpretation of the four kingdoms, which were represented by a statue of mixed alloys and with a golden head representing Nebuchadnezzar himself (Dan. 2:37-39), Nebuchadnezzar builds a golden statue of himself and decrees that all in the kingdom must pay tribute to it. The wise men of Babylon, having recently had their necks saved by Daniel, now conspire to have his three friends, of whose rank they have grown quickly jealous, gotten out of the way. As pious Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego cannot pay tribute to idols. The wise men inform Nebuchadnezzar that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have broken his command. Incensed with rage, the king decrees that, the furnace "heated up seven times more than was customary," the three be bound and thrown into the flames. A mysterious fourth figure appears in the furnace with them. Having "the appearance of a god," this angel of the Lord removes their bonds and preserves the pious men from the flames so that they emerge unscathed from the furnace, without "even the smell of fire [on] them" (Dan. 3:1-27). Yet again, this story serves to illustrate the supremacy of the God of Israel above all others for, as Nebuchadnezzar declares, "There is no other god who is able to deliver in this way" (Dan. 3:29).

The Coens recall the fiery furnace in the Hotel Earle. As soon as Barton checks in, he and Charlie remark about how "hot" it is, and Barton constantly finds the wallpaper of his room peeling due to the cheap glue that runs in the heat. Remember also that Barton's room and Charlie's room serve as symbols of their respective minds: When he returns from the dance to find the detectives waiting for them, Barton complains of the heat of the room as well as of a headache; Charlie repeatedly comments that the climate within his own room is "hot"; even the detectives remark, as sinister flames build up in the heat grate below Barton's room, and the wallpaper peels from the walls, that the heat is excessive. When a shotgun-toting Charlie reappears by stepping out of the hotel elevator, the flames build drastically. After he shoots the first detective, the camera cuts to a frontal view of Charlie, now backed entirely by flames, as he screams, "LOOK UPON ME! I'LL SHOW YOU THE LIFE OF THE MIND!" The other detective turns to run; Charlie, flames pursuing him down the hall, runs after him, shoots him in the leg, reloads just outside of Barton's room (where Barton, handcuffed to the bed, watches in horror), and shoots him in the forehead. The flames do not seem to consume the walls of the hotel, and none of the residents seems too concerned about the fire. Given both the disruption of the boundary between fact and fiction in Barton's mind after Audrey's death, and the connection between the hotel walls room and Barton's own mind, this could be a surreal statement of Barton's own point of view, could be all within Barton's head. What Barton does not make up, however, is that Charlie

has returned, and with a vengeance. As Bramann notes, Charlie has returned to provide Barton with a necessary education. Charlie appears to Barton as a supernatural—at least superhuman—being at this point: Not only do the facts about him dwarf the identity of the "Charlie" that Barton knew; he delivers an almost divine judgment on the detectives,²⁹ clears Barton's name as noted above, and manifests a preternatural feat of strength in bending the bed posts so Barton could escape.

But his ultimate role is as the divine interpreter of Barton's vision. Daniel's visions require angelic intercession for the meanings to be revealed.³⁰ Charlie fills a similar role in *Barton Fink*. Appearing larger than life, and framed by flames, Charlie appears to deliver to the would-be visionary the startling vision that he needs to hear: Barton is told that Charlie chose to reveal to him the nightmare of his own mind's life "Because YOU DON'T LISTEN!" In Daniel, "one like a human being" descends "upon the clouds of heaven" to announce the "everlasting dominion" of the "Ancient One" (Dan. 7:13-14). Charlie ascends from what appear to be and have been interpreted as the flames of Hell in order to deliver his revelation. But while he appears to be the diametric opposite to the "angelic leader of the heavenly host,"³¹ Charlie should not be interpreted—regardless of the violence and the apparent immorality of his actions—to be any less of a divine figure. It also would not be too much of a conjecture that the Coens joke here upon

the advent of the angelic "one like a son of man" in Charlie, who is first perceived by Barton to be an average common American "working stiff," the emblem of everything that is good about America that yet gets crushed under the heel of capitalism. Thus, even after Charlie's identity is initially divulged, Barton legitimately (in his own mind and with a clear conscience) brands Charlie as a symbol of that common man he wants to exalt, and whom he makes, in the person of the wrestler who goes off to "great things," the good son of a hard-working family of "common people." But having returned, the one like a son of the common man brings no gospel of triumph. He brings instead the revelation that Barton has needed to hear: "Look around this dump, Barton. You think you know pain? You're just a tourist with a typewriter... I live here!" Charlie reveals to Barton himself Barton's inability to empathize, his unwillingness to listen, and his naivete as a writer all disqualify him from any "visionary" or "prophetic" aspirations he has held. Revolutionary aspirations for "average" people are like straw if they are not rooted in empathy; the "working stiff" just want release from their concerns and their troubles rather than high-handed proclamations about "great things" that are to come (they want entertainment, not art); people want to be "helped out" and to have someone "do the same" in return. Barton can only apologize for his stubbornness (screenplay).

Conclusion

After Charlie returns to his room, Barton visits Lipnick, who informs him that his script "won't wash." The dream obscure, the vision a failure, Barton protests that he "just wanted to show you something beautiful... something about all of us." The "Barton Fink Feeling," which Lipnick as Nebuchadnezzar had placed on a pedestal earlier, is nothing special after all and, far from being "King," Barton is dismissed not as a "writer" but as a "goddamn write-off." Bound to a contract with a production company that will not produce anything he writes "until you grow up a little," Barton can only stagger away broken, his vision shattered, his self-importance spent.

As the movie ends in uncertainty, what then could be the "apocalyptic cure," if any operates within Barton Fink? The Book of Daniel, which was composed from earlier tales to "provide support in the face of [the Antiochan] persecution,"³² promises that "[t]hose who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:3). Having had the laurel stripped from his brow, the "poet of the streets" seems doomed to the fate of "those who sleep in the dust of the earth [and] shall awake... to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). Should there be a "time of the end" at which "many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined" (Dan. 12:9-10), Barton is not the person to reveal its vision and herald its inauguration. Indeed, the only "comprehensive view of the world" that the movie's climax and denouement

provide seems to be the cold reiteration of the fact that Barton Fink is no prophet of the people.³³

In its own way, this is a vision of something more certain and more grounded in reality than was Barton's inflated interpretation of himself. Even if the knowledge revealed to Barton in the apocalypse delivered to him by Charlie, does not lead to an expanded self-awareness that could allow him to rehabilitate his reputation and career, it still provides Barton with an insight into "a greater transcendent reality" in the sense that it literally forces Barton to transcend the narrow, cerebral view of life that he has constructed for himself—it rips the blinders from his head. Thus while a crisis—in this case that of his self-definition and personal perspective—may not be resolved, it is presented as containing a bare modicum of hope that it may be resolved. Neither idealistically—because his pompous self-perception of his role in shaping a visionary theater and cinema—nor realistically—as his friends, and perhaps his family (when in New York, Charlie "dropped in" on Barton's parents and uncle, whom Barton later tries frantically but futilely to call), are dead—can Barton's life be what it was before he came to Hollywood. As Barton sits on the beach, stripped bare internally, and utterly numb inside, the movie ends in a living tableau in which a young woman (recalling a painting of a "bathing beauty" that hung in the hotel above his typewriter) sits looking out into the surf, and a seagull drops dead into the water. The apocalypse

of *Barton Fink* seems not to be intended for the audience (we know right off the bat that Barton is a phony and a hack) but for Barton himself, a revelation of the living death that his creativity would suffer so long as he clung to his misconceptions about the nature of "the life of the mind."

¹ All biblical quotations, except when otherwise noted, will be from the New Revised Standard Version, The HarperCollins Study Bible.

² Quotations from Joel and Ethan Coen's screenplay for *Barton Fink* are from the version available online at http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/barton_Fink.html. (Note: The "Daily Script" website misspells the Coens' surname as "Cohen.")

³ The screenplay uses a translation of the Bible different from the NRSV.

⁴ See James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, Brassey's, 2002.

⁵ Barry Laga, "Decapitated Spectators: *Barton Fink*, (Post)History, and Cinematic Pleasure," *Postmodernism in the Cinema*, Ed. Cristina Degli-Espositi, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, 201. Laga's concern with the Coens' skewering of historical references is irrelevant to my study of the Coens' use of Daniel.

⁶ Michael Dunne, "*Barton Fink*, Intertextuality, and the (almost) Unbearable Richness of Viewing," Originally published in *Literature Film Quarterly* (2000), available at: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3768/is_200001/ai_n8879687/pg_1. Dunne's argument rests upon his application of Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (Image, Music, Text 1957) as a lens for viewing the Coens' constant referencing not only of movies but of novels. I do not have room here to approach this interpretation, but a buried contention of mine is that, rather than supporting Barthes's thesis that the "transcendent" "Author" is dead and that there are "scriptors" who arrange language, tropes, and references that individual audience members interpret, this film in particular is a testament by the Coens that the "Author" is (or "Authors are") very much alive. Their use of Daniel and their understanding of its function as an apocalyptic text demonstrates this.

⁷ The conflagration at the movie's climax, which will be discussed below. For the story of the "fiery furnace," see Daniel 3:19 ff.

⁸ I borrow the concept of an "apocalyptic cure" from John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, Second Edition. The term "apocalyptic cure," however, comes from a graduate seminar I took in the fall 2006 semester at Boston University with James C. Walters in "Apocalyptic Literature."

⁹ See Collins 110.

¹⁰ The respective Italian and German surnames of the bigoted police detectives, for example, or Barton's own overtly "Jewish" last name.

¹¹ See Ebert's review at <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19910823/REVIEWS/108230301/1023> (Originally published in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 23 August 1991. The Coens themselves remarked that such a grand apocalypse was the "only" way, given the "great apocalypse the world was heading toward," to end the movie. See Mottram.

¹² Aron Pinker, "A Dream of a Dream in Daniel 2," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 33:4 (2005), 235. Pinker's conjectures that Nebuchadnezzar's reticence "perhaps indicate[s] that he is not in possession of the particulars of his own dream." This is, I think, a moot point at best—and it is made in the service of providing a more rational approach to how wise Daniel could have pieced together and discerned rationally the content of the dream.

¹³ Jack N. Lawson, "'The God Who Reveals Secrets': The Mesopotamian Background to Daniel 2:47," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 74 (1997), 64.

¹⁴ Collins 91-92.

¹⁵ Collins 91.

¹⁶ I introduce this as an aside: Lipnick lists the Bible as something that cannot contribute to Barton's screenplay.

¹⁷ Jorn K. Bramann, review of *Barton Fink*. Originally printed in *The Educating Rita Workbook* (2004). Reprinted in *The Philosophical Forum*, available at: <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/phil/forum/Fink.htm>.

¹⁸ Bramann.

¹⁹ Lawson 63. I must be fair and note that Lawson at first points out that these manuals were divinely inspired. But Daniel's direct gift of a vision from God that interprets the dream and resolves the crisis clearly trumps their efficacy and solves the mystery of who clearly has God's favor.

²⁰ In a 1991 interview with Jim Emerson, the Coens note that *Barton Fink* is from the "Person Alone in the Room" genre of film. *The Coen Brothers: Interviews*, Ed. William Rodney Allen, Jackson: U. of Mississippi, 2006, 56.

²¹ R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, 125.

²² Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers: Virgin Film*, 107.

²³ Quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, Second Edition, 10.

²⁴ Collins 99.

²⁵ I am assuming only for the sake of drawing a parallel between the two characters that a "historical" Daniel existed, let alone that the author of Daniel was the "historical" Daniel.

²⁶ Screenplay; Laga 197.

²⁷ Palmer 125.

²⁸ Bramann provides a brief interpretation of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

²⁹ See note 10 above.

³⁰ Collins 106.

³¹ Collins 103.

³² Collins 280.

³³ Collins 280.