3.2 The Mysterious Medium in George Saunders's "Buddha Boy" (2007)

Like "The New Mecca," George Saunders originally wrote "Buddha Boy" for *GQ*, which published the text in 2006. Saunders included an amended version of the text in the essay collection *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007). In this text, Saunders describes being confronted with the rumor of a Buddhist boy named Ram Bahadur Bomjan who had allegedly been meditating for seven months straight without eating or drinking.[1] He travels to Nepal to see the boy for himself and explores the possibility of the Buddhist teenager's superior powers of mind control. In contrast to the approach that he adopted in "The New Mecca," Saunders is not much concerned with the communal making of meaning. Rather, he is interested in the fundamentally subjective workings of interpretation that are practiced in Buddhism. More to the point, he is intrigued by the cognitive functions and possibilities of a human medium that triggers questions of religious self-creation.

Saunders mirrors the monk's reflexive performance in the multi-faceted self-reflection of his own subjectivity as human medium that creates itself more or less consciously. For instance, Saunders characterizes his experience in Nepal as being the result of a will that is motivated by bare human curiosity. Furthermore, he describes his experience as decisively mediated by his own mind, whose desire for cognitive closure he meticulously documents, analyzes, and questions. Thus, he explicitly portrays the narrative of his experience as the product of an interpretative process wrung from his own body.

1 Bomjan started meditating in May 2005 but disappeared from the site visited by Saunders in March 2006. He has since been seen repeatedly at different sites but his story has changed dramatically as he has been accused of violence, rape and incest. Saunders's early fascination with the boy's meditating powers has therefore been called delusional. Burnett III, "The Dark Secrets of Nepal's Famous Buddha Boy."

In his telling of the story however, Saunders also comments on religion's persisting function for the self-making of the individual human subject. Kieran Flanagan has argued that religion: "constitutes the problematic many thought had dissolved into history, assassinated by reason and buried in the spirit of secularisation."[2] However, particularly if the human subject increasingly constructs itself reflexively, it is forced to confront its own contingency and to ask itself questions also related to ambiguity, enchantment and mystery.[3] The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has argued, rather broadly, that religion represents the human capacity to give meaning to reality and signifies a "metaphysical grounding" of social values.[4] As such, it influences social and personal identity. Even more generally, scholars have posited that spirituality fulfills similar functions, particularly in terms of the meaning, purpose, unification, or integration of personal identity.[5]

George Saunders's "Buddha Boy" prominently features Buddhist concepts of both self and subjectivity. Faced with the metaphysical and unfathomable subjectivity of a young monk, he emphasizes the limits of his own ability to make sense of his experience rather than foregrounding the monk's miraculousness. Importantly, Buddhism is dominated by a deeply skeptical view of the human subject. For instance, Buddhists reject the existence of an enduring or substantial self. For them, our sense of self is more like a cognitive illusion necessary to reify self and world. "On this view", Matthew MacKenzie argues:

> the sense of self arises from an on-going process of appropriation (upādāna) of the embodied stream of experience into a self-model that 'perfumes' all further cognitive operations. Moreover, it can change and even perhaps drop away entirely in certain types of experience (pathological or meditative).[6]

The basis for this self-model, then, is a kind of: "egoless streaming of reflexive awareness"[7] that can be perceived as a permanent self although it is, fundamentally, continuously (re-)created and its substantiality is an illusion. Here it is very much the inner dialogue between individual subject and identity that

2 Flanagan, "Religion and Modern Personal Identity," 250.

3 Flanagan, 255–256.

4 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 131.

5 Hill et al., "Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure."

6 MacKenzie, "Reflexivity, Subjectivity, and the Constructed Self: A Buddhist Model," 289.

7 MacKenzie, 290.

presents opportunities for subjective formation and, as will be shown in the following analysis of Saunders's text, fundamental considerations of self-reflection.

Mysterious Motivation

To begin with, Saunders characterizes his own role as performed. His concern with the decisive power, exercised by cognition on the writer's part, extends to the frame narrative. Here, Saunders displays an awareness of the importance of the professional context in which his experience in Nepal is produced. Saunders's trip cannot be viewed as an ordinary journalistic assignment, and hence professional necessity, but as the product of a mysterious inner drive. Saunders makes clear that he was initially approached by his editor to write about a meditating boy. "Last December," he writes in the opening line of the piece, "I got an email from my editor at *GQ*."[8] Although the editor explicitly asks him to look into the Buddhist boy's story, Saunders declines:

> I e-mailed my editor back: I was pretty busy, what with the teaching and all, besides which Christmas break was coming up and I hadn't been to the gym once the preceding semester, plus it would be great to, uh, get an early start on my taxes.[9]

As grounds for declining the offer, Saunders lists reasons—such as other professional duties—that might otherwise have prompted him to take the job. The fact that he would be paid to travel to Nepal, for instance, is never discussed once.

Rather, Saunders explicitly presents his experience as highly specific and subjective. Rather than invoking a professional or financial reason related to the capitalistic incentives of professional journalism, Saunders instead describes his motivation to travel to Nepal as originating in a reaction against the media's tendency towards prejudice and his own personal curiosity. However, he cannot "get this boy off [his] mind,"[10] and so Saunders confronts his friends with online accounts of the boy's story. Both these accounts and his

8 Saunders, "Buddha Boy," 211.

9 Saunders, 212.

10 Saunders, 212.

friends' reactions were, Saunders notes, marked by speculation and prejudice. "Skeptics said," he writes, with reference to his online research, "he was being fed at night behind a curtain, that his guru was building himself a temple, that his parents were building themselves a mansion, that the Maoist rebels, in on the hoax, were raking in tens of thousands of dollars in donations."[11] Saunders observes a certain tendency to judge the story in a polarizing way. On the one hand, certain people deem it impossible for the boy to still be alive. Saunders recounts: "One type of American—let's call them Realists—will react by making a snack-related joke… and will then explain that it's physically impossible to survive even one week without food or water, much less seven months."[12] On the other hand, he observes that certain people want to believe. "A second type—let's call them Believers—will say… they wish they could go to Nepal tomorrow."[13] Without explicitly taking sides, Saunders situates his decision to travel to Nepal in the context of these prejudiced views. He states: "What I said, finally, was: This I have to see."[14] Hence, Saunders establishes an early distinction between explicitly professional and mysteriously human motivation for inquiry.

This is further manifested in his preference of the rather general role of the writer over the journalist. Saunders characterizes himself merely as a writer with a distinct sensibility. This is particularly apparent in his repeated references to notetaking—a very concrete and physical manifestation of the act of writing. On the way to see the meditating boy, for example, Saunders mentions that he is unsuccessfully trying to take notes: "Beyond the staging area, the road goes single-vehicle, double rutted. I try taking notes, but the road is too bumpy. *CRWLFF!* I write, *FHWUED??*"[15] Elsewhere, while waiting to get closer to the meditating boy, Saunders merely imagines himself taking notes: "I sit on a log. What I'll do is hang out here for an hour or so, get my bearings, take a few notes on the general site layout."[16] During the night that he spends at the meditation site, Saunders writes about trying to take notes in the dark:

11 Saunders, 211–212.
12 Saunders, 212.
13 Saunders, 212.
14 Saunders, 212.
15 Saunders, 222.
16 Saunders, 225.

> From inside the Enclosure, or maybe the far side of it, I hear what sounds like a cough. Sound is traveling strangely. Was that the boy? Did the boy just cough? To note this possible cough in my notebook, I devise a system: I take out my mini-flashlight, mute the light with my hand, so as not to disturb the boy, record the time, make my note.[17]

In all of these cases, notetaking cannot simply be read as a mere vehicle for a writer's self-characterization. It also embeds the writer's processing of the experience through the taking of notes within the produced experience itself, insofar as it is affected by the quality of a road, is imagined as an effect of the experience, or is itself capable of altering the experience. Notetaking attains the status of an actively produced experience.

At least once, however, Saunders's idea of himself as a writer processing and storing his experience by means of a notebook is at odds with the sensory experience itself. When Subel, his guide and translator, calls him over to take a picture, Saunders hesitates at first:

> 'You have to,' Subel says. 'That's how they know you're a journalist.'
> I hold up my notebook. Maybe I could just take some notes?
> 'They're simple people, man,' he says. 'You have to take a photo.'[18]

In this passage, Saunders paints a clear picture of journalism as being in tension with writing—and with himself. However, this tension is due not to Saunders's own values or practice, but to a narrow understanding of journalism as being essentially visual that is held by "simple people." Saunders clearly does not see himself as a journalist; it is just a role that he occasionally has to play to please others. Elsewhere, for instance, when he is told the story of a snake that bit the meditating boy, he plays his part reluctantly:

> 'What kind of snake was it?' I ask, trying to be journalistic.
> 'It was… a big jungle snake,' Subel translates.
> 'Ah,' I say.

Being "journalistic" here clearly does not help Saunders. The question of what kind of snake it was is obviously not significant to the story. Hence, being a journalist, or even just acting like one, reflects a rather narrow idea of self for

17 Saunders, 234–235.

18 Saunders, 228.

Saunders. A writer, by contrast, cultivates an open-minded sensibility, rooted in the inexplicable personal, merely human curiosity of his self of which he cannot be fully aware.

The Master Mediator

In congruence with Buddhist philosophy, his mysterious openness and curiosity lead Saunders to perceive experience as being ultimately mediated mentally. In Saunders's depiction, however, the mind never works independently; it is connected to other media within or outside the body, such as the body's sensory organs, or other major characters, such as Saunders's translator or the a young monk called Prem. On the one hand, the mind's ultimate superiority as a medium is manifested in the minor role assigned to the mediation by way of the body's sensory organs. On the other hand, the mind's constant reflection upon the mediation performed by other media reveals its ultimate power to impose meaning upon reality.

In line with his depiction of experience, as mediated by the body in "The New Mecca," Saunders only rarely questions sensory perception. In "Buddha Boy," at least under normal circumstances, reality just *is*. In Kathmandu, for instance, Saunders comes across what later turns out to be a soup kitchen:

> Off to one side of the road is a strange sunken hollow – like a shallow basement excavation – filled with rows of wooden benches on which hundreds of the dustiest men, women, and children imaginable wait for something with the sad patience of animals. It's like a bus station, but there's no road in sight. Several Westerners huddle near a gate, harried-looking, pissy, admitting people or not. A blind man is expelled from the lot and lingers by the gate, acting casual, like he was not just expelled. What is going on here? Three hundred people in a kind of open-air jail, no blind guys allowed.[19]

Despite his obvious difficulties in making sense of the place, Saunders appears to fully trust his senses here. What he experiences is real; the question of whether or not his senses might be playing tricks on him is not raised. Furthermore, Saunders perceives primarily by means of his eyes and does not refer to other possible—and possibly intense—forms of sensory perception,

19 Saunders, 217.

such as smell. Saunders invites the reader to experience what he experiences much more rarely than he had in "The New Mecca". In these instances, reality appears rather simple. For example, in one episode that occurs on the night he spends close to the meditating boy, Saunders ponders the effect of the silence surrounding him: "In this quiet, even the slightest posture adjustment is deafening. If a tiny breeze picks up, you notice. If a drop of moisture falls, you jump."[20] Here, it is the lack of stimuli that gives the experience its appearance of simplicity. Similarly, shortly before Saunders sees the boy for the first time, he assertively describes the scene as if the reader were seeing what he sees, because it appears so straightforward:

> The first impression is zoolike. You are looking into an Enclosure. Inside the Enclosure are dozens of smallish pipal trees festooned with a startling density of prayer flags (red, green, yellow, many faded to white from the sun and rain). This Enclosure also has a vaguely military feel: something recently and hastily constructed, with security in mind.[21]

Framed by the zoo metaphor, the content of Saunders's experience is almost exclusively visual. Through a rather simplistic interpretation, the scene resembles an interchangeable object that Saunders thinks would be experienced in exactly the same way by the reader.

This situation changes when things start to get a bit more complicated for Saunders, regarding both his perception of reality and in terms of the zoo metaphor. In the following paragraph, Saunders switches subjects, turning back to himself, while his eyes assume greater agency:

> I scan the Enclosure, looking for That Which Is Enclosed. Nothing. I look closer, focusing on three or four larger trees that, unlike the smaller trees, have the characteristic flaring pipal roots. This too feels zoolike: the scanning, the rescanning, the sudden sense of Ah, *there* he is![22]

In this passage, although it is not stated explicitly, his eyes are more directly connected to his mind, as they search for the boy. The description of his visual searching, thus, takes on a much more subjective quality. This kind of searching, Saunders appears to suggest, is more contingent than the impressions

20 Saunders, 235.

21 Saunders, 224.

22 Saunders, 224.

that he had described previously. It is primarily the control of the mind, not the particular workings of the senses, or aspects of external reality itself, that signals a high degree of subjectivity—and not just in this paragraph.

In "Buddha Boy," the mind, rather than any particular sensory organ, appears to be the master-mediator of experience. It is the mind that is characterized as the engine of sensory experience and its interpretation, especially when the body as a whole is challenged. At the very beginning of Saunders's nocturnal camp-out, for instance, he hears a weird noise: "At 7:20, oddly, a car alarm goes off. How many cars in deep rural Nepal have alarms? It goes on and on. Finally it dawns on me, when the car alarm moves to a different tree, that the car alarm is a bird."[23] In this case, Saunders initially mistakes a bird for a car-alarm, as the result of a mistaken mental attribution of the sound. In a similar way, Saunders describes his mind as playing tricks on him, when—as suggested by nearby monks—he believes himself to be witnessing a miracle, as he sees colored sparks emanating from the boy's forehead and hears his inhumanly loud heartbeat:

> I look through the binoculars. Yes, red and blue sparks, yep, and now, wow, green. And orange. Then suddenly, they're all orange. They look – actually, they look like orange cinders. Like orange cinders floating up from a fire. A campfire, say. I lower the binoculars. Seen with the naked eye, the sparks look to be coming not from inside the Enclosure but from just beyond it. Slowly, a campfire resolves itself in the distance. The heartbeat becomes syncopated. The heartbeat is coming from off to my right and behind me and is actually, I can now tell, a drum, from a village out in the jungle.[24]

Here, Saunders arrives at a more sober conclusion about what he has seen and heard, because he keeps an open mind and ultimately interprets his perceptions differently—after having let some time go by and used binoculars. Hence, in both cases, it is the mind that decisively classifies what he initially sees and hears.

However, Saunders does not set up an opposition between body and mind. Their relationship is, rather, circular or dialogical, given that the body influences the interpretations produced by the mind and vice versa. For instance, when Saunders's body is challenged, his mind is challenged too. As Saunders

23 Saunders, 235.

24 Saunders, 236.

suffers while trying to fall asleep at the meditation site, he writes about how suffering affects the mind. Having initially been able to convince himself of the importance of not losing his calm[25] and even playing devil's advocate,[26] his mind struggles to make sense of reality when he realizes that the white flecks he saw were an optical illusion:

> Oh man, I think, I have no idea what's going on here. The line between miracle and hallucination is all but gone. I am so tired. The center is not… What is it the center is sometimes said not to do? Hanging? Having? The center are not hanging.[27]

Challenged by sleep deprivation and the extreme cold, Saunders loses the ability to clearly perceive reality, a condition that he expresses through a joking reference to the famous line from William Butler Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* (1920).[28] But even here, as he finally reflects in writing upon his earlier inability to think clearly, Saunders marks out the mind—in this case, explicitly the writing mind expressing itself in prose—as the ultimate master-mediator of experience.

Apart from the role played by his body, Saunders describes his experience as being mediated by other human beings, such as his translator Subel, or the young monk Prem. Subel, in particular, whom Saunders explicitly characterizes as "media savvy,"[29] repeatedly influences Saunders's experiences. For instance, Saunders uses Subel to illustrate the critical political state of Nepal as a country, when he narrates how Subel tearfully told him stories about a woman who was unable to get medical treatment or about the arrogance of soldiers.[30] However, Saunders interprets these stories for himself, explicitly concluding that: "[p]olitical pragmatism exhausted, they're looking for something, anything, to save them." [31] It is a friend of Subel's who tells Saunders: "he hopes the meditating boy will do 'something good for this country,' meaning, to my ear, *something good for this poor, beaten-down country which I dearly love.*"[32] In both

25 Saunders, 239.
26 Saunders, 241.
27 Saunders, 245.
28 Yeats, *The Second Coming*.
29 Saunders, "Buddha Boy," 220.
30 Saunders, 220–221.
31 Saunders, 221.
32 Saunders, 221.

cases, Saunders describes his experience as being mediated by another human being. Nevertheless, the meaning assigned to the experience is, ultimately, determined by Saunders's own mind. In the latter case, that of Subel's friend, this is even explicitly signaled by the italicization of Saunders's mental interpretation of what was already a literal quote from the friend.

Along the same lines, Saunders narrates his first encounter with Prem. When Prem lets Saunders into the meditation site, Saunders describes their interaction as follows:

> The young monk looks me over. He's not suspicious exactly; protective, maybe. He makes me feel (or I make me feel) that I'm disturbing the boy for frivolous reasons, like the embodiment of Western Triviality, a field rep for the Society of International Travel Voyeurs.[33]

Although Saunders does not explicitly identify the interpretation of the encounter as his own, he nevertheless raises the possibility that his mind might be decisively affecting his own feelings. Thus, while leaving the source of interpretation open, Saunders's subjective feeling is characterized as a product of both the monk's behavior and his mental interpretation of the monk's behavior. Saunders once again plays up the power of his mind to shape not only his interpretation of experience, but also his emotional response thereto.

Through this depiction of the writer's mind as the master-mediator, Saunders explicitly locates the power to assign meaning within himself. As he turns this power into the object of his text and story, he communicates a self-awareness of his role as a producer of meaning, who actively produces experience and, at the same time, is decisively involved in the interpretation of this experience. He, thus, champions a radically subjective form of knowledge, rooted almost exclusively in the human mind and will.

The Buddhist Base

As detailed previously, this radical subjectivity is based on a Buddhist philosophy of the self. Still, among the powers assigned to Saunders's own mind, we find the capacity to accept meaning originating outside of Saunders himself. He bases his interpretation of the experience in Nepal on rather general

33 Saunders, 225–226.

premises about human nature that are, in turn, undergirded by conclusions drawn from specific experiences, much like the belief in human sameness that Saunders expresses in "The New Mecca". In "Buddha Boy," Saunders explicitly lays out his most basic convictions that shape the story as influenced by Buddhist thought. Saunders ponders the first general premise on the flight to Kathmandu:

> The mind is a machine that is constantly asking: What would I prefer? Close your eyes, refuse to move, and watch what your mind does. What it does is become discontent with That Which Is. A desire arises, you satisfy that desire, and another arises in its place. This wanting and rewanting is an endless cycle for which, turns out, there is already a name: samsara. Samsara is at the heart of the vast human carnival: greed, neurosis, mad ambition, adultery, crimes of passion … and all of this takes place because we believe we will be made happy once our desires have been satisfied.[34]

In this passage, Saunders declares his firm belief in the basic power of desire to drive human behavior. However, he also simply acknowledges a Buddhist concept that he has come to accept. Notably, this general passage about desire comes right after he has described how he was unable to articulate his own desires on the plane:

> I decide to close my eyes and sit motionless, to make the time pass.
> Somebody slides up their window shade and, feeling the change in light on my eyelids, I am filled with sudden curiosity: Has the shade really been lifted? By someone? Gosh, who was it? What did they look like? What were they trying to accomplish by lifting the shade? I badly want to open my eyes and confirm that a shade has indeed been lifted, by someone, for some purpose.[35]

Here, Saunders presents experience, interpreted in a specific way, as personal evidence for the general assertion stated above. He also expands his idea of desire to include curiosity, understanding it as a desire to know. In so doing, he ties the concept of desire to the larger story of the genesis of the article itself, which, as detailed above, is rooted in mere curiosity, as a response to the media's tendency, or desire, to judge prematurely.

34 Saunders, 214–215.

35 Saunders, 214.

Samsara is not the only general idea about humankind that he explicitly imports from Buddhism. Having come across a soup kitchen, on his walk through Kathmandu, Saunders concludes by introducing another Buddhist concept closely related to samsara:

> Life is suffering, the Buddha said, by which he did not mean *Every moment of life is unbearable* but rather *All happiness/rest/contentment is transient; all appearances of permanence are illusory*.[36]

In this paragraph, Saunders even gives more details about his understanding of the idea attributed to the Buddha by contrasting two possible interpretations. Furthermore, through the use of italics, he highlights the fact that both of these are personal interpretations of possible readings. He emphasizes the fundamentally temporary nature of happiness in human life. Understood in this sense, suffering could be interpreted as not yet satisfied desire. "Not so fast," Saunders seems to say, as he immediately provides a specific, yet different interpretation of his walk through Kathmandu:

> The faceless woman, the odd-toothed woman, the dusty elderly people with babies in their laps, waiting for a meal, the blind guy by the gate, feigning indifference: In Nepal, it occurs to me, life *is* suffering, nothing esoteric about it.[37]

Saunders adopts a literal interpretation of the Buddha's statement that he rejected previously. By its nature, however, the suffering that he experiences in Nepal is still temporary; it simply appears unlikely that it will end soon.

Later on in the text, Saunders makes another explicit reference to suffering that more explicitly evokes the temporal meaning of the saying. During the cold night that Saunders spends at the boy's meditation site, he physically suffers as he freezes:

> Time slows way down. I wait and wait to check my watch. Three hours go by, slow, torturous hours. It is now, I calculate, around three in the morning. Excellent: Next will come predawn, then dawn, then the minivan, the hotel, America. As a special treat, I allow myself to check my watch.

36 Saunders, 217.

37 Saunders, 217.

> It's 12:10. Fifteen minutes – fifteen minutes? … Dammit, shit! I find myself in the strange position of being angry at Time.[38]

Of course, as he indicates here, there is the prospect of an almost certain end to the suffering in the morning. This is why time becomes his focus, which matches the more specific meaning that he attributed to the Buddha's saying.

In a third instance, Saunders articulates another general premise about human nature that shapes his interpretation of reality in Nepal. Having prayed for loved ones at a stupa in Kathmandu, Saunders, a practicing Buddhist, elaborates on the role of fear in human existence:

> Today at the stupa, it occurs to me that this low-level ambient fear constitutes a decent working definition of the human: A human being is someone who, having lived awhile, becomes terrified and, having become terrified, deeply craves an end to the fear.[39]

As Saunders's argument outlines, his interpretation of the centrality of fear—along with desire and suffering—includes a temporal dimension that reflects the nature of human life from a Buddhist perspective. In the text, Saunders explains this general assertion in greater detail in a passage that contains the specific narration of his praying at the stupa.[40] Through prayer, Saunders locates his power, that resides in mere belief, to positively affect the future as well as to avert the harm that he fears. He also observes this faith in the power of belief in the Nepalese people's will to believe in the meditating boy's powers:

> The country is scared, wired, suffering, dreading an imminent explosion that will take a catastrophically poor country and turn it into a catastrophically poor country in a state of civil war. In Katmandu it seems everybody knows about the meditating boy, follows news of him avidly, believes he's doing what he's said to be doing, and wishes him luck. They feel him, you sense, as a kind of savior-from-within, a radical new solution to festering old problems.[41]

38 Saunders, 238–239.
39 Saunders, 219.
40 Saunders, 218–219.
41 Saunders, 221.

In contrast to Saunders's prayer, however, this belief in the boy's powers almost appears to be a human necessity. Faced with a catastrophic reality, people look outside of it for reasons to hope, to what *might* only be real.

The general Buddhist premises that Saunders draws on in order to make sense of his experience in Nepal, therefore, only work in concert with specific phenomenal experience. Furthermore, the connection between the general and the specific is produced and maintained by and within Saunders, and is thus marked out as both subjective and arbitrary. It is described as a product of a human mind that is aware and that understands itself as having the desire to form concepts in order to sate its desire for meaning, while, in the process, coming to understand its own function as the maker of such concepts.

Mysterious Mind-Control

The central treatment of authorial self-awareness in the text occurs in Saunders's implicit linking of his own activity of making sense with the boy's performance. While Saunders describes the workings and power of his own mind at length, as it decisively produces, processes, and interprets experience, he juxtaposes it with the possible workings of the boy's meditating mind. Ultimately, Saunders is unable to determine how the boy manages to keep up his months-long meditation process, seemingly without support. However, Saunders has arrived at the point at which he is able to assert that the boy has turned into a human medium and attained a certain imaginative power that affects how Nepali people think about reality.

By reflecting on his own mind, which exercises a similar function as a human medium, Saunders foregrounds the possibility of a human mind that is able to perform the kind of body control that the boy appears to be capable of. Saunders locates the similarity between himself and the boy in their shared humanity and its supposedly common impulse to sate physical desire, which he describes as a fight against the physical. During the night he spends at the meditation site, Saunders asks:

> What if the boy is making this fight in a new way, by struggling against the thousands-of-years-old usage patterns of the brain? What if he is the first of a new breed – or the most recent manifestation of an occasionally appear-

> ing breed – sent to show us something new about ourselves, a new way our bodies and minds can work?[42]

As Saunders puts it, this mere entertainment of the possibility that the boy could be an utterly different kind of human being is itself the result of fundamental human reflexivity; it is a cognitively activated will to believe in this possibility. In the text, then, it is Saunders's awareness of the capabilities and limits of his own mind that leads him to the conclusion that the boy's story is "pretty damn mysterious."[43] This also means, however, that the decision about whether to reject or accept the possibility of the boy's being fundamentally different is entirely up to the imaginative powers of his own mind. By engaging in such an extensive display of self-reflection, Saunders emphasizes the function of religion in the subjective, but nevertheless shared human aspects of imagination at work in the complex assignment of meaning to unfathomable reality.

42 Saunders, 243.

43 Saunders, 244.