

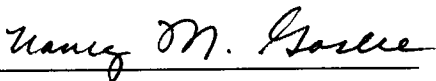
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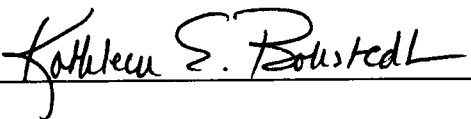
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Lance Marshall Dean entitled "The Persistence of Allegory in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.


B.J. Leggett, Major Professor

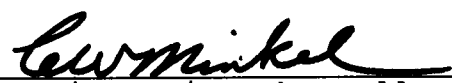
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Accepted for the Council:


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Dean of The Graduate School

**THE PERSISTENCE OF ALLEGORY IN MODERN
AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY**

A Dissertation
Prepared for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lance Marshall Dean
December 1996

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Jeannette Bouchard, whose love, patience and love have enabled me to complete this work and continue to enjoy our lives together, and to Townes Bouchard-Dean, who brings small, great pleasures.

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I am grateful to the faculty, graduate students and staff of the English Department at The University of Tennessee for their kind encouragement. I am particularly thankful to my Dissertation Committee: B.J. Leggett, Allen Dunn, Nancy M. Goslee and Kathy Bohstedt. They have worked closely with me on every stage of this project. They have always been professional, yet they have treated me as a friend. Thank you. I also wish to acknowledge my various friends for their interest and encouragement.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Betty and Paul Dean, for their patient trust that I would finish.

ABSTRACT

This study registers the continuing presence of allegory in modern and contemporary American poetry, and argues that the persistence of allegory marks a distinct response to our condition in modernity. After an examination of the demotion allegory in the romantic period, this study provides various definitions of modernism and postmodernism to demonstrate why, for some postmodern theorists, allegory has returned to favor. Whereas theories of allegory have come to the fore in the postmodern period, this study remarks the presence of the allegorical impulse in modernist texts. The work of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens as representative of the modernist period, and the work of Frank Bidart and Jorie Graham as representative of the contemporary period, provide illustrations of the persistence of allegory. This study concludes that the allegorical impulse of twentieth-century American poetry is rooted in modernism and that forms of this modernist endeavor with allegory continue today as an important response, rather than a capitulation, to our postmodern situation.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The Persistence of Allegory

"Allegory first emerged in response to a . . . sense of estrangement from tradition. . . . A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present--these are its two most fundamental impulses."

Craig Owens,

"The Allegorical Impulse"

Much recent postmodern theory and criticism has sought to make readers more sensitive to the lack of foundations of totalizing metanarratives. Yet readers of contemporary American poetry will notice that some contemporary poets--poets who are aware of, and don't simply dismiss, postmodern theory--continue to express desire for narratives of transcendence that might provide shape and meaning in our postmodern period of facticity and historicity. To account for this continuing expression of the possibility of

transcendent meaning, I turn to theories and practices of allegory because allegories are structures often viewed as imposing narratives while, at the same time, questioning the legitimacy of our connection to these narratives.

I argue that the allegorical writings of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Frank Bidart and Jorie Graham are a response to our condition in modernity. I further contend that the allegorical impulse of some twentieth-century American poetry is rooted in modernism and that forms of this modernist endeavor with allegory continue today as an important response to our postmodern situation.

Contemporary poets find themselves historically positioned after modernism but not beyond modernism. Examining the contemporary uses of allegory foregrounds some of the reasons "modernism" and "postmodernism" are presently so contested.

"The Postconfessional Lyric" by Gregory Orr will serve to illustrate some of the issues raised by my study and suggest what is at stake. Orr traces what he calls "one of the main threads of American poetry" from Bradstreet to Louise Gluck and calls this "the autobiographical dramatic lyric" (650). As his title suggests he focuses on those autobiographical poets who come after the confessional poets of the mid-century. Commenting on the confessionals, Orr notes that they drove themselves into a restricted (and

unhealthy) place. He writes,

When the confessional poets transformed and extended American poetry by courageously engaging an enormous amount of autobiographical material, it had the effect of ensnaring the self in the conditional, circumstantial world. (666-7)

In short, the confessionals found themselves in the postmodern condition.

In contrast, Orr finds the postconfessionals to be poets with "survivor's skills," and "chief among these skills was access to the transcendent, to what, in poetry, could be called the lyric mode" (667). Thus, for Orr, the postconfessional lyric operates according to two principles, the first principle a "lyric longing" which "manifests as the desire to transcend the conditions of being," and the second principle "an awareness of the conditional world" (667). He places the first principle on a vertical axis and the second on the horizontal. I suggest that Orr is describing the functioning of allegory, where temporality is registered in a horizontal narrative movement while pointing to what it desires, a vertical, metaphoric completeness.

Where Orr and I differ is in how much we are willing to ask for. In discussing the postconfessional use of symbols,

Orr states that "they [symbols] satisfy lyric longing if they take us out of the self and its anguished moment," and that "often this involves solitary transcendence, the self losing its burden through identification with an object" (670). This is accepting too little and believing too much. How this solitary transcendence will help a reader is unclear, and this identification with an object remains naively unquestioned. Basically, Orr argues for a low-grade romanticism.

Significantly, Orr deliberately excludes the modernists from his survey. He complains that "a preference for system over self distinguishes both Pound and Eliot. Even Stevens's self is abstract and impersonal From the perspective of American individualism, the great system makers proved to be out of touch with the realities of the twentieth century--rigid in their systems, cold and distant from the human fates being suffered around them" (652). I suggest that this rather predictable characterization of modernism misses its strengths. While modernists were system makers and found abstraction necessary, they did so in order to attempt to create a meaningful place for the self in a fragmented world. Systems and abstractions are necessary for not only for the self, but, more importantly, for a community of selves. Modernist allegory points to possible systems, whether they be transcendent or

provisionally normative. Furthermore, as allegories, they question the relationship between the self and the system or absolute, for allegories--in contrast to symbols--insist on the arbitrary character of the relation. Allegory exhibits both a larger will and a greater wariness than Orr settles for. Or, to put this another way, allegories register the postmodern condition while opposing it.

My examples of allegory in modernism are taken from Eliot and Stevens and my examples from the postmodern period come from Bidart and Graham. Devoting a chapter to each poet, I try to demonstrate their individual development and the ways they differ from each other. I have no doubt helped my argument by selecting contemporary poets who have openly acknowledged the importance of modernists to their work, but, then, this is my point: the modernist project continues.

The main question of this study is also the most difficult one--what constitutes an allegory? From a general poststructuralist point of view (and one I accept), all language is allegorical. However, I have tried to choose poets who are self-consciously aware of the allegorical character of their work. In these poets' work, the allegorical split becomes the issue of their poems. This split may be figured as a gap between body or letter or text and spirit, a gap between idealized past or origin and the

fragmented present, or a gap between the profane or visible and the sacred or invisible. The four poets under consideration here are linked by their preoccupation with such dualities as the mind and nature, the soul and body, the imagination and reality, the spirit and the letter of language, and whether or not these dualities may be reconciled. Many of the definitions of allegory that I employ are linguistic and ahistorical (such as that of Paul de Man) in emphasis. However, as I am exploring modernist allegories, I turn most frequently to Walter Benjamin, whom I view, despite postmodernists' claims to the contrary, as essentially a modernist critic. Whether or not the poems chosen as examples may be viewed as allegorical is finally the burden of the individual chapters.

The persistence of allegory in twentieth-century American poetry helps account for the existence of some trends that one would not expect to find in the postmodern period. These include a willingness toward abstraction, a high degree of religiosity, an intense interest in the body, and experimentation with narratives.

My first chapter takes up various definitions of allegory and relates them to literary periods. I begin with the romantic period, for this is when our sense of modernity becomes painfully present and when, not coincidentally, the symbol versus allegory debate comes to the fore. This

discussion of allegory theory in the romantic period leads to a discussion of the split posited between modernism and postmodernism, for critics generally refer back to romanticism when contesting this split in meaning. Again not coincidentally, at the same time that the term postmodernism first starts gaining currency, the theorizing of allegory intensifies. I suggest that while theories of allegory gain prominence in the postmodern period, the allegorical impulse is already clearly evident in some important modernist American poetry.

This is finally a study of desire, what Jorie Graham calls "the big hunger," and an investigation into a form of the sublime. The poets examined here exhibit the human longing for meaning and completeness. The postmodern condition does not diminish this desire. Frank Bidart displays allegorical thinking when he concludes "Confessional" this way: "*Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot have one.*" With these lines Bidart shows the human "need" and an awareness of our postmodern situation that refuses the possibility of a metaphysics. The lines also demonstrate the inevitable performative contradiction. His certainty that one cannot have a metaphysics presupposes a metaphysics. Allegories obsessively express our needs and question any such fulfillment. Confronted with failure, caught in contradiction, allegories invoke the sublime, an

affirmation in the face of impossibility. These poets must believe transcendence is possible in order to keep desire alive. With the persistence of allegory, these poets take our desires, and the conditions that thwart them, seriously.

Chapter Two

Allegory in Modernity: Romantic, Modernist and Postmodernist

Examining allegory's relationship to twentieth-century American poetry requires focusing on two historical periods in which the very terms and definitions of these periods remain contested; in fact allegory theory and practice stand at the center of these contestations. In the first of these periods, the romantic period, modernity becomes fully entrenched while the value of the symbol is promoted, with some telling exceptions, at the expense of allegory. The second period is the present postmodernist period in which we are still attempting to define or understand our condition, often by positing a break between modernism and postmodernism.¹ The term "postmodernism" suggests that we are in a position after modernism, but, in light of modernist and contemporary writers' use of allegory, I

¹ By the term "modernity," as opposed to "modernist" or "modernism," I mean the historical period now generally posited as beginning c. 1500, although its precise beginnings concern me less here than its continuing effects. With the terms "romanticism," "modernism," and "postmodernism," I refer to literary periods existing within, and responding to the challenges of, modernity. I devote much discussion to these contested terms subsequently in this chapter.

suggest we are not beyond modernism. At the same time that critics began positing the postmodern, largely in opposition to modernism and romanticism, critics (though not initially the same critics) sought to return attention to allegory.

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, notes "the return and revival, if not the reinvention in some unexpected form, of *allegory* as such, including the complex theoretical problems of allegorical interpretation" (167). Calling this return of allegory "significant and symptomatic" of "our own cultural and theoretical moment," Jameson continues:

For the displacement of modernism by postmodernism can also be measured and detected in the crisis of the older aesthetic absolute of the Symbol, as its formal and linguistic values secured their hegemony in the long period from romanticism to New Criticism and the canonization of "modernist" works in the university system in the late 1950s. If the symbolic is (overhastily) assimilated to various organic conceptions of the work of art and of culture itself, then the return of the repressed of its various opposites, and of a whole range of overt or covert theories of the allegorical, can be characterized by a generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and

discontinuities, to the heterogeneous (not merely in works of art), to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions, to social differentiation rather than to Society as such in its "totality," in which older doctrines of the monumental work and the "concrete universal" bathed and reflected themselves.

(167-68)

Jameson correctly locates the parameters of an examination of allegory in modernity--a history of valuation rooted in romanticism and a crisis of that valuation occurring with the modernism/postmodernism split. His description also points to the difficulties in describing the workings of allegory in the twentieth century. He describes allegory in terms of the modern/postmodern split, but the terms of this split remain unclear. In his description, admittedly most concerned with allegorical interpretation, modernism is hard to place, situated ambiguously in quotation marks or uneasily represented by New Criticism. Throughout his work Jameson employs allegory to read and oppose postmodernist culture. Yet, to avoid the appearance of "retreating" to modernism, Jameson, himself, "overhastily" assimilates the organic symbol to modernism. One of my hopes for this study is to articulate the role of allegory in modernism.

It is now quite common to find critics "rescuing" certain modernist writers by attempting to demonstrate that they are actually proto-postmodernists. To the degree that I apply postmodern (particularly poststructuralist) claims about allegory to modernist texts, the aim here is similar. But I am interested in complicating rather than rescuing modernist texts, for, I argue, they don't need rescuing; their allegorical tendency is still with us.

Allegory is "significant and symptomatic" not only in "our cultural and theoretical moment" but also in our condition of modernity. While Jameson is surely accurate in finding current theories of allegory "characterized by a general sensitivity" to the various discontinuities he catalogues, Jameson's own hopes for the power of allegorical interpretation (to which I will return) make it clear this is not a full description of the operations of allegory. For allegory, even in its most stringent, postmodern form (with its insistence on particularity, discontinuity, and temporality), nevertheless points to a system or code or shared reality beyond itself for meaning. Even in its denial of the possibility of satisfaction, allegory reveals our desire for meaning.² To be sure, allegory theory and

² Underlying, and sometimes surfacing in, this study is my assumption that humans inherently seek meaning and value, what Steven Connor terms "the imperative to value" (2). Connor claims "that value and evaluation are necessary as a kind of law of human nature and being, such that we cannot help but enter the play of value, even when we would wish to withdraw from or suspend it" (8). This imperative

practice have changed from romanticism to postmodernism, although I believe this is primarily a change in emphasis. Allegory is symptomatic of our condition in modernity for it problematizes the very ground it requires for its operations, just as we grow ever more sceptical of these grounds, whether foundational or provisional, even as we continue to need and desire them for our cultural practices: allegory reflects our self-contradiction. Opposing Jameson's unwillingness, I categorize allegory's persistent pointing to possible grounds, coupled with an ironized awareness of the instability of those grounds, as a fundamentally modernist endeavor. Furthermore, characterizations of our postmodern condition have not rendered this modernist endeavor obsolete.

Allegory's sly negotiation between levels of meaning, specifically between particular cultural practices and more general beliefs, codes or systems of meaning, is, of course, not restricted to modernity. The Greek word is formed of two components, *allos* meaning "other" and the verb *agoreuein* meaning "to speak" (with a sense of speaking in the public assembly, in the *agora*), and is read literally by the *OED* as

to value, for Connor, is "distinct from the operation of particular values" (3-4). More pointedly and not-so-subtly, Jameson, discussing literary interpretation, nevertheless articulates a similar assumption: "As a matter of practical criticism, it must be clear to anyone who has experimented with various approaches to a given text that the mind is not content until it puts some order in these findings and invents a hierarchical relationship among its various interpretations" (*Political Unconscious* 31).

"speaking otherwise than one seems to speak." Not only are the two components of the word seemingly at odds with each other, but, as Jon Whitman points out, the second component "at an early stage developed two quite different connotations" (*Allegory*, 263). *Agora* could refer to an official assembly and to the open market, connecting the word "both with official, political address and with everyday, common speech." Whitman continues, "When this component was combined with the inverting word *allos*, the resulting composite connoted both that which was said in secret, and that which was *unworthy of the crowd*" (263). Whitman relates the connotation of secretness with political allegory and the connotation of elite language with religious and philosophic allegory.³ Each of these connotations suggests allegory is a response to the pressures of a fragmented society in which the fit between levels of meaning is contested.

Definitions of allegory emphasize the composite nature of the term, the suggestion of saying more than one thing, of positing layers of literal and figural meaning. Although many Greek and Latin commentaries made no distinction between allegory and metaphor, current textbook definitions

³ I quote here from Appendix I of Jon Whitman's *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, an excellent overview of the term up to the Romantic period. He concludes that the distinction between allegory and symbol, articulated in the Romantic period, "remains problematic" (267).

often emphasize the temporal extension of metaphor as signaling the presence of allegory. For example, Holman's and Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature* defines allegory as "a form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, either in prose or verse, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself" (10). In periods of crisis, when textual meaning and cultural values conflict, allegorical interpretation seeks to bridge the gap. The desired equation between layers of meaning, for instance, enabled commentators of Homeric texts to view poetry as veiled philosophy, thereby keeping the texts in critical circulation by discovering or imposing contemporary meaning. Thus, from its earliest instances, allegory has been strongly linked to myth and religion, with allegory viewed as an instrument of rationality.

Of course allegories are produced in situations where no crisis is evident. Such an allegory may be considered what Northrop Frye terms "naive allegory," and describes as "an allegory which resists a primary analysis of imagery--that is, an allegory which is simply discursive writing with an illustrative image or two stuck into it" (91). Frye explains, "its basis is the habitual or customary ideas fostered by education and ritual . . . (90), and gives the example of a "theme for a pageant designed only to entertain a visiting monarch for half an hour" (91). For Frye, such an allegory "will have to be treated less as literature than

as a document in the history of ideas" (91), presumably because both its imagery and its ideas are familiar as is the fit between them. In a sense, the extreme naive allegory fails to speak other. Because I am more interested in the ways allegory arises in periods of crisis, most particularly in the crisis of modernity, the naive allegory does not receive emphasis here.

1. Modernity and Romanticism: Valuations of Allegory

The periods of crisis most relevant to this study are the romantic period with its awareness of modernity and the related crisis of the modern/postmodern split. Most investigations of the contemporary implications of allegory return to the site of British and German romanticism with good reason, for, as Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, ". . . the aesthetic contrast between allegory and symbol--which seems self-evident to us--is only the result of the philosophical development of the last two centuries . . ." (65). In his chapter concerned with the same contrast, entitled "The Romantic Crisis," Tzvetan Todorov proclaims that romantic aesthetic "announces and inaugurates our modernity" (147). Thus, this distinction posited by the romantics vividly raises issues central to our postmodern period. Some of these issues are dramatized by the tensions present in

allegory, such as the tension between particularity and cognitive abstraction, and between expressive agency (called into question in postmodernism) and transpersonal significance. John McGowan, while acknowledging the debate over the causes and date of the emergence of modernity, sees "the almost simultaneous birth of romanticism with modernity" (5) and summarizes its emergence and main result this way:

The challenge to Catholicism by the various Protestant sects, the challenge to Eurocentrism in the discovery of radically different societies in other parts of the globe, the challenge to religion manifested in both new scientific discoveries and new economic practices, the challenge to monarchy/oligarchy in the rise of popular, democratic agitation, and the challenge to traditional patterns of social integration in changing modes of production and distribution and the growth of towns and cities all combine over a three-hundred-year period (1500-1800) to transform Europe. By the end of this period, the West has recognized, in the face of diversity and change, that it is thrown back upon itself to ground, legitimate, and make significant its own practices. (4)

Whether or not it is possible "to ground, legitimate, and make significant" our own practices becomes the epistemological and ethical question that postmodern critics increasingly find themselves addressing.

With the realization of modernity, grounding the potential power of ethos is problematized during the romantic period. The romantics, generally, sought to critique the splintering of society at the hands of Reason by unleashing radical subjectivity. Edwin Honig describes the results:

In proclaiming the priority of the individual, the typical English Romantics saw in Christian analogy mainly the blandishments of a discredited priestcraft. Hunting for the true individual rather than the true faith, they celebrated the vitalism of existence and an heroic self-determination. The hero's quest no longer reflects the ethical norms of Aristotle or the metaphysics of Aquinas; it starts instead from a subjective notion of cultural rejection and moves toward the impasse of overreaching conscience.

(39)

Thus, the impasse results from a radical subjectivity at odds with the desire to posit a legitimating ground that

could unify the various fragmented spheres of society. These seemingly contradictory desires (to express radical subjectivity and posit a legitimating ground) were expressed, if not resolved, in the commentaries on allegory. Charles Altieri, discussing the British romantic poets in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, remarks:

The more intense the visionary experience, the greater the need--for poet as well as audience--to resist the condition of marginality that made the vision possible, while rendering its social use problematic. The poems' complexity as experience creates extraordinary pressure to offer allegorical structures that clarify the moral impact. Or, to slightly alter the point, there is a considerable gulf between the specific personal powers to which poetry can testify and the need to determine whether those powers offer an exemplary moral ethos for a community. Making the link requires the supplements of a public moral and religious rhetoric. (73)

However, "the supplements of a public moral and religious rhetoric," while serving the need for a generalizable ground, were (and are) distrusted because they threaten "to undermine the distinctly personal effort to come to terms

with the 'otherness' where spirit resides" (Altieri, 73). This double-bind pushed the romantics to theorize a strong opposition between symbol and allegory and to devalue allegory.

In *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, Rene Wellek suggests that it is "to Goethe that we apparently owe the distinction between allegory and symbol, which was then elaborated by Schelling and August Wilhelm Schlegel, and from there taken over by Coleridge" (I, 4). Goethe formulates the opposition in his *Maximen* (# 279):

It is a big difference whether the poet looks for the particular of the general or whether he sees the general in the particular. The former produces allegory, where the particular has validity only as an example of the general; the latter, however, is the actual nature of poetry: it expresses a particular, without thinking of the general or without pointing at it. He who grasps this particular vividly gets the general with it at the same time without being aware of it, or only late. (qtd. in Nagele, 88)

In making this distinction, Goethe subtly suggests the writer of allegory is in a position of lack and must unnaturally look for, search out, the particular, which

serves as a metonymic pointer. The poet of symbolism, engaged in "the actual nature of poetry," partakes in the fullness of immediate presence. The poet "gets the general with it," based on the assumption that the particular is a natural, organic aspect of the general.⁴

Coleridge inherits much of his critical thrust from Kant and the German romantics, particularly Schelling and A.W. Schlegel. In *Miscellaneous Criticism*, Coleridge provides this definition:

We may thus safely define allegoric writing as the employment of one set of agents and images with actions and accompaniments correspondent, so as to convey, while in disguise, either moral qualities or conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects of the senses, or other images,

⁴ Many critics have noted a correspondence between the romantic theory of the symbol and bourgeois ideology. Rainer Nagele notes,

The bourgeois valorization of the individual and the particular . . . is less a real revolution of the traditional hierarchy than a veiling of the power of the general and a harmonization of the relationship. The aesthetic theory of the symbol has its precise equivalent in the bourgeois ideology of the free market: if all individual interests can freely develop, they will by themselves play together in a harmony in which the general welfare is served without any violence against the individual. (89)

Terry Eagleton, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, makes a similar point (324).

agents, actions, fortunes, and circumstances, so that the difference is everywhere presented to the idea or imagination while the likeness is suggested to the mind; and this connectedly so that the parts combine to form a consistent whole.

(30)

Here, Coleridge links allegory with "fancy," where sameness is presented mechanically to the mind in the form of abstractions while the imagination finds difference. Imagination is the operation of the symbol, synthesizing subject and object.

Coleridge's linking of allegory to fancy and his belief in the organicism of the symbol are stated more explicitly in *The Statesman's Manual* (1818). Here, Coleridge's general purpose is to advocate the Bible as practical textbook for statesmen. Hazard Adams summarizes the argument: "The quality of the Bible mentioned by Coleridge which gives rise to the distinction is its alleged 'freedom from the hollowness of abstractions' in contrast to the 'histories of highest note in the present age'" (70). Coleridge complains,

It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no *medium* between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*. Faith is either to be buried in the

dead letter, or its name and honors usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds SYMBOLS with ALLEGORIES. Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol (o estin aei tautegeorikon) is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative. The others are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter, less beautiful but not less shadowy than the sloping orchard or hillside pasture-field seen in the transparent lake below. Alas! for the flocks that are led forth to such pastures! (30-31)

While allegory is an arbitrary, belated reflection "seen in the transparent lake below," the symbol is a "living part" illuminated by the fullness of spirit. Coleridge enunciates the romantics' rejection of the neoclassical view that art should strive to imitate nature; here the reflection is "shadowy."

The assumptions behind Coleridge's preference for the symbol are clarified by Todorov, who, while focusing on German romanticism, enumerates the main features of the romantic aesthetic of the symbol. Todorov identifies a series of categories, "production, intransitivity, coherence, syntheticism, expression of the inexpressible," and argues, "the notion of the symbol is opposed to that of allegory by virtue of one or the other of these same categories" (221). As opposed to the theory of imitation, "production" refers to the creative process as "the artist has to rival the spirit of nature" (169). The second and third categories are related: "Intransitive," rather than instrumental, art rejects utility to become an end in itself; it signifies and simultaneously is. Art may be intransitive because it exhibits internal "coherence"; as every aspect is necessary, motivated, it requires no supplement. "Syntheticism," or "the fusion of contraries" (184), applies both to the internal coherence of a particular work and to art in general, as, for example, in the aspiration of uniting the various genres of poetry.

Todorov's final category, "the expression of the inexpressible," relates to art's intransitivity; the work of art cannot be translated into everyday, utilitarian language. "Such an impossibility," Todorov notes, "gives rise to an infinite number of interpretations" (193).

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, it was "the very indefiniteness of its meaning" which provided "the victory to the word and concept of the symbolic when the rationalistic aesthetic of the age of enlightenment succumbed to critical philosophy and the aesthetics of genius" (67). Yet this is a victory in need of supplementation, for genius becomes that which can not be reconciled with the grounds of its production. Thus, after describing the foundation of nineteenth-century aesthetics as "the freedom of the symbol-making activity of the mind," Gadamer turns to question its narrowness: "But is that a sufficient foundation? Is this symbol-making activity not also in fact limited by the continued existence of a mythical, allegorical tradition?" (72). Gadamer's use of "mythical" here is confusing, for the German romantics generally applied the term symbol to early mythological texts; as Jon Whitman explains, "critics such as August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schelling" argue that because "figures in mythology . . . are inseparable from their overall significance, later rationalizations violate their original integrity" ("From the Textual to the Temporal" 167). Nevertheless, Gadamer correctly notes "the continued

existence" of an "allegorical tradition" in German romantic theory. Todorov points to the writings of Friedrich Creuzer and K.W.F. Solger who both find value in allegory precisely because it introduces temporality. In *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Volker* (1810), Creuzer claims:

The difference between the two forms has to be situated in the instantaneousness that allegory lacks. An idea is exposed in the symbol in an instant, and entirely, and it reaches all the forces of our soul. . . . Allegory leads us to respect and to follow the steps taken by the thought hidden in the image. In the one, there is instantaneous totality; in the other, progression in a series of moments. (qtd. in Todorov, 217)

Solger introduces the element of time in two ways. First he relates a typology of forms with historical periods. Applying the symbol and allegory distinction to A. W. Schlegel's distinction between the classics and romantics, Solger concludes, "Just as, in the spirit of ancient art, essence and manifestation are always already unified symbolically in activity itself, so they are found here in allegorical opposition that cannot be mediated save through *Witz*, which brings together the separate relations of things and in so doing surmounts their isolated character" (376;

qtd. in Todorov, 219). Solger's second conclusion is similar to Creuzer's: "The allegory contains the same things as the symbol; however, in allegory we grasp better the idea's functioning, which is already brought to fulfillment in the symbol" (*Vorlesungen*, 131; quoted in Todorov, 220). In a historical schema, the need for allegory suggests belatedness; within the typology of forms the figure of allegory, the bringing together "the separate relations of things," is an earlier stage of becoming (but a later historical stage), not yet "brought to fulfillment."

In the final chapter of *Theories of the Symbol*, Todorov concludes, "In time as in space, language differences are irreducible, and by the same token are more important than similarities: history, not in the sense of chronology nor of exemplification of some eternal essence, but in the sense of an irreversible and irreducible unfolding, is another romantic invention . . ." (286-87). Allegory registers this temporal unfolding.

Clearly, different periods have valued the use of allegory differently and, in revaluing allegory, have influenced not only contemporary implementation but also readings of past uses of allegory. Jon Whitman insists on the necessity of historicizing critical terms and notes what such historicizing reveals when he argues, "both *allegory* and *symbol*, however, not only vary in definition over time; in the course of their development, they expose varying

attitudes toward time itself" ("From the Textual to the Temporal" 161). Twentieth-century criticism has produced just such a revaluation of allegory, largely by interrogating the theories and practice of English, French and German romanticism and insisting on the ways allegory inscribes history or temporality. Particularly the works of Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, and Fredric Jameson have, with differing emphasis, renewed interest in allegory. This recent flurry of activity proves instructive, revealing attitudes about romanticism, modernism and postmodernism as part of our continuing interrogations of modernity.

2. Modernism and Postmodernism

In North America, due in part to the New Criticism's adoption of Coleridge's critical writings, contemporary allegorical practices received little critical analysis in the first half of the twentieth century. Important work began in the 1950's with Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Edwin Honig's *Dark Conceit*. At the same time that critics began returning attention to allegory, critics (though not initially the same critics) also began contesting the concept of modernism with the introduction of the concept of

postmodernism.⁵

Attempts to describe and differentiate modernism and postmodernism most frequently refer to romanticism. Altieri begins *Enlarging the Temple*, his study of American poetry of the 1960s, "by setting the opposition between modern and postmodern poetry in the larger context of English Romanticism. Here one finds the general assumptions about the nature of poetry and of the poets' social role, which establish the common ground on which postmodern and modern poetics can be opposed" (17).⁶

Following romanticism, "the concern for a ground outside ordinary states of consciousness remains," but Altieri suggests,

modernism shifts the emphasis from the force of creative nature to the ideal of creative culture. Value and fact can only merge in the imagination's creative response to whatever energies awaken it

⁵ For a brief summary of the first uses of the term "postmodern," see Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity*, pages 267-69.

⁶ Altieri's model for his modern poetics is "essentially symbolist," represented by "Coleridge's meditations on poetic structure and on the mind's dialectical pursuit of an ideal unity" (17). In opposition to this, Altieri calls his model for a postmodern poetics, represented by early Wordsworth, "an essentially *immanentist* vision of the role of poetry" (17). In this 1979 work, Altieri argues for this postmodern model, but his more recent works find much to praise in modernism, particularly the intersubjective potential in abstraction.

to the human meanings and forms potential in the experience. The ultimate desire of the moderns--most pronounced in Yeats, Eliot, and the Pound of the early Cantos but present in Crane and Stevens as well--is to liberate those potential forces in the culture which might provide models and sustenance for the imagination as it seeks to bring individuals and the culture to more complete, more fully humane uses of human energy. The real weakness of the New Critics in their redactions of modernism was to confuse the creative imagination seeking to transform cultural vision with the ordering imagination content with complicated aesthetic constructs. (38)

Certainly the New Critics encouraged and institutionalized the view of modernism as producing "complicated aesthetic constructs" untouched by cultural practices.⁷ Yet the impulse toward producing autonomous aesthetic constructs is

⁷ In rather New Critical fashion I leave, for the most part, the complicated and admittedly important subject of the New Criticism's influence on our thinking about modernism to the side. Attacks on the New Criticism are various but two predominant strains may be discerned: 1) that New Criticism unjustifiably brackets the social domain, rendering the poem--and it usually is a poem--into a rather insular object, and 2) that New Criticism too systematically projects its desire for unity onto literature. It is often noted that the insistence on coherence, sometimes termed the ideology of the symbol, illustrates the untenability of bracketing the social, for ideology, is kicked out the front door only to be smuggled in the back door.

present early in modernism, for to legitimize creative impulses that might provide cultural models, modernists sought to objectify these impulses. This often proved self-defeating, but it was an attempt to transcend the subjective mire. In *A Genealogy of Modernism*, Michael H. Levenson traces the combination of a formalist aesthetic with other modernist impulses. Here Levenson specifically refers to Vorticism:

Insofar as the movement celebrates "pure form," then it appears to overturn anthropocentric values, to stake itself upon objective principles wholly distinct from human will, and to mark a break with a romantic aesthetic. But insofar as its basis remains the freedom of the artist and the absolute priority of personal vision, then it appears as only an extreme romantic individualism. Up to the outbreak of the war, and somewhat beyond, these two principles remained entangled. Pure form was a goal; individual will was its underpinning. (135)

But what is the connection, suggested by the semi-colon, between Levenson's last two clauses?

To account for movement between these two principles or impulses, William A. Johnsen argues for a dialectic of

modernism, though, again, one that meets frustration precisely at the point of synthesis:

(1) Man suffers the frustrating disparity between a fallen outer world of disorder and more perfect inner world; he exchanges the soft, wet outer world of disorder, contingency and chaos for the hard, dry inner world of metaphor, myth and history. . . . (2) Man realizes both the falsification of reality that order irrevocably produces, and his loss of immediate contact with humans and things; confronted with a world becoming ethereal and narcissistic, he returns to re-examine the real, the natural, the unordered. . . . (3) Facing again two polarized choices, man tries to envision an excluded middle when he comes to realize what the structuralists understand: opposed choices are inverted mirror images of each other, mutually dependent, ordered by a common point of view. Existing between polarities, the excluded middle or third possibility cannot be grasped with the same sureness as the first two stages. (544-45)

Certainly this movement is familiar enough in modernism, and may be found even in individual poems. For example,

Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar," by posing social questions in perceptual terms, illustrates how the introduction of a formal artifice may order the world (in this case, the slovenly wilderness) but, in doing so, falsifies the world, leaving it static and unproductive. Nevertheless, the poem points to what it cannot grasp, Johnsen's "middle or third possibility," for the claim that the jar has falsified the wilderness rests on the assumption of some "true" essence of wilderness.

Altieri's, Levenson's and Johnsen's descriptions of the impulses of modernism operate in different registers, but share certain basic issues. Altieri emphasizes the quest for grounds necessitated by the condition of modernity. The shift in grounds from nature to culture makes more acute the awareness of the shakiness of these grounds, as culture is found to be plural and the various values relative.

This leads to the two impulses Levenson finds present in even early modernism. Modernists could use their isolated position by focusing on the individual consciousness with such techniques as first person narration and, more extreme, interior monologue. But even the most minimalist of modernist techniques, imagism, strives for an objectivity. Levenson notes that imagism grew out of the impressionism advocated by Ford Maddox Ford and comments, "When Pound praises Ford because he has 'expressed himself and mirrored the world,' it is unclear whether he thinks

Ford has done one thing or two" (132). To clarify the confusion, or to at least dramatize the problem of the world having collapsed into the poet, requires techniques which provide a frame or another position from which to judge the first, or both positions, relative. Such techniques as the unreliable narrator, the dramatic monologue or the multiplication of images emphasize this. Eliot's theories of the mythical method and the objective correlative are attempts to objectify the subjective point or points of view. With the poet and the world both viewed as subjective and fragmentary, hopes for objectivity rested with the language between. This formalist, structuralist impulse of modernism longs for the ordering principles Johnsen refers to, but not at the expense of sacrificing lived experience. Thus, Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar" and Frost's "Birches," in their attempts to know and order the world without replacing or escaping it, better illustrate the sense of modernism I mean to convey here than, say, Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium."

Struggling toward a similar description of modernism, Alan Wilde insists that we must recognize

a refusal of easy answers and, at the same time, to acknowledge in its absolute poise--not confidence and rest but crisis and arrest--to concede, that is, the *humanity* of the modernist

enterprise. At the heart of that enterprise one discerns the intense need to shape a disordered world--not, in the first instance, either to reform or escape it but, instead, to establish, if only negatively, a relationship with it. (47)

Wilde sees two predominant types of attack on modernism, which, again, characterize modernism in similar fashion. One complains that "modernism presents itself as a congeries of so many closed, spatial, formally organized works: a series of self-sustaining or organic constructs distantly proclaiming their inherent superiority to the messiness of life" (19). The other view holds modernism to be "a ragbag of detachable moral injunctions" (20). Wilde concludes that the injunctions (E.M. Forster's "only connect" is his example) "express desire, not achievement; and it is in the space between the two [attacks] that modernism . . . reveals the dynamics of its often desperate undertaking" (20). While acknowledging the modernists' desperateness, Wilde correctly credits them, as opposed to postmodernists, with at least undertaking something.

To differentiate between modernism and postmodernism, Wilde identifies three ironic modes in twentieth-century literature. Mediate irony "imagines a world lapsed from a recoverable (and in the twentieth century, generally a primitivist) norm" (9). More extreme, Wilde suggests,

"disjunctive irony (the characteristic form of modernism) strives, however reluctantly, toward a condition of paradox. The ironist, far more basically adrift, confronts a world that appears inherently disconnected and fragmented. At its extreme or 'absolute' point . . . disjunctive irony both recognizes the disconnections and seeks to control them . . . ; and so the confusions of the world are shaped into an equal poise of opposites: the form of an unresolvable paradox" (10).⁸ In contrast to the active undertakings of modernism, Wilde connects what he terms suspensive irony with postmodernism, which

with its yet more radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity, abandons the quest for paradise altogether--the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so simply) accepted. . . . Ambiguity and paradox give way to quandary, to a low-keyed engagement with a world of perplexities and uncertainties (10)

In Wilde's later summary, the "frustration of being unable

⁸ The use of the term paradox will undoubtedly signal a New Critical reading of modernism for some, but Wilde, using the criticism of Cleanth Brooks as example, argues that the New Critics call up only a "seeming paradox" as opposed to Wilde's sense of an "unresolvable paradox" (20-27).

to resolve a dilemma gives way to an acceptance of the impossibility of making any sense whatever of the world as a whole. Acceptance is the key word here" (44).⁹ Where Wilde sees an "acceptance" of this impossibility, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in perhaps the most influential account of post-modernism, more aggressively calls for a sweeping rejection of any attempts to make sense of the world as a whole.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), including such metanarrative as, in Brian McHale's paraphrase, "the Enlightenment narrative of human liberation through knowledge, the Hegelian narrative

⁹ While I find Wilde's summary quite credible, the examples he employs present a problem frequently confronted by readers interested in American poetry and its relation to postmodernism. Although *Horizons of Assent* focuses on fiction, Wilde frequently cites poetry when discussing modernism. However, when his examination turns to postmodernism, examples of poetry--with the exception of the ubiquitous Ashbery--are almost never cited. Another example of this may be found in Matei Calinescu's discussion of "the postmodernist poetics of 'indeterminacy' or 'undecidability'" (298). Having raised the issue of a "postmodernist poetics," Calinescu immediately turns to prose, because

The problematic of undecidability . . . is much more acute, and its consequences farther reaching, in prose than in poetry. A certain degree of undecidability of meaning (variously referred to as suggestion, ambiguity, polysemy, or obscurity) has always been a feature of poetry. (299)

From a text dedicated to illustrating the subtly differing threads of modernity, this claim for poetry is disappointing; it's simply too general to be useful.

of the dialectical self-realization of Spirit, the Marxist narrative of revolution and the founding of a classless society, and so on" (19-20). Lyotard, indirectly responding to Jurgen Habermas's argument that modernity suffers a "crisis of legitimation" resulting from a fragmenting of discourse into different spheres, sees these metanarratives, or grand narratives (*grands recits*), as attempts to legitimize knowledge, including scientific knowledge originally opposed to narrative. Where Habermas proposes a normative communication model to further the Enlightenment project, Lyotard blithely claims, "we no longer have recourse to the grand narratives--we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But . . . the little narrative [*petit recit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention . . ." (60). Most postmodern critics propose interventions which will foment or reveal heterogeneity in the face of presumed totalizing systems, whether they be a rigid symbolic order or what is variously called advanced, multinational, or late capitalism. John McGowan notes the irony of the postmodern situation: "The Western world has achieved what the high romantics wished for: a monolithic world in which everything is subsumed under a universal principle. But this monolith is capitalism itself . . ." (13). Thus, Lyotard advocates local invention in the

sciences and the arts to counter repressive totalizing systems. This localized, self-legitimizing version of narrative--the problem of modernity pushed into a corner--has made it difficult to produce theories, for theories of postmodernism tend to get caught in a performative contradiction. Lyotard himself cannot be excluded from this problem. Linda Hutcheon, among the variety of critics making a similar point, sees Lyotard's argument as "an obviously meta-narrative theory of postmodernism's incredulity to meta-narrative" (198). This performative contradiction seems inevitable, but Brian McCale feels it can be played down:

To escape the general postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives it is only necessary that we regard our own metanarrative incredulously, in a certain sense, proffering it tentatively or provisionally, as no more (but no less) than a strategically useful and satisfying fiction, in the key of "as if." (24)

We are back in the modernist language of Wallace Stevens here, as McCale seems to recognize when he recommends that we "turn down modernism and lower its stakes" (24). While this is fine advice, postmodernist criticism has demonstrated repeatedly the difficulty of suspending or

bracketing our self-interest.

Following Lyotard, critics such as McCale are relatively enthusiastic at the prospect of gaming with language, of telling little stories in endless experiment for possible transgression. For Jameson, Lyotard's response to the postmodern condition is actually a symptom of this condition. Far from dismissing the aptness of Lyotard's and others' description of our lived experience of the postmodern condition, Jameson argues that postmodernism follows the logic of late capitalism.¹⁰ Jameson believes a

¹⁰ The relation of late capitalism, or some other proposed monolithic system, to postmodernism raises perhaps the most vexing issue concerning postmodernism: is postmodernism an historical period or a loose collection of attitudes and techniques given a name in the late twentieth century but discernable in other periods? Jameson of course views it as an historical period and this is one of the reasons he cannot openly suggest a return to modernism. For Lyotard, postmodernism is an ahistorical term: "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (81). And so, a paragraph later, Lyotard can write, "it seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern . . ." (81). I find it productive to conceive of postmodernism as an historical period, but some qualifications must be made. The material conditions sufficiently differ between romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism to merit period labels. However, all three periods share the problems, as outlined above, of modernity; I see no absolute break between modernism and postmodernism. Furthermore, the material conditions of a period certainly influence, and can be read from, productions of art, but they do not absolutely determine these productions. Finally, older artistic forms (as my subject here, allegory, suggests) take on different inflections, receive different valuations, in different periods. Thus, I argue the modernist impulse in response to modernity is essentially allegorical and that this modernist allegorical impulse is a potentially productive response to

crippling result of the postmodern condition is our inability to cognitively map the world and thus understand our place in it. Mapping is a significant metaphor because it suggests a spatial representation of reality, a flattening of experience. Postmodernism's emphasis on surfaces has resulted, Jameson argues, in the loss of historical thinking.

Believing that it is no longer possible to create autonomous works of art standing at a critical distance from dominant culture, Jameson does not advocate a return to modernism. Rather, he argues,

the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object--the world space of multinational capital--at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain our capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (*Postmodernism* 54)

our postmodern condition. For differing views on this issue of periodization, see de Man's "Literary History and Literary Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight*, and Peter Osborne's "Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category."

Although Jameson has struggled to forestall such a conclusion, I must favorably categorize his impulse to make sense of the world through the location of historical narratives as modernist.

Jameson has persistently warned against what Wilde sees as the weaknesses of postmodern art. Wilde, although unable to find any agreement as to what "the mainstream of postmodernism is," finds it

at least possible to discern, here and there within the movement, the danger on the one hand of a too flaccid acceptance of disorder and, on the other, of a too easy retreat into a reductive, minimalist aestheticism. For what characterizes the modernist consciousness above all is the energy of its desire. (47-48)

Jameson is a representative of the modernist consciousness that energetically engages the world and desires to make sense of it. And, as we shall find, this modernist consciousness often reveals itself in the form of allegory.

3. The Return of Allegory

This confluence of allegory theory and the modernism/postmodernism debate has resulted in various, even contradictory, conclusions. Mihai Spariosu argues that allegory and hermeneutics are features of modernism that "come into being as instruments of literate or rational values . . ." (76). In postmodernism, defined by Spariosu as a return of "archaic or pre-rational values," allegory and hermeneutics "lose their utility or functionality, and therefore their cultural prestige as well" (77). Spariosu formulates this opposition:

As opposed to modernist texts which still support rational cultural values, even though they present these values in an ironical or parodic fashion, postmodernist texts shift their emphasis onto the world of the senses, discontinuity, decentering, play of surfaces, Becoming, and eternal return of the same. Thereby, they again bring pre-rational values to the foreground of our culture. (76-77)

Spariosu's view that postmodernism emphasizes "discontinuity, decentering, play of surfaces" is accepted by Craig Owens, but Owens argues that the allegorical

impulse "characterizes postmodernism" (223). In "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Owens equates allegory with deconstruction (largely through the figure of Paul de Man) and makes this distinction:

The deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. Modernist theory presupposes that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence. It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred. (235)

In attempting to align allegory with either modernism or

postmodernism, Spariousu and Owens present rather predictable views of modernism and postmodernism but imply very different senses of allegory. Spariousu follows the traditional view associating allegory with rationalization, but his mention of parody and irony do not sufficiently emphasize the climate of crisis necessary to generate the need to provide rationalization. Owens, depending on a poststructuralist view of allegory, gives weight to the sense of crisis but without taking seriously the desire, the ambition, for meaning and value that makes crisis a felt problem. I am suggesting that Spariousu's and Owens' versions of allegory are two sides of the same coin. Though these critics are correct that a modernist will call heads and a postmodernist will call tails, they must share its purchasing power.

I leave it to Mutlu Konuk Blasing to provide a less historically inflected definition of allegory. She categorizes allegory as the trope of metonymy and explains,

. . . the allegorical model of figuring poetic language proposes that the signifier stands for or metonymically represents the signified according to guidelines spelled out by tradition or history. The signified, tenor, or subject is prior to and has no natural relation to the signifier, vehicle, or text that comes after and represents it

according to convention. While on the literal level the signifier is purely itself, here it is an emblem or an allegorical marker for what it signifies. (6)

Thus, for Blasing, allegory signals belatedness and an arbitrary pointing across a gap toward convention or tradition. This definition has the advantage of acknowledging the contingency and insufficiency which preoccupy Owens without dismissing convention and tradition.

To clarify further the operations of allegory in the twentieth century, it is worth returning now to Frye's analysis. Following his discussion of the naive allegory, Frye conveniently outlines a spectrum suggesting the range and boundaries of allegory, "a kind of sliding scale, ranging from the most explicitly allegorical, consistent with being literature, at one extreme, to the most elusive, anti-explicit and anti-allegorical at the other" (91). Here Frye is defining "the boundaries of literature" (91); I wish to (mis)appropriate his scale to suggest the range of allegory. Frye's scale, moving from the extreme of naive allegory, notes "the continuous allegories, like *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Faerie Queen*, and then the free-style allegories . . . (91). As examples of the "free-style allegories," Frye cites as examples Ariosto, Goethe, Ibsen, Hawthorne and suggests that in these examples "allegory may

be picked and dropped again at pleasure" (91). The anti-allegory occupies the other extreme, and here Frye suggests, "the poetic imagery begins to recede from example and precept and become increasing ironic and paradoxical. . . . this type is more consistent with the modern literal view of art, the sense of the poem as withdrawn from explicit statement" (91). Indeed, the highly ironized anti-allegory is the allegorical form most frequently encountered in the twentieth century.

Continuous allegory is quite rare in modern and contemporary poetry, although section IV of "East Coker" in Eliot's *Four Quartets* is an example and provides illustration of the difficulty of categorizing types of allegory along the spectrum. Section IV attempts to articulate the paradox of the Christian Good Friday, suggesting death is the beginning of life just as the poem will conclude "In my end is my beginning" (*The Complete Poems and Plays* 129). The section is a continuous allegory in that it extends the metaphor comparing the healing of hospital care to God's health-care program. The "wounded surgeon" figures as Christ, "the dying nurse" as the church, and "the ruined millionaire" as Adam. This is clearly a continuous allegory in Frye's terms: "a writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying 'by this I also (*allos*) mean that.' If this seems to be done continuously, we may say, cautiously, that what he is

writing 'is' an allegory" (90). Eliot's section is an allegory and its meaning is clear enough. Still, something troubles.

The nurse, a figure for the church, is "dying," presumably because every human (and, by extension, every human institution) must die. This is intended as a sign of health, for "to be restored, our sickness must grow worse" (127). However, the church is also dying in that Eliot writes in a period when belief in the church is dying. It is difficult to read this dying of belief as a sign of health because accepting the claim of the poem--"Resolving the enigma" (127)--depends on this belief. This irony alerts us to a more pervasive irony. We can follow that a surgeon and God show concern for our physical and spiritual health respectively. But the means of ensuring (and insuring) some form of health are antithetical. Eliot's continuous allegory compares the wildly different activities of the surgeon and God, and requires that readers focus on the small area of congruence--both healers have as their goal a kind of health. In short, Eliot employs a metaphysical conceit. And the metaphysical conceit is precisely one of the types of imagery Frye places at the anti-allegorical end of his scale: "Several types of this ironic and anti-allegorical imagery are familiar. One is the typical symbol of the metaphysical school of the Baroque period, the 'conceit' or deliberately strained union of

normally disparate things" (91-2).¹¹ Frye places the continuous allegory next to the naive allegory on his scale, but this continuous allegory ranges far from the naive. Allegories of modernity typically range across the whole scale.

Furthermore, this allegory typifies the general operations of the modernist allegory. First, it provides a typical modernist allegorical story: our very fall--"The whole earth is our hospital / Endowed by the ruined millionaire" (127-28)--our presumed cultural disintegration and dis-ease, signal a utopian possibility. To his credit, by employing nearly incommensurable vehicle and tenor, Eliot does not make this easy. He might have personified Christ in a more timeless occupation, but this would have cheapened the paradox of Good Friday. Second, Eliot employs allegory to negotiate between the particularities of the world we know (the operations of a surgeon) and a tradition (Christianity) we are aware of. But awareness of, and belief in, a tradition are not the same. In an age when belief at best malingers, we may wish the surgeon wasn't wounded, the hospital not contagious. We may find the

¹¹ Angus Fletcher, in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, several times suggests the connection between the Metaphysical poets and allegory. He notes types of lyrical poetry which can convey allegory, including "in the conceits of Metaphysical verse, above all through its excesses (Clevelandism)" (4). Fletcher later asserts, "The price of a lack of mimetic naturalness is what the allegorist, like the Metaphysical poet, must pay in order to force his reader into an analytic frame of mind" (107).

allegory nearer to contradiction than paradox. In typical modernist fashion, this allegory locates our desire, in this case for a kind of health, or at least for an understanding of our dis-ease, and ironizes the grounds from which the allegory promises the satisfaction of our desire.

While continuous allegories are quite rare in literature today, their workings are worth describing because they most clearly exhibit the operations and potential of allegory in general. Wishing to exploit the potential of allegory, Jameson bases his theory on the four-level model of allegorical composition expressed in Dante Alighieri's *Epistle to Can Grande della Scala*. The four levels are comprised of "the literal; the allegorical . . . , which illumines human life under the pattern of Christ's life; the tropological, which provides moral lessons; and the anagogical, which points to divinely inspired truth" (Harris 5). The significance here lies not in the authorship as such--no longer thought to originate with Dante (the letter in fact may not be Dante's)--but rather in its application to Dante's *Comedy* as an attempt to reconcile poetic practice and theological truth.¹² This model of

¹² For a detailed investigation of Dante's discussions of allegory in the *Convivio* and the *Epistle to Can Grande della Scala*, see *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism: c. 1100-c.1375*, edited by A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, 382-387. The relevant section of the *Epistle* reads:

For the elucidation, therefore, of what we have to say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work

allegorical composition, Jameson argues, may be adapted to "twentieth-century realities"

if for literal we simply read psychological, retaining the second, moral level as such; if for the dominant archetypal pattern of the life of Christ we substitute religion in the broadest sense of the religion of art, seeing the Incarnation now as the incarnation of meaning in language; if finally, replacing theology with politics, we make of Dante's eschatology an

may be described as 'polysemous', that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical. And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion' [Ps. 113: 1-2]. For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified, if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different (*diversi*) from the literal or the historical; for the word 'allegory' is so called from the Greek *alleon*, which in Latin is *alienum* ('strange') or *diversum* ('different'). (Quoted in Minnis and Scott, 459-60)

earthly one, where the human race finds its salvation not in eternity, but in history itself.

(*Marxism and Form* 61)¹³

Of course the levels of allegory appeal to Jameson because of their analogous affinity with the Marxist conception of base and superstructure. Moreover, Jameson strives to maintain a sense of history in the face of the mere historicity of postmodernism. Jameson explains:

if interpretation in terms of expressive causality or of allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely

¹³ I quote here from Jameson's early (1971) work because this provides a concise description of his adaption of the four-level model of allegory. Despite the fact that he alters some of the particulars of his adaption in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and provides less copious descriptions of his allegorical model in *Postmodernism* (1991), the allegorical thrust of his criticism has remained largely consistent. Jameson, of course, is not the first to reinterpret the Dantean allegory for the purposes of historical materialism. For an interesting examination of an earlier significant example, see Jeanne P. Brownlow's discussion of Auguste Comte's positivism in "Epochal Allegory in Galdos's *Torquemada*," where she notes, "Compte effectively reallegorized Dante's grand conception, already an allegory of history, according to his own historiographic intuitions" (298).

because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality.

(*Political Unconscious* 34)

Jameson provides his model for adapting the medieval allegorical system to twentieth-century realities within a discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin. I wish to conclude this chapter with an examination of Benjamin's work on allegory because he has been so influential with postmodern critics (particularly de Man's and Jameson's sense of allegory) and because he provides what I feel is the strongest sense of the modernist allegorical impulse.¹⁴

Benjamin's 1928 study of German baroque drama and allegory, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*,¹⁵ is

¹⁴ Benjamin is frequently regarded as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* and his publication history has made this possible. Only a small percentage of his work was published in his lifetime and his unpublished papers were left scattered about Europe. While much of this work was published in Germany in 1955, English translations did not begin arriving until the late 60s--just in time to be picked up by postmodern critics. Furthermore, the work's vastness, fragmentariness, and idiosyncratic style have made it easier to take away whatever one was looking for from it. I do not pretend familiarity with all his work, and rather rely, with a few exceptions, on *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, one of the very few extended works Benjamin completed in his lifetime.

¹⁵ The English translation of the title (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) is potentially misleading in at least two ways. The translator, John Osborne, preserves *Trauerspiel* throughout the text because it refers to "modern, baroque tragedy as distinct from classical tragedy (*Tragodie*)" ("Translator's Note" 5). And, as George Steiner

significant both for its wealth of insights on allegory and for its relevance to modernism. "His theory of allegory," John McCole notes, "spelled out an uncompromising radical modernist aesthetic in all but name. This implicit modernism was no miraculous coincidence: he had won it through a rigorous, independent recourse to the romantic sources of cultural modernism, before undertaking any extensive, direct encounter with modernist works" (32). Benjamin, while writing a historical study, insists on its implications for modernism, particularly German expressionism. Georg Lukacs describes this double intention, "as though the Baroque mask had fallen, revealing the modernist skull underneath" (43). Benjamin finds common in both periods a characteristic exaggeration in language, a "violence of their manner . . . designed to conceal the absence of widely accepted works of literature" (54). Both ages possessed "an unrelenting will" (55) and that will is the will of the allegorist to induce meaning from fragmented particulars.

Two strands run through Benjamin's sense of allegory, a belief in historical degeneration and a Messianic hope. These are captured in his most famous formulation, his description in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" of a

points out in the introduction to the text, *Ursprung*, while meaning "origin," resonates with the sense of "that primal leap (*Sprung*) into being which at once reveals and determines the unfolding structure, the central dynamics of form in an organic or spiritual phenomenon" (16).

Paul Klee painting ("Angelus Novus") as the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

(Illuminations 257-58)

This description reveals the angel's, the allegorist's, the modernist's desire to recover wholeness despite the sense that history is distancing them from any such possibility. Present here also is the modernist interest in archeology with its method of collecting the shards of the past in order to "make it new."

With the catastrophe of time separating us from wholeness, Benjamin characterizes baroque allegory as a dialectic between "the sacred and the profane" in which "any

person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (175). However, although this renders the detail "of no great importance," nevertheless "all of the things [details] which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things . . ." (175). Benjamin continues, "this religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression" (175). He concludes it is "expression of convention" (175); this is the sense Blasing conveys in remarking that "the signifier, vehicle, or text . . . comes after and represents it [the signified, tenor, or subject] according to convention" (6).

Blasing also notes, "the signifier is purely itself" (6), and, for Benjamin, allegory insists on the materiality of language, where "the written word tends toward the visual" (176) so that the language is "heavy with material display" (200). Illustrating this display of the materiality of language, Benjamin points to the use of capital letters asserting "the disjunctive, atomistic principle" (208), and how "in the anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects . . ." (207). Blasing notes that allegorical thinking "tends to be accompanied by a reductive formalism; and an esthetic of

method, of creating effects by manipulating formal stimuli, only affirms the barrier between the mind and nature, the soul and the body, the spirit and the letter of language" (8). "The barrier between the mind and nature" is precisely the barrier that Paul de Man, in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," accuses advocates of the romantic symbol of having tried, through "tenacious self-mystification," to erase. De Man concludes,

The dialectical relationship between subject and object is no longer the central statement of romantic thought, but this dialectic is now located entirely in the temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs. It becomes a conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge.

(*Blindness and Insight* 208)

De Man treats the operations of allegory relatively ahistorically, reducing the "authentically temporal predicament" to the *rhetoric* of temporality. Benjamin connects the belatedness of signs to history, or, in Terry Eagleton's phrase, "the unredeemed torment of secular time" (*Walter Benjamin* 326).

Emphasizing this materiality (and thinking of baroque emblems with their captions), Benjamin argues that when "history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script. The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history . . . is present in reality in the form of the ruin" (177). In associating history with decay, Benjamin declares, "allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). In this way, Benjamin is strenuously anti-teleological.

Or, from the point of view of the critic, I might term his method as relying on a negative teleology, for Benjamin argues that history-as-decay collaborates with the critic in fragmenting the work. The purpose of the critic is not to recover the unity of the "original" work; rather the critic atomizes it in order to constellate the fragments in new alignments. For Benjamin's purposes, baroque allegory is productive because it openly declares its fragmentation. Thus, Benjamin views the piling on of ruins as creation:

That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of goal, and, in

the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification. (178)

As Angus Fletcher notes in his discussion of "the true nature of allegory," this repetition becomes a compulsion without satisfaction.¹⁶ This compulsion takes on an aspect of sadism, for Benjamin explains, the corpse "becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property" (218). Thus, this intense repetition compulsion becomes a process of reification as things and bodies are drained of life. "This absolute split between force and form," Blasing contends, "renders the body of the poem an imprisoning mechanism. And the poets in this mode often strike out at the body--their own bodies or their poems, the body of nature or of literature" (8). This leads to a search of novelty within convention that leads only to a further emptying out of meaning.

At this point of vertigo, where, "as those who lose their footing turn somersaults in their fall, so would the allegorical intention fall from emblem to emblem down into the dizziness of its bottomless depths" (232), Benjamin insists on a stunning reversal, an "about-turn into

¹⁶ See Fletcher, chapter 6 ("Psychoanalytic Analogues: Obsession and Compulsion") for a discussion of the application of Freudian psychology to the following areas of allegory: agency, imagery, action, causality, and theme.

salvation and redemption" (232). This reversal is a move which many postmodern critics (though invoking Benjamin as a fellow traveller) either refuse to acknowledge or decline to follow.

By allegorizing the allegorical intention, Benjamin argues that the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed:

Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this one about turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps

forward to the idea of resurrection. (232-33)

And so, after a lengthy study, Benjamin declares "allegory goes away empty-handed" (233). Benjamin, as does Jameson, relies on a notion of the sublime, where the will, faced with the terror of vertigo, the *aporia* of empty repetition, makes the leap.

Benjamin needs this reversal to avoid nihilism. In fact his view is finally quite idealist. In the preface to the *Trauerspiel* study, he bluntly declares that he will pursue "the original task of philosophy, the representation of ideas" (34), where "idea" carries the sense of an absolute and timeless value rather than some subjective notion. McCole terms Benjamin a "hyperidealist" and characterizes his critical project as

getting to ideas without forfeiting what he saw as the genuine, critical intentions of idealism--above all, a solidarity with the creaturely element of human existence and the promise of a radical break with the existing order of things. That meant cutting off the conventional routes of access to the idea while ultimately holding out for an extreme, idiosyncratic idealism after all. (149)

Benjamin and Jameson conceive of allegory similarly, but emphasize different aspects. Both critics react antagonistically to their historical climates. While his theory contains idealism, Benjamin, writing against the pressures of a fascist ideology between the wars in Germany, places most of his emphasis on the destructive powers of history. Jameson, on the other hand, writing against the pressures of postmodern fragmentation, more openly holds out the hope that allegories may point to an improved collective future. Both critics insist on stopping short of describing that future. Nevertheless, they demonstrate allegory's potential to face the terrors of history without giving up the desire to construct meaning in the present. This allegorical impulse remains viable today, as it was for the modernist, on the dump of history, mixing memory and desire.

Chapter Three

T.S. Eliot's Scaffolds of Allegory

"Allegory is only one poetic method, but it is a method which has very great advantages."

"Dante" (1929)

The allegorist is "like a stern sultan in the harem of objects." Walter Benjamin,

The Origin of German Tragic Drama

Walter Benjamin's characterization of allegory as the "expression of convention" invokes many significant issues of relationship found in T.S. Eliot's poetry and criticism: the relationship of the secular to the sacred, the relationship and attitude of the individual to history and tradition, and the relationship of the letter to the spirit of language. Benjamin and Eliot share an extreme skepticism shadowed by an unrelenting desire for the ideal; this skeptical idealism reveals itself in the modernist habit of allegorical thinking.¹

¹ In the first issue of the *Little Review* (May 1917), Eliot published "Eeldrop and Appleplex," a fictional portrait of Eliot and Ezra Pound respectively. Eliot, describing himself, writes, "It may be added that Eeldrop was a skeptic, with a taste for mysticism . . ." (qtd. in

This dichotomy, for Benjamin a dialectic, appears in Eliot's dissertation on F.H. Bradley, in his formulation of the "historical sense" and the "mythical method" in criticism, and, of course, in the poetry, where he "must borrow every changing shape / To find expression"² Indeed, Eliot manipulates (his borrowing would become stealing) the conventions of poetic structure and tradition to construct possibilities of expressive agency. These concerns represent a search for meaning driven by a sense of the loss of meaning, a quest for spirit haunting the fragmented past.

Eliot's work interrogates tradition, with the hope of finding there a transcendent symbolic wholeness. In his early work tradition appears only to block his characters in a sense of belatedness, whereas in *The Waste Land* Eliot constellates an atomized tradition into allegorical structures, and, in the criticism of 1930s and the last poems, tradition is ultimately abandoned in favor of Eliot's belief in the greater foundational stability of Christian

Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History* 153).

² "Portrait of a Lady" from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), page 21. All subsequent quotes from Eliot's poetry will be from this edition, cited by page number parenthetically in the text. In this chapter I employ the following abbreviations for texts by Eliot which I most frequently quote: KE--*Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*; Letters I--*The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume I, 1898-1922*; SE--*Selected Essays* (1950); SP--*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*; WL Drafts--*The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*.

"orthodoxy." Eliot's confrontation with tradition, his successes in constructing tradition and manipulating convention, heightened his awareness of the allegorical character of language, forcing him, finally, to cease writing poetry.

Eliot's need to express contemporary forces while maintaining some grounding of convention manifests itself in his studies of philosophy. Michael H. Levenson, discussing Eliot's dissertation on F.H. Bradley and his subsequent article "Leibniz' Monads and Bradley's Finite Centres," aptly summarizes the course Eliot was trying to steer and the "compelling questions" he faced from the beginning of his career:

How might we construct an intellectual position which acknowledges the scientific critique of transcendence (of the Absolute)? And how, once transcendence is relinquished, might we avoid a precipitous fall into solipsism? That is to say, how acknowledge the force of a skeptical science and the need for authority and order? (185)

To acknowledge both the force and the need, Eliot turned to tradition. "Eliot requires personae and tradition," according to Charles Altieri, "because of his Bradleyan and later his Christian sense that the individual ego can at

best capture only single perspectives on absolute reality and must be surrendered to a more inclusive creative Logos . . ." (*Enlarging the Temple* 43). The need for a greater inclusiveness does account for the doubleness, but in this account Altieri too quickly collapses Eliot's later Christian sense into Eliot's earlier reading of Bradley (although Eliot later does synthesize the two). In his dissertation on Bradley's philosophy, Eliot simply brackets the notion of the Absolute; as I will note, Eliot makes a similar move in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." And in his article "Leibniz' Monadism and Bradley's Finite Centres" (1916) Eliot asserts:

. . . so Bradley's universe, actual only in finite centres, is only by an act of faith unified. Upon inspection, it falls away into the isolated finite experiences out of which it is put together. . . . The Absolute responds only to an imaginary demand of thought, and satisfies only an imaginary demand of feeling. Pretending to be something which makes finite centres cohere, it turns out to be merely the assertion that they do. And this assertion is only true so far as we here and now find it to be so. (KE 202)

Certainly Eliot desires to believe in an absolute, and he

will seek an inclusive tradition, but he does not claim their presence at the beginning of his career. In a more recent account of Eliot's work, Altieri outlines the steps in Bradley's system and describes the implications for one bracketing the absolute:

First there is immediate experience, then the domain of individual interpretations, then the absolute which allows each individual to see her own interpretations as placed coherently within an encompassing whole giving meaning to all its parts. The absolute then is an ideal metaphoric structure. It invites differences, then gathers them into relations even richer than any simple measure of similitude. But if one does not accept the absolute, the corresponding sense of metonymic lack is as devastating as the alternative is satisfying. For one then deals not only with the isolation of the object but also of the perceiving subject, whose interpretive gestures only confirm the solipsist's prison. ("Preludes" as Prelude" 27n)

Facing this set of problems, Eliot discontinues his work in philosophy, decides not to return from England to defend his dissertation (presumably because of the war), and focuses on

the task of writing poetry and criticism.

After writing very little poetry since his Harvard period, Eliot, in collaboration with Pound, begins writing again, producing the work viewed as contributing to the tenets of high modernism. The resulting poetry is the quatrain poems published in 1920 and further fragments later included in *The Waste Land*, while in criticism, among other significant essays, Eliot formulates "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

1. The Expression of Convention:

"Tradition and the Individual Talent"

"Reality is a convention" (KE 165).

There is little doubt that Eliot saw only a lack of meaning in the early twentieth century, describing "contemporary history" in 1923 as "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy" (SP 177). To find or construct meaning in this anarchy, Eliot relied on two related, and too often conflated, methods. The first we might call the community of interpretation, where a collection of points of view are gathered which, differing in themselves, may nonetheless in their collectivity point to a convergence of meaning. The second method (apparent after Eliot's

conversion, but a temptation from the beginning) is to posit an Archimedean point, a transcendental absolute outside of history, from which to judge history. Eliot describes the first method, and hints at the second, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Eliot begins this, his most famous essay, by lamenting that "in English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence" (SE 3). While it becomes clear in the course of the essay that he is referring to British literature in a European tradition (which he sometimes imperially lets stand for all tradition), Eliot's American background can only have increased his fear that tradition represents a lack.

Nevertheless, Eliot insists tradition is available, though it is unclear whether it simply exists or is constructed, for "it cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (4). Obtaining tradition involves "the historical sense" which requires a double perception:

a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his

own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (4)

This historical sense is required because meaning is produced by relations, for "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (4).

Yet, while arguing for a need for a sense of the past, Eliot seeks a dynamic tradition allowing for the individual talent. Eliot notes,

The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete

before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and new. (5)

But precisely what works or poets are the "monuments" which "form an ideal order" remains contested. Switching metaphors, from "monuments" to "current," Eliot suggests this is a matter for the present, as "the poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same" (5-6). This suggests that the poet constructs tradition, or at least chooses among a variety of currents, according to contemporary materials and needs.

Much of Eliot's criticism is dedicated to constructing his tradition, and, I suspect, much present resentment felt toward Eliot stems from the success with which his tradition became institutionalized as *the* tradition. Richard Shusterman notes Eliot's role in this concealment:

As the inherent flexibility of Eliot's concept of

tradition is considerably contradicted and concealed by its metaphorical portrayal in terms of monuments and timeless orders, so the role of criticism in tradition is overshadowed by the suggestion (never explicitly stated) that within the literary past which includes both bad and good, there is imbedded an 'ideal order,' 'main current,' or essence of tradition which is wholly good and calls for no criticism. (158)

That an ideal order can be open to new work raises problems, some of which Joseph G. Kronick addresses:

Eliot would like to believe that art is plenitude existing in a suprahistorical realm and, at the same time, present in the world in the form of the new work. The presence of the Word, in this moment, would be reappropriated by writing. Yet writing is a surplus, an uncontrollable economy, which once added to the plenitude of the Word reveals that plenitude as a void. Thus, when Eliot speaks of the autotelic text, he expresses his desire to grant the literary work the atemporal status of tradition; however, as the new work adds itself to the preexisting body of literature, it opens Eliot's text, in spite of

Eliot, to history and repetition. (187-88)

Kronick is correct that Eliot "would like to believe" that art is "suprahistorical," but Eliot stops short of actually arguing for this belief. Again using the strategy of bracketing the absolute (previously employed in his dissertation on Bradley), Eliot concludes, "this essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry" (11).³

I agree with Kronick, as well, that the addition of Eliot's texts to tradition opens these texts "to history and repetition." This may occur "in spite of Eliot," but not without his awareness. Giving a meaningful shape to history is a major concern of Eliot's poetry, a concern that leads him to engage in allegory. Before turning to *The Waste Land* and his later poetry, I will examine "Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," with some mention of his earlier poems, to

³ It's worth noting that Benjamin comes to a similar conclusion to his study of allegory:

For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word. Such a resolution, like the resolution of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically, in terms of a theology of history (216)

illustrate their allegorical character.

2. "Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service":

The Problems of Re-Formation

Eliot's quatrain poems of *Poems--1920*, first published in England under the title *Ara Vos Prec* (And so I pray you),⁴ while perhaps unusual in the flamboyant austerity of their form, delineate concerns with origins which recur throughout his poetic career. In "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (written in 1917), Eliot follows the metaphoric logic of the epigraph ("Look, look, master, here comes two religious caterpillars") taken from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and compares various presumed followers of God's Word ("sapient sutlers," "Origen" and "sable presbyters") with bees that "With hairy bellies pass between / The staminate and pistillate, / Blest office of the epicene" (54-55), as well as comparing them with Sweeney in his bath.

The opening two stanzas dramatize Eliot's persistent anxiety over the disjunction between words and the Word:

⁴ In "Dante" (1929), Eliot translates the passage of the *Purgatorio* which had supplied him with the title for the 1920 publication: "And so I pray you, by that Virtue which leads you to the topmost of the stair--be mindful in due time of my pain" (SE 217).

Polyphiloprogenitive
 The sapient sutlers of the Lord
 Drift across the window-panes.
 In the beginning was the Word.

In the beginning was the Word.
 Superfetation of τὸ ἔν,
 And at the mensual turn of time
 Produced enervate Origen. (54)

The "Word" is clearly the absolute and words are the tradition through which Eliot hopes to gain access to the absolute. Yet the words of tradition, whether it be the words of literary tradition or biblical commentary, block access. One need not see Eliot consciously subscribing to a structural linguistics to argue that he views a split between the letter and the spirit of language. Following a common philosophic and religious view, one Edward Lobb describes as "the story of Eden applied to the secular history of literature" (5), Eliot posits as origin a state of physical and spiritual unity from which we have fallen; Coleridge argued the symbol apprehends this same unity. But, in this poem, Eliot finds all efforts at returning to, or illuminating, the Word lead only to more words, begetting allegorically the distance from origins.

The concept of the fall is not the same as the concept

of historical decline. Describing the "ancestry of American moderns like Eliot and Pound" as "doubly entailed," Gregory S. Jay suggests,

On the one hand, a subjective Romantic vision of nature offered to make writing new by entombing history and silencing its ghosts. On the other hand, the nineteenth century sought in history's voices the objective, timeless laws that would save culture from a future of anarchy. (20)

But Eliot could neither silence history (like Poe's entombed characters, Eliot's corpses have an afterlife), nor could he accept the positivism of the nineteenth century. However, as James Longenbach rightly points out, "the idea of decline is not an answer to the nineteenth-century idea of progress, and it would be wrong to see the thrust of twentieth-century historiography in expressions of historical decline" (*Modernist Poetics of History* 6). Rather, Eliot sees, as Benjamin described the vision of the angel of history, "one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage," where historians "perceive a chain of events" (*Illuminations* 257). The desire to uncover wholeness in the wreckage results in the piling up of wreckage, but possibly

in new, worthwhile configurations.⁵

⁵ This sense of history of course relates to Eliot's notion of the "dissociation of sensibility," first expressed in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). Eliot compares poets of the early seventeenth century with Tennyson and Browning and famously concludes: "In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered" (SE 247). For Eliot, the result is "the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thoughts as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility" (247). Terry Eagleton, in *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, observes Benjamin's similar interest in the crisis period of the seventeenth century:

. . . Benjamin's return to the seventeenth century inevitably recalls the apparently similar gestures of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Restless with an eighteenth century that it has already rewritten as 'Augustan', thwarted by its own ideological creations, twentieth-century English criticism peers back beyond that artificially pacified epoch to glimpse in its turbulent predecessor an image it can call its own. (3)

Eagleton emphasizes Benjamin's and Eliot's differences, misleadingly I think, by focusing only on Eliot's criticism.

John Paul Riquelme finds Eliot's concept expressing a shared condition of loss among modernism and other "postmedieval modalities" (119) and argues that "whatever their differences, Romantic and modern are similar by contrast with something that cannot be adequately expressed in language, something that reveals its absence through figuration taken to its limits" (110). Indeed, Eliot's reconsideration of the concept in "Milton II" (1947) illustrates the impossibility of positive description:

All we can say is, that something like this did happen; that it had something to do with the Civil War; that it would even be unwise to say it was caused by the Civil War, but that it is a consequence of the same causes which brought about the Civil War; that we must seek the causes in Europe, not in England alone; and for what these causes were, we may dig and dig until we get to a depth at which words and concepts fail us. (SP 266).

For Jay, this desire for originary wholeness at odds with--but produced by--Eliot's historical view stems from Eliot's "New England lineage." Jay concludes that

Eliot inherits a profoundly divided attitude towards nature and his own body, a severe habit of examining his soul's worth, a keen need for a philosophy of history, and a Protestant theory of language--a theory that denies to human words the idolatrous power to speak the Word, though it secretly desires this power at every turn. (21)

Each of Jay's examples of Eliot's divided attitude appears in "Service," subsumed in the main concern of textuality, for, as Benjamin observes of allegory, when "history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script" (177).

Historical belatedness becomes textual belatedness in allegory, according to Mutlu Konuk Blasing, as "the text is an always belated representation of a prior presence,

Riquelme concludes that "by expressing together a phenomenon [the dissociation] that is bound up with a particular kind of interpretive response [the endless digging], these aspects suggest that the concept of *allegory* can stand, generally speaking, for what Eliot thinks has disappeared" (112). Riquelme explains that "this sort of allegorical method relies on continuing deferrals of meaning in response to multiple, interlocking issues and to unanswered, unanswerable questions. The method involves shifting always to another provisional perspective and another context for interpretation as a recognition that many such contexts and perspectives are possible" (112).

source, or truth" (8). "And," Blasing points out, "the poets in this mode [allegorical] often strike out at the body--their own bodies and their poems, the body of nature or of literature--to punish it for violating the soul" (8).⁶

Typical of much of Eliot's poetry and of allegories in general, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" insists on its textuality; textuality is its point and obstacle. Employing an epigraph, allusions, and a traditional quatrain form (borrowed here specifically from Theophile Gautier),⁷ Eliot emphasizes the poem's written quality as bound by past conventions. While the quatrain form seems a marked departure from the earlier "free verse" poems, this written quality manifests itself even in the earlier dramatic monologues. John Paul Riquelme finds in Eliot "an allegiance to *allegory* and wit rather than *symbol* and *imagination*" and suggests

⁶ It's worth noting in this context Eliot's early fascination with Saints and, particularly, their mortification of the flesh. See Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years*, on the "Saint poems," 59-64.

⁷ In 'The Men of 1914': *T.S. Eliot and Early Modernism*, Erik Svarny devotes much consideration to Eliot's and Pound's adoption of the Gautier quatrain. Svarny, who describes form as a "value-bearing instrument" (99), begins, "the rather simple point to be made is that the 'formed' quality of the Gautier quatrain is apparent immediately, before the reading process, to the visual sense" (83); in this way the conventional form itself foregrounds textuality.

The preferences are based on conceptions of mind as differential that treat personality as an epiphenomenon. In much of Eliot's poetry the undermining of the self takes the form of undercutting the impression that a poem is uttered spontaneously, that it is essentially self-originating, a matter of voice, as figure for spirit or mind. Through allusion, quotation, and discontinuities, Eliot emphasizes instead poetry's written, historical, intertextual character. (113)

An example of this is provided by Blasing, who notes that "the epigraph to 'Prufrock' formally subsumes its hero's problem with expressive language to the poet's problem with textuality" (38). Thus, even though "Prufrock" is a dramatic monologue and presumably a presentation of speech, Blasing argues that its epigraph "identifies it as writing and diminishes its urgency by absorbing it within the prototype of another confession, so that the beginning 'let us go' is already the 'end of something'" (39). "Eliot's early work," Blasing concludes, "is unusual in its dependence on epigraphs that mediate between the poet and the poem, preformulating the poem before it can begin, and his epigraphs often explicitly concern belatedness, exhaustion, and endings" (39).

This mediation or preformulation, signaling for Blasing

the allegorical character of Eliot's work, is seen by Maureen Quilligan as a generic feature of allegory. In *The Language of Allegory* Quilligan develops Edwin Honig's notion of the "threshold image" into the "threshold text" and argues that allegories "unfold as narrative investigations of their threshold texts . . ." (53). From this she generalizes, "the allegorical author simply does what the allegorical critic does; but he writes a commentary on his own text rather than someone else's" (53). Quilligan (again following Honig) draws her example from *The Scarlet Letter* where Hawthorne presents himself as an editor of a found text and the interpreter of a literal scarlet letter. Eliot, with the title suggesting this is his "Sunday Morning Service," presents himself as the pastor providing commentary on previous texts. In this way, the irony aimed at supplemental commentary rebounds back to Eliot.⁸

⁸ Martin Scofield, in *T.S. Eliot: the poems* (95), notes speculation that the Mr. Eliot of the title may refer to Eliot's cousin, Fred, and cites Lyndall Gordon as his source. Indeed, Gordon argues "His [T.S. Eliot's] resentment against the empty proprieties of Sunday church-going dated back to Boston days and must have been associated with Unitarian churches attended by his family. In particular, he evidently resented Sunday morning services conducted by his cousin, Fred Eliot, who became a Unitarian Minister" (70). But Gordon continues, "In 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' and 'The Hippopotamus' Eliot denounced empty idolatry of forms with the reforming zeal of his forebears" (*Eliot's Early Years* 70). As evidence of his forebears' "reforming zeal," Gordon quotes the Revd. Andrew Eliot and a portion of *Savonarola* by Charlotte Eliot, T.S. Eliot's mother. I agree with Scofield that Eliot can't have expected readers to have thought of the "Mr. Eliot" as anyone else but the poet himself. Nevertheless, Gordon's full comment is revealing: Eliot both seeks reform of the

Through its epigraph, textual allusions and reference to Origen, the poem asks that we consider the relation of its present moment to various points in the past. Too often critics read the relation of present to past as a contrast, with Sweeney representing the brute present devoid of spirit. Yet every past moment alluded to is a textual moment signaling its deferral from unified origins, thus making the present, at least in this respect, different only in degree.

Admittedly, my describing all of the moments of textuality as deferrals, rather than valuing the present as negative and some alluded to past textual moment as positive, depends on the notion of an origin of unity. But this is what makes the poem allegorical, for it points to, desires, and depends for interpretation on, a moment it cannot actualize. And, characteristic of allegory, the insistence on such an originary moment succeeds only in dramatizing the distance from that moment. In this way allegory is a specific instance of the double-bind of modernity; with the development of subjectivity we can articulate our loss, a loss produced precisely by our inheritance of subjectivity. Emerson, in "Experience,"

"empty proprieties" of church services, particularly of the Unitarian kind, and stands at the end of a long line of zealous reformers of the Unitarian kind who Eliot relates to both personally and historically. Eric Sigg nicely summarizes Eliot's position: "If Eliot dismantled Unitarian theology to his satisfaction, he left its ethic largely undisturbed" ("Eliot as a product of America" 18).

similarly equated subjectivity with the Fall while nevertheless urging that we might begin again; however Eliot argues in "Sweeney Erect" that Emerson "had not seen the silhouette / Of Sweeney straddled in the sun" (43).

The originary moment is posited in line four, "In the beginning was the Word." Of course this quotes the Prologue of the Gospel according to John, so the closest we get to the Word are the words of a book which echo the earlier originary claim of Genesis. The exact repetition (a "superfetation" of the one) of the claim in line five, a repetition which in some other poets might be read as an intensification signaling sincerity, works here to suggest only belatedness and a weary repetition of words. And in the beginning of this poem, the word "Polyphiloprogenitive" is emphatically not the Word. Rather, the use of "polyphiloprogenitive," a multiply-compounded neologism with the prefix "poly" apparently added by Eliot, keenly illustrates the way all attempts to prefix a word serve only to make it supplemental.⁹

⁹ Though making a similar point in *The Origins of Modernism*, Stan Smith sees the formation of "polyphiloprogenitive" differently:

[It] is an adulterated, bastard word, combining (in its first semes) Greek and (in its second two) Latin roots. . . . [It] combines (and enacts its meaning by hyperbolically exceeding) two quite different concepts, which point to origins and ends respectively: 'polygenetic', having more than one origin, and 'philoprogenitive', having many offspring. (120)

In the wake of originary wholeness stands only a weak personification of that idea: "enervate Origen," himself a writer of allegories. (Eliot will again use a name, his own, to cover, though without intended irony, the absence of origins in *Four Quartets*.) Origen (c. AD 185-254), explains B.C. Southam, was "the first and greatest of the early Christian theological scholars, famed for his output of a reputed 6,000 books and enormously long Biblical commentaries. His exegesis of John, ch. I, was particularly elaborate" (86). Origen is "eneverate" not only due to his belated commentaries, but also because he "castrated himself for the sake of his spiritual health" (86).¹⁰

The third and forth stanzas may be seen as contrasting with the first two, as the later concern a single visual image rather than the production of multiple written texts:

A painter of the Umbrian school
Designed upon a gesso ground
The nimbus of the Baptized God.

¹⁰ While clearly the object of the satire, Origen the allegorist shares characteristics with Eliot the allegorist. Angus Fletcher points out that "Origen, in the *Contra Celsum*, . . . displays fully the connection between allegory and contagion" (199n). Lyndall Gordon proclaims, "Eliot believed one might hold to the visionary power promised in 'I am the Resurrection' only if the flesh were purged" (*Early Years* 98). Some of this attitude may have been imparted to him in childhood, for his father wrote that it might be necessary "to emasculate our children to keep them clean" (qtd. in Gordon, 27).

The wilderness is cracked and browned

But through the water pale and thin

Still shine the unoffending feet

And there above the painter set

The Father and the Paraclete.

. (54)

Indeed, A.D. Moody simply states, "the painter, in contrast, makes a simple and enduring image of the incarnate Christ, and even the Trinity" (64). The temptation to find a contrast stems from Eliot's use here of *ekphrasis*, which James A.W. Heffernan defines as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3). Heffernan remarks that *ekphrasis* stages a contest "between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (6). However, Heffernan later notes, "no sight represented in a poem can escape the mediation of language. When the war between word and image is fought on the field of language itself, it becomes essentially a war of words" (84). Or as Eliot puts it in "Burnt Norton," "Words move . . . / Only in time" (175).

Furthermore, and not often noted, in these quatrains Eliot emphasizes, rather than the image of the painting, the

creative act of the painter.¹¹ This emphasis suggests the painting is one more interpretation, this time in the style of the "Umbrian school," designed, set, and grounded on nothing more than gesso. The very paint depicting the waste land wilderness "is cracked and browned," though whether this is an effect of the painter or a production of the "turn of time" is unclear.

The image of "the Baptized God," whose "unoffending feet" Eloise Knapp Hay describes as "merely the extremities of a simple man" (46), anticipates the appearance in the final stanza of the bathing Sweeney:

Sweeney shifts from ham to ham
 Stirring the water in his bath.
 The masters of the subtle schools
 Are controversial, polymath. (55)

Sweeney embodies the variety of positions taken in the poem

¹¹ Floyd C. Watkins suggests Piero della Francesca's "The Baptism of Christ" is Eliot's source here because it is

. . . a gesso panel, and since 1861 it has been owned by the National Gallery, London, where Eliot would have seen it many times. Indeed, Franesca was something of a discovery for the intellectuals in the period after 1915; he influences the Cubists and one phase of the work of Picasso. (39)

Watkins tentatively concludes that, "like Origen and the writers of pedantic theology, 'The Baptism of Christ' perhaps suggests the sterile incomprehension of the Word" (40).

without fully directing our attitude. Moody paraphrases the final stanza not unreasonably this way: "Sweeney, the natural man, takes his bath in a different sense from 'the Baptized God.' And 'the masters of the subtle schools', the cause of his knowing no better, are perhaps no better off than him" (64). Like the Baptized God, Sweeney is in his purifying bath. In contrast to Origen, Sweeney, shifting "from ham to ham," is depicted as robust. James Longenbach strives to counter the predominant critical attitude toward Sweeney:

. . . the overtly sexual Sweeney . . . is not so much a vulgar counterpart to the baptized Christ as the embodiment of the Word that the "enervate" Origen and the "epicene" presbyters cannot reach. If anything, this poem teeters on the contrary mystification, idealizing the modern sensibility, freed from the legacy of a Puritan past, to rediscover its primitive energies. ("Ara Vos Prec" 55)

Here Longenbach reproduces Eliot's strategy of attempting to be modern by freeing himself from the past by going deeper into a mystified, unnameable past.

The poem dramatizes the problem of identifying an absolute origin, and demonstrates how striving for such an

origin worsens the problem. The dilemmas Eliot implicates himself in and dramatizes in "Service" would confront him for the rest of his career. To transcend these he would have to leave poetry behind entirely. Though the contrived corridors of history must be resisted, they could not be immediately rejected or transcended. Eliot sought to turn to advantage the fragmented historical and cultural condition in which he found himself. From fragmented history, he would construct a tradition to shape history and resist historicity.

3. *The Waste Land* and the Allegorical Impulse of the Mythical Method

"'I can connect / Nothing with nothing'" (70).

Despite its famed difficulty, readers of *The Waste Land* have rarely hesitated in proclaiming some meaning for the poem. Marjorie Perloff, contrasting the poem to John Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities" (an example for her of "the poetics of indeterminacy"), explains why this is so, suggesting the poem "has, despite its temporal and spatial dislocations and its collage form, a perfectly coherent symbolic structure" (13). The difficulty of the poem does not result from its indeterminacy--which Altieri defines as

"the refusal to submit details to allegorical pattern (''Preludes'' 26n)--but, rather, from its overdeterminacy. To be sure, differences of emphasis remain, but the general strategy is to read the poem as an allegory. For example Calvin Bedient, while admitting his summary "neglects much that gives the poem its complexity and vitality," presents the following "Bunyanized" plot:

After suffering a loss of Romantic belief in the vicinity of the Hyacinth Garden, Pilgrim, hearing a voice reproach him with being the Son of man, and uncertain of his way, visits the fortune-telling booth in Vanity Fair, and is warned to Fear Death by Water. Heeding this baneful advice, he walks round and round in Hell in the Unreal City, where only the crowds flow, sharing their quiet desperation. He marries Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks--a fiery Medusa who turns his penis to stone--and wanders the banks of the Thames, a voyeur of slimy rats' bellies, cigarette ends, horny London traffic, typists scarcely forced. At length, no longer able to bear the absence of the Hanged Man, weary of the Blind Seers and Fake Goddesses of Vanity Fair, he ascends the Mount of Voluntary Dryness, praying for rain. Successfully meeting the challenge of

the Perilous Chapel, he receives a sign of acceptance from the Heavens, and with Divine Help gathers wisdom for further purification. At the end, he sits fishing on the Shore of Beatitude, the Arid Plains safely behind him, his line baited for God-food. (60)

The poem's strong allegorical tendency is more clearly seen when not only a symbolic shape is identified but when the "complexity and vitality" is viewed as generating and subverting whatever shape is identified. The combination of these two reveals the allegorical impulse.

It is highly unlikely that Bedient could have produced his Bunyanized plot without the many critical investigations that preceded his or without the notes Eliot provided; in writing the notes for the poem, Eliot has only encouraged the suspicion that the poem can be read as a coherent whole. Although many critics, usually following Pound's lead, seek to dismiss the notes as unnecessary or misleading,¹² they

¹² Most prominently among these critics, Hugh Kenner, referring to the poem's eventual publication by Horace Liveright, flatly declares that "the notes got added to *The Waste Land* as a consequence of the technological fact that books are printed in multiples of thirty-two pages" and that the poem "was in book form too long for thirty-two pages of decent-sized print and a good deal too short for sixty-four" (150). However, Lawrence Rainey quotes a letter dated 26 February (less than a month following completion of the poem) from Eliot to Maurice Firuski concerning possible publication in book form. Eliot states:

My poem is of 435 lines; with certain spacings

must necessarily be read as a part of the poem, if for no other reason, because they have played a part in readers' reception and provided a direction for much critical activity. *The Waste Land* is, in Louis Menand's description, "a poem that includes an interpretation . . . as part of the poem, and it is therefore a poem that makes a problem of its meaning precisely by virtue of its apparent (and apparently inadequate) effort to explain itself" (89). In this way the notes signal the poem as an allegory, for, as Frye points out, "we have actual allegory when a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to his examples and

essential to the sense, 475 book lines; furthermore, it consists of five parts, which would increase the space necessary; and with title pages, some notes that I propose to add, etc., I guess that it would run to from 28 to 32 pages. (qtd. in Rainey 117)

Thus, Rainey finds the notes "were not merely a late and arbitrary addition imposed by the publishing exigencies of Horace Liveright, . . . but an integral part of the work as Eliot himself wished to have it published . . . (117). Admittedly, much later, Eliot claimed to regret the notes himself:

I have sometimes thought of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. . . . It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail. (qtd. in Kenner 151)

To be sure, many readers (with or without the notes) have found the poem to be a wild goose chase, but, more importantly, Eliot does not regret the tribute to Weston. And it is the tribute which credits Weston's work for suggesting the poem's "plan" and "a good deal of the incidental symbolism."

precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed" (90).

This is not to claim that the notes explicitly indicate the relationships, but that they indicate the existence of relationships. At the outset, Eliot credits Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* for "not only the title, but the plan" (76). We are told that "Teresias . . . is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (78n), and "the collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism [Buddha's Fire Sermon and St. Augustine's *Confessions*], as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident" (79n). In short, we are told of a plan, a unity, and an intentional culmination.

However, the notes also inform us of some things "rudely forced" into the plan and unity. In this way the notes foreground the constructedness of the poem because, Benjamin notes, the writer of allegory "must not conceal the fact that his activity is one of arranging, since it was not so much the mere whole as its obviously constructed quality that was the principal impression which was aimed at" (179). In several instances Eliot announces that the relationship between images is only personal. In the note to line 221, he admits that "this may not appear as exact as Sappho's lines, but I had in mind the 'longshore' or 'dory' fisherman, who returns at nightfall" (78). And the note to line 46 declares the arbitrary relationship between figures:

I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples of Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant appear later; also the 'crowds of people', and Death by Water is executed in Part IV. The Man with Three Staves (an authentic of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself. (76)

The confessed arbitrary association of parts within the general plan signals a modernist allegory where a general plan presumes the will to order without claiming any absolute authority to do so.

The need for a general plan in writing a longer poem preoccupied Eliot even before composing *The Waste Land*. In "William Blake" (1920) Eliot, finding Blake "eccentric" and "inclined to formlessness," argues, "you cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal point of view, or splitting it up into various personalities" (SE 278). In *The Waste Land* Eliot would do both. The "more

impersonal point of view" would allow one to see the relations between the "various personalities." Eliot had noted a similar strategy in Bradley:

. . . we vary by passing from one point of view to another or as I have tried to suggest, by occupying more than one point of view at the same time, an attitude that gives us our assumptions, our half-objects, our figments of imagination; we vary by self-transcendence. The point of view (or finite centre) has for its object one consistent world, and accordingly no finite centre can be self-sufficient, for the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater and less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. (KE 147)

This higher or larger point of view Eliot found lacking in Blake: "What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas" (SE 279). Here Eliot contrasts Blake with Dante, and when we turn to Eliot's 1920 essay on Dante we see that by "framework" Eliot means allegory.

In this Dante essay, Eliot questions how traditional and accepted this framework of ideas need be:

If the artistic emotion presented by any episode of the *Comedy* is dependent upon the whole, we may proceed to inquire what the whole scheme is. The usefulness of allegory and astronomy is obvious. A mechanical framework, in a poem of so vast an ambit, was a necessity. As the centre of gravity of emotions is more remote from a single human action, or a system of purely human actions, than in drama or epic, so the framework has to be more artificial and apparently more mechanical. It is not essential that the allegory or the almost unintelligible astronomy should be understood--only that its presence should be justified. The emotional structure within this scaffold is what must be understood--the structure made possible by the scaffold. (*The Sacred Wood* 167-68)

The argument here is tautological, for the artistic emotion of any "episode" leads us to inquire about the "whole scheme," but the scheme or "framework" or "allegory" need not be understood, only the "emotional structure" need be understood. Eliot turns this circle because he is trying to create order in the absence of belief; the Dante essay

argues that one need not hold Dante's beliefs to appreciate the structured feeling. Eliot in "Dante" (1929) follows a similarly circular argument in discussing how to read Dante:

What we should consider is not so much the meaning of the images, but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images. We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and *practice* tended to express itself in allegory: and, for a competent poet, allegory means *clear visual images*. And clear visual images are given much more intensity by having a meaning--we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the image we must be aware that the meaning is there too. Allegory is only one poetic method, but it is a method which has very great advantages" (SE 204).

Although Eliot held Dante in the highest esteem, he found himself in historical circumstances closer to those of Blake. Eliot argues that "the concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius" (SE "William Blake" 280). Rather than finally criticize Blake, Eliot faults ". . . the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed; perhaps the

circumstances compelled him to fabricate, perhaps the poet required the philosopher and mythologist . . ." (280). *The Waste Land* is conspicuously fabricated from Christian and non-Christian fertility myths as well as astrology--all known and relatively traditional ways of thinking about the world--but the poem doesn't claim they are authorities, only ways of thinking, connecting and ordering.

To find order in the absence of belief is the purpose of what Eliot termed the "mythical method." In "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," appearing in *The Dial* in November of 1923, Eliot hailed Joyce's 1922 novel (chapters of which Eliot read, and published in *The Egoist*, in 1919) as, "the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape" (SP 175). For Eliot, "Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance" which he links to "the importance of a scientific discovery" (177). Eliot argues that "using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, . . . is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). Contrasting it with "narrative method," Eliot terms this way of controlling "the mythical method" (178). And by citing approaches--"Psychology . . ., ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred" (178)--enabling this method, Eliot

suggests that *The Waste Land* also employs this very method.

Eliot also complains the method has been treated by reviewers "as an amusing dodge, or scaffolding erected by the author for the purpose of disposing his realistic tale, of no interest in the completed structure" (175). Eliot's use of "scaffolding" signals that he associates the mythical method with allegory, for "scaffold," as we have already seen in "Dante" (1920), is Eliot's choice of metaphor in nearly every discussion of allegory. Dominic Manganiello sketches in the connection between the mythical method and allegory: "as an ordering principle, the mythical method serves the same function for the modern artist that allegory served for Dante" (56). Eliot's association of the mythical method with allegory as ordering principle is reinforced by his comments on the role of allegory in Dante; in the third of the Clark Lectures (1926), Eliot notes,

I do not reject the part of allegory. Allegory itself may be only a mode of expression of a mind passionately eager to find order and significance in the world--though it may find order or set order in ways in which we have come to neglect.
(*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 98)

As Eliot's own description testifies, there is little question that his use of the method was intended to impose

("to find . . . or set") order on contemporary history. And Eliot makes it quite clear what he thinks of this history. But critics too often go on to assume that the past is, therefore, valued positively. For example Alan Williamson argues the mythical method "uses the terms of one period to pass judgment on those of another, the present, which is generally assumed to be inferior" (154). However, as I've tried to illustrate with "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," any past Eliot points to turns out to exhibit belatedness from origins and authority. The historical past does not inherently possess positive value; rather, it is useful to the poet and readers because it is culturally known, available, and open to interpretive valuation.

Michael H. Levenson makes a similar point in examining the mythical method in *The Waste Land*. He puzzles over why Eliot contrasts this method with narrative method and concludes, "Where narrative has traditionally depended on convergence of incident, convergence of character, Eliot's mythic method extends *parallels*. . . . Consistently, the poem withdraws from dramatic conflict to cultural context" (200). To discourage us from seeking convergence, conflict and contrast, Levenson correctly emphasizes "parallels."

Levenson also notes that Eliot, in revising *The Waste Land* and faced with choices between allusions, always opts for the older and more general. The most obvious examples of this occur in his decision to use the generic title

rather than allude to Dickens in "He do the police in different voices," and his choice of epigraph from Petronius' *Satyricon* rather than Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The result is an obvious extension in time that, again, illustrates parallels rather than contrasts.

Calvin Bedient, the only critic to consider at length the allegorical impulse of *The Waste Land*, views the poem enacting a battle between its metonymic elements and the metaphors that, in his reading, control and purify them. "The Waste Land inscribes," according to Bedient, "an inside movement from the realm of the . . . 'found,' historical, secular, to that of the . . . selected, allegorical and sacred, a realm shaped by the poet-narrator of the poem" (2). It is hard to fathom the distinction made here--perhaps the quotation marks indicate Bedient's unease--between the "'found'" and the "selected." And after emphasizing the "dominance," "that is almost a tyranny" of metaphor (2), he notes the poem's "freight of non-allegorical, metonymic grit" (3) and states that

even "myth" in the poem proved--Eliot being, after all, a belated author who would nonetheless seek an original, in the sense of timeless, knowledge of the One--entirely mediated through a "body" of European literature (3-4)

Harriet Davidson sums up why the metaphoric and the metonymic axis cannot be viewed or discussed separately:

In *The Waste Land* the attempt to achieve some metaphoric/symbolic enclosure (or presence) is undercut by metonymic particularity, allusive dispersion, and constant metamorphosis. While the poem desires presence, the desire produces only particularity and absence. (*T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics* 103-4)

After its title and epigraph the poem begins again, under the heading "The Burial of the Dead," with the desire to breed new expressions out of the past thwarted by the past:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (61)

On the literal level, this suggests the futility of fertility in the natural world. With the human attributes of "memory and desire" applied to the seasons' cycle, the futility of human hope is suggested. More specifically, the

human desire that art may enact new expression is thwarted by the memory (through allusion) of Chaucer's Prologue. And, as Chaucer's Prologue announces a literal and spiritual pilgrimage or quest, this passage suggests that any quester here is a late straggler repeating earlier failures.

The poem, like "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," reveals fear of both fertility and sterility (fertility pushed to its limit). As the title of the poem suggests, readers find themselves in a sterile land:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no
relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (61)

Contrasting this sterility is not so much the variety of water imagery and fertility myths perhaps culminating in "a damp gust / Bringing rain" (74), but the tangled fecundity of textual fragments. Thus Harriet Davidson, noting "there is no proper or original form of these myths," argues that "in Eliot's own variant on these stories [fertility myths] in *The Waste Land*, death is never redeemed by any clear salvation, and barrenness is relieved only by a chaotic

multiplicity, . . . an ironic kind of fertility . . ."

("Improper desire: reading *The Waste Land*" 125).

The poem begins with "a heap of broken images" and ends with "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (75).

Benjamin, in describing the allegorical method of the baroque, aptly describes Eliot's practice here as well:

That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification. (178)

Benjamin explains that these fragments are objects which, "as something incomplete and imperfect, . . . stare out from the allegorical structure" (186). In "A Game of Chess" Eliot presents just such remnants as a painting of "the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced" and

. . . other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms

Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.

(64)

These stumps of time hush the enclosed room of the poem with the inescapable weight of the past. Because the past is inescapable, though withering, Eliot reifies its atomistic aspects so that he might manipulate these, as would, in Benjamin's description of the allegorist, "a stern sultan in the harem of objects" (178). This reification has two related results: the bodies of the characters are often truncated and drained of life, and, correspondingly, the materiality of language is given emphasis.

Frequently noted are the lifeless characters hovering, like the Sibyl of the epigraph, between life and death--although even the dead, being emblematic, are not quite dead. Longenbach points out that "Eliot praised James for having 'taken Hawthorne's ghost-sense and given it substance,' that is, for giving a psychological obsession with the past a concrete reality in the presence of ghosts. Eliot did just that in the encounter with the ghostly 'Stetson' in *The Waste Land* . . ." (*Modernist Poetics of History* 23). Longenbach correctly notes the "concrete reality" of the past, but "ghost" fails to convey sufficiently the concrete materiality of Stetson and "That corpse you planted last year in your garden" that may well "sprout" (63). And time itself, in a manipulation of

Marvell, is personified (and depersonified) as bones and a grinning skull: "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / The Rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (67). As Benjamin declares, ". . . the corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property" (218). More specifically, Benjamin argues that

in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face-- or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity-- nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing (166)

From this point of view, in "Death by Water," once "a current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers," the reader is warned to "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome

and tall as you" (71).

The other significant rattling of the bones in the poem are the variety of textual fragments ripped out of context and the number of words left scattered now that any connective tissue to sense has withered away. Maud Ellmann argues that "in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' Eliot celebrates the voices of the dead, but he comes to dread their verbal ambush in *The Waste Land*" (101). But if Eliot dreads their ambush, why does he include so many allusions and direct quotations?¹³ Leonard Diepeveen, in *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem*, makes important distinctions between the functioning of allusion and direct

¹³ One of the most vexing problem readers face in *The Waste Land* is deciding the identity of the speaker or protagonist. Perhaps naively, I consider Eliot the primary force (the sultan) of the poem. I find it difficult to consider any of the figures in the poem as speakers because they are so frequently textualized and mediated and otherwise objectified. As a result of this, the figures are preformulated and, thus, lack agency, making them poor candidates for the role of protagonist. This is particularly true of Tiresias who is sometimes put forward as the protagonist. Angus Fletcher compares the agents of allegories to people "possessed by a daemon" and goes on to describe an allegorical agent as "driven by some hidden, private force, or, viewing him from another angle, it would appear that he did not control his own destiny, but appeared to be controlled by some foreign force, something outside the sphere of his own ego" (40-41). This lack of control of his destiny, Fletcher notes, causes an agent "to act somewhat mechanistically. The perfect allegorical agent is not a man possessed by a daemon, but a robot . . . (55). *The Waste Land* is full of such agents, from Tiresias, who has "foresuffered all" (what he "sees" is the past repeated, the problem of the poem), to the "human engines" of the typist with her "automatic hand" and "the young man carbuncular." Perhaps the perfect allegorical agents of the poem are the figures in the "wicked pack of cards."

quotation. "Alluding texts," Diepeveen points out, "attempt to assimilate their borrowings; the artist does not present the allusion as a self-contained texture that refuses integration into the new text. This impulse to swallow the allusion shows the importance of unity for alluding poems" (10). In contrast, "the less allusion and the more quotation readers encounter, the more the quoting poem appropriates and works with what some would call the *writing* of another text" (16). Diepeveen concludes that the "emphasis on texture and de-emphasis of conceptual paraphrase increases the quotation's presence as indelibly alien, as an element opposing the borrowing text" (16). Eliot's brazen stealing emphasizes the texture of language to counter its conceptual sense.

Because the poem was originally titled "HE DO THE POLICE IN DIFFERENT VOICES" (*WL Drafts* 5), critics often focus on the voices of the poem, but speech is rarely emphasized in the poem. While the finished poem shows him relenting at times, Eliot writes on a draft: "I want to avoid trying [to] show pronunciation by spelling" (*WL Drafts* 13). Pound seems to have been aware of this, for in a letter of December 24, 1921 he calls the nearly finished poem "MUCH improved" and notes parenthetically, "(It also, to yr. horror probably, reads aloud very well. Mouthing out his OOOOOOze)" (*Letters I* 497).

The pressure to fragment texts extends to words as

well. As characters are reified and manipulated, the materiality of language as it splits apart is foregrounded. The connection between truncated character and the bifurcation of language is nowhere more apparent than in the figure of Philomela. Raped by Tereus, her tongue cut out, she is transformed into a nightingale. And though Eliot describes her singing (in a painting) "with inviolable voice" (64), she can't quite name her attacker: "So rudely forc'd. / Tereu" (68). And this is violated, becoming in Elizabethan convention "'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (64). This and other onomatopoeic sequences, such as the water-dripping song of the hermit-thrush (73), serve to point out the unnaturalness of language: rather than bound by a natural connection, the signifier and signified are tenuously held together by changing conventions.¹⁴

¹⁴ The unnaturalness of the creation of *The Waste Land* is brought out further by Pound's poem to Eliot:

SAGE HOMME

These are the Poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptuals thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
Know diligent Reader
That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the caesarean Operation.
(*Letters I* 498)

In reply, among other requests, Eliot writes "Wish to use Caesarean operation in italics in front" (*Letters I* 504).

The emphasis on texture can be found in Eliot's practice in the notes to the poem; they usually identify the source of a quotation, but rarely translate the non-English sources. No doubt Eliot exhibits elitism in this, but his practice also serves to maintain the textuality and otherness of the quotation. Eliot's uses of so much foreign text has this effect for most speakers of English. If the particular language or signifying chain is not known, the signifiers can only be text. Even when Eliot's note explains that the Thames-daughters' Song incorporates the lament of Wagner's Rhine-daughters ("Weialala leia / Wallala leialala"), it is hard to know how this differs from merely "la la" (70).

Most difficult to translate, of course, is "What the Thunder Said": "DA DA DA." Blasing claims of this "onomatopoeic sequence" that such "a coincidence of force and form is merely a poetic device or a foreign tongue or even nonsense, for surely 'Dada' lurks behind 'DA DA DA'" (45). She concludes:

Eliot's language alternates between a parodic super-sense or God's-eye view and a parodic sub-sense In "DA DA DA," these two extremes of the language of *The Waste Land*--ranging from "Son of Man" to "Twit twit twit"--meet, as God

speaks "nonsense" through the medium of nature.

(45)

Benjamin explains this dialectic by suggesting that in allegory "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" and, thus, in the profane world "the detail is of no great importance" (175). The logic of *The Waste Land* is spelled out by the Thames-daughter: "'I can connect / Nothing with nothing'" (70). Benjamin completes the dialectic, noting

that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things. . . . Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. (175)

From the point of view of the profane, Benjamin notes, "as those who lose their footing turn somersaults in their fall, so would the allegorical intention fall from emblem to emblem down into the dizziness of its bottomless depths" (232). Thus, the history Eliot would shape into meaning falls into meaninglessness:

Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal (73)

Benjamin claims a reversal into the sublime occurs at this point of vertigo, an "about-turn into salvation and redemption" (232). Blasing half-heartedly raises this possibility:

The "Shantih shantih shantih" that ends the poem points to a future direction. The last line is properly a *deus ex machina*: it delivers the poet not only from the tradition that informs and encloses the poem but from history itself. For it is the language of a theological center, even if in a foreign tongue--as indeed the language of faith, for the characters of *The Waste Land* is a foreign tongue. "The Peace which passeth understanding" is what follows the historical ruin of the poem, the collapse of textual authority and the dismemberment of texts of centrality. Ruins in general impart such peace because they celebrate oblivion. . . . This species of the sublime . . . may account for the final peace or sense of relief at the end of *The Waste Land*.

(45-46)¹⁵

There may be a sense of relief in having halted this fall through emblems, but a kind of failure is present as well.

Altieri, in "Eliot's impact on twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry," nicely captures the results of Eliot's experiments of the 20s:

Ultimately Eliot rejected both impersonality and its attendant culturalism because he saw that by seeking comprehensiveness one only insured a constant emptiness, frustrated by endlessly receding spiritual possibilities. There could be no adequate ground discovered in seeking cultural universals, and there could be no redemption

¹⁵ Although Blasing never refers to Benjamin, in arguing for the allegorical character of Eliot's poetry she follows Benjamin's sense of allegory extraordinarily closely. Benjamin focuses on the role of ruins in baroque allegory and explicitly relates them to textual fragmentation. Of the ruin, Benjamin asserts:

The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history . . . is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (178)

glimpsed in the sudden configurations gathered
among fragments. (201)

Eliot succeeds in collecting fragmented history, but, in imposing an arbitrary order, fails to find authority in it. In the logic of the *via negativa*, this failure may suggest spiritual promise, but pragmatically, as his desire is for the end of desire, this will produce few more poems. As we turn our attention to Wallace Stevens, we shall see the inability to complete desire productively producing further embodiments of desire.

Chapter Four

Wallace Stevens' Allegories of the Self and Imagination

". . . poetry is a cemetery of nobilities."

"The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"

"This is form gulping after formlessness."

"The Auroras of Autumn"

"Desire prolongs its adventures to create

Forms of farewell"

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

"After all," Wallace Stevens concluded, "Eliot and I are dead opposites and I have been doing about everything that he would not be likely to do".¹ Stevens made this assessment in 1950 and critics have generally agreed with his conclusion. Nevertheless, the two poets share the mode of allegorical thinking, and while, to be sure, they employ

¹ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, page 677. I employ the following abbreviations for writings by Stevens when citing them parenthetically by page number in the text: CP--*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*; L--*Letters of Wallace Stevens*; NA--*The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*; OP--*Opus Posthumous*.

allegory differently, they share similar ends. While Eliot seeks origins which would give meaning to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (SP 177), Stevens finds lingering orders of belief unsatisfactory and strives to begin again. Eliot can never arrive at origins and Stevens can't quite escape ideas of origin, for Stevens requires the idea of lost origins as the source of desire. Hence Eliot in his later works would seem to dismiss desire (although the logic of the *via negativa* in a kind of double negative actually expresses desire), but Stevens, while dismissing old modes of desire, holds desire as the engine of ever-newer modes of desire. For Stevens, this never satisfied desire is the imagination and he posits the process of this imagination as an absolute.

Eliot and Stevens both exhibit a "blessed rage for order," but Stevens, closer to romanticism, seeks to turn his failures to make contact with the world that would yield a meaningful or useful order into the success of the imagination. Eliot can't finally resist imposing some version, no matter how mystified, of the absolute, yet Stevens, too, in his shift from allegorical content to allegorical process, posits a version of the absolute, that of the self-transcending imagination. Stevens, in his acceptance of the fictionality of all positions, eludes the charge of dogmatism often leveled at Eliot, but he risks draining his poetics of power as his absolute is self-

transcending through self-consumption. As allegories, Stevens' poems point to the process which has exceeded them.

In a general sense, Stevens is nearly always allegorical. Many of his poems are examples of, to use his phrase, "abstraction blooded" (CP 385). Helen Vendler points to this allegorical tendency when discussing the conclusion to "Sunday Morning." Vendler argues that "Though Stevens, like Keats, mentions natural objects, they are allegorical instances of the abstract formulation earlier in the poem" (*On Extended Wings* 49). After providing examples--"Stevens' deer represent solitude" etc.--Vendler concludes, "The scene, in short, is being used largely as an instance of a thesis, not surrendered to in and for itself" (49).

Certainly Stevens' poems operate at a high level of abstraction and, thus, possess a general allegorical character, but some of his poems exhibit a more specific sense of allegory. Although Stevens is generally treated as a lyric poet, his allegorical poems involve narrative plotting, the force of ". . . the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (239). Both "The Comedian as the Letter C," a traditional allegory, and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," employing a series of allegorical fables and, more importantly, displaying allegorical process, are manifestly teleological. As allegories foreground temporality, they possess narrative intention. Peter Brooks, in *Reading for Plot*, suggests that ". . . narrative

has something to do with time-boundedness, and . . . plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (22). But Brooks, relying on Lacan's combination of Freud and Saussure, also points out that narrative's deathward intention is countered by defenses that would delay its closure, meaning and death. Thus Brooks concludes, "narrative is hence condemned to *saying other than what it would mean*, spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement" (56). Narrative, described as "saying other than what it would mean," noted for its temporality of "spinning out its movement" and its intention "toward a meaning," can thus be viewed as allegorical. "The fundamental structure of allegory," remarks de Man in a discussion of Wordsworth, appears in "the tendency of the language toward narrative" (225).

Both "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" quest after beginning again and dramatize the difficulty of truly doing so. Beginning again involves the cutting away of old modes of desire, the insufficient ways of thinking (Stevens titles one poem "Poetry is a Destructive Force"). And in the clearing, the imagination must be bodied forth, or, in his terms, the abstraction must be blooded. But this bodied, textualized (as narrative) imagination must suffer the fate of all bodies (and all narratives). In opening a temporal space in which the imagination can act out and narrate its findings, the poems

have opened up the imagination to its inevitable deathly conclusion. Stevens' poems, while possessing little plot, display much plotting as the imagination both moves toward conclusion and attempts to defer that conclusion. Before turning to "The Comedian," a manifestly allegorical poem trapping Stevens in allegorical content, and "Notes," where allegorical content is consumed by process, I will begin with an examination of Stevens' motives for employing metaphor to illustrate how metonymy works to evade metaphoric closure by prolonging its operation through the temporality of allegorical space and how metonymy nevertheless leads to (or collapses into) metaphoric closure.

1. "The Motive for Metaphor": Shrinking from Closure

Many of Stevens' poems present metaphors of an exaggerated character which serve to remind the reader of the artifice of the poems, disallowing any final resting in one fiction. The metaphors function to create, to discover, to illustrate, and to undermine final belief in the particular creation, discovery, or illustration. The most extreme metaphors suggest that even discovery or illustration is creation--one of his *Adagia* reads, "Reality is a vacuum" (OP 168). Metaphors frequently function

metonymically, allegorically rather than symbolically, extravagantly exposing their incompleteness and, thus, the poet's yearning for completeness. These self-destructive creations, which presage the short-lived allegories of "Notes," allow no final resting place, but make possible further explorations and creations.

Stevens articulates a function of metaphor in the 1943 poem, "The Motive for Metaphor," which concludes:

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound--
Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant fatal, dominant X. (CP 288)

Clearly, this suggests that the desire for change is the motive for metaphor, and such changes result in pleasure, for the changes are "exhilarations." What the maker of metaphors shrinks from remains less clear. Here metaphors shrink from other metaphors, but metaphors of what? The "dominant X" is often read as reality, with the poem read as a pejorative expression of the motive for metaphor. But the

poem also describes the "dominant X" negatively, as heavy and "fatal." If the "dominant X" metaphorically names reality, the metaphors also relate reality to death. The motive for metaphor, then, is the desire to experience change, pleasure: to live.²

To put this more defensively, the motive for metaphor is to avoid conclusion, final meaning and death. The poem, in displaying the motive for metaphor, uses metonymic displacements to delay the inevitable collapse into metaphoric closure. The metaphoric closure is inevitable, even necessary, because, as Benjamin flatly states in "The Storyteller," "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell" (*Illuminations* 94). Stevens' poem begins with an acknowledgment of this end, for it is the closure of death which gives meaning to, makes sense of, the evasions. In this sense, "death is the mother of beauty." The poem begins, "You like it under the trees of autumn / Because everything is half dead" (288). The poem situates itself in a teleological process by pointing to the late season and its deathward implications. The wind, too, moves

² Writing to Henry Church, Stevens explicitly links "The Motive for Metaphor" with the "It Must Change" and "It Must Give Pleasure" injunctions of "Notes." In this 1942 letter, Stevens turns from "Notes" to a discussion of "The Motive for Metaphor" and writes, "This is an illustration of the last remark that the essence of change is that it gives pleasure: that it exhilarates, so that, after all, with very little in the NOTES to go by, there is a theory" (L 430).

forward, but "like a cripple among the leaves" it delays through repetition as it "repeats words without meaning." Repetition is a regression, a going back to start over, and the next stanza regresses to spring: "In the same way, you were happy in spring, / With the half colors of quarter-things." This happiness stems from an incompleteness "Where you yourself were never quite yourself," an incompleteness producing desire for change that leads to completion. The poem, having created a temporal space in which to enact its telos, exhausts its half-seasons and half-reasons, its delays, and collapses into metaphoric closure. The "dominant X" is paradoxically both "fatal" and "vital": "fatal" because it brings the constructed reader and reading to an end, and ironically "vital" because it sanctions the reading's meaning for a now complete reader.

The desire for change, the motive for metaphor, has been a constant theme from the earliest of Stevens' poems. The speaker in "Sunday Morning" questions a paradise where there is "no change of death" and "ripe fruit never fall" (CP 69) and "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" explores a similar theme. While "Sunday Morning" may not be conscious of its own fiction, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" clearly suggests replacing the fiction of Christian dogma with poetry, called "the supreme fiction" (CP 59).

In "Notes," Stevens identifies the source of this desire for change: "And not to have is the beginning of

desire" (382). Two cantos later we find:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a
place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (383)

Canto I of "Notes" declaims, "The death of one god is the death of all" (381). J. Hillis Miller argues:

This vanishing of the gods, leaving a barren man in a barren land, is the basis of all Stevens' thought and poetry. His version of the death of the gods coincides with a radical transformation in the way man sees the world. . . . Instead of being intimately possessed by man, things appear to close themselves within themselves. . . . The moment of self-awareness coincides with the moment of the death of the gods. God is dead, therefore I am. But I am nothing because I have nothing but awareness of the barrenness within and without.
(78-79)³

³ Miller's argument describes Crispin's situation in "The Comedian as the Letter C," as the excess of description renders the world mere tokens and Crispin a cipher. With the phrase "the barrenness within and without," Miller presents an emptied version of Stevens' description of the nobility that imagination can bring:

Miller's phenomenological argument suggests that things are inaccessible and cannot be apprehended. In this sense all language is allegorical, suggesting our desire to name, to know, to have what we cannot have. Discussing Stevens' conception of metaphor, Guy Rotella, after conceding that ". . . Stevens can conceive of metaphor in romantic terms," continues,

But he can conceive of it in ways nearer to current notions of metonymy than to metaphor, insisting that metaphor has no transcendent dimension: 'We are not dealing with identity' [NA 72]. Stevens retains the romantic desire for transcendent metaphors in which the visible and invisible become one, but by denying the existence of an absolute that could guarantee identity he also circumscribes metaphor so that it can never achieve that union. (105)

Indeed, many of the metaphors of Stevens' poems respond to this desire while making clear the impossibility of

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (NA 36)

permanently fulfilling it. In short, they display the allegorical impulse.

Miller's argument emphasizes the decreative quality of "the barrenness within and without": "This nothing is an annihilating force which rejects everything fictitious. It wipes away each incipient reconstruction of the old harmony before it has had time to crystallize . . ." (79).⁴ Certainly, many of Stevens' poems reject "the old harmony." In "Dance of the Macabre Mice," the statue ironically stands as a metaphor of a no longer satisfactory political state. Artistic forms, too, become outmoded. The repeated, tired assertions suggest this in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz": "Too many waltzes--The epic of disbelief / Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant" (CP 121-22). One now hears sad strains in the gay waltz because "the waltz / Is no longer a mode of desire . . ." (121).

But many of these same poems, while dismissing old modes of desire, do not dismiss desire; they promise new

⁴ The term "decreation" was used by Stevens, who borrowed it from Simone Weil. In "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens explains his use of the term:

Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grace* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers.

(NA 174-75)

modes. "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" concludes:

Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music

Will unite these figures of men and their shapes

Will glisten again with motion, the music

Will be motion and full of shadows. (112)

The speaker in "Lions in Sweden" declines "These lions, these majestic images" and confidently suggests:

send them back

To Monsieur Dufy's Hamburg whence they came.

The vegetation still abounds with forms. (CP 125)

While suggesting no specific form, the speaker realizes:

And the whole of the soul, Swenson,

As every man in Sweden will concede,

Still hankers after lions, or, to shift,

Still hankers after sovereign images. (125)

Stevens recognizes these hankerings. For example, when discussing metaphor in the first of "Three Academic Pieces," Stevens concludes:

. . . metaphor has its aspect of the ideal. This aspect of it cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life. (NA 81-2)

Thus, for Stevens, instances of the ideal become outmoded, but desire for the abstract ideal remains. How to intimate this ideal in the vegetation abounding with forms challenged Stevens for much of his career. In "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens fatally allows the soil of that vegetation to determine his allegorical content, mortally binding him to one form of local vegetation and severing him from the ideal of forms abounding.

2. "Score this anecdote": "The Comedian as the Letter C"

Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint! (OP 43)

Hi Simons, one of Stevens' earliest advocates, complained in 1940 that Stevens had not received the attention he deserved. Focusing on "The Comedian as the Letter C" (written in 1921 as "From the Journal of Crispin" and substantially rewritten under its present title in

1922), Simons rather defensively begins his essay by asserting that "if this poem had been studied as attentively as *The Waste Land*, Stevens would now be regarded as quite as significant a contemporary figure as Eliot" (97), and at the end of the essay states, "'The Comedian as the Letter C' is Wallace Stevens' *Ulysses*" (112). While Simons is clearly attempting to vault Stevens into the leading position among modernists, it should be noted that the poem is being compared to two of the most highly allegorical of modernist texts.⁵

Simons never follows through with the comparison with these other texts, but does proclaim of "The Comedian" that "simply and precisely, it is an allegory. It is avowedly 'doctrinal'" (98). Simons explains:

It tells both how a representative modern poet tried to change from a romanticist to a realist and how he adapted himself to his social environment. The hero's development may be summarized as a passage from (1) juvenile romantic subjectivism, through (2) a realism almost without

⁵ Stevens, for his part, did not take up Simons' claims concerning Stevens' position among modernists, but, rather, responded that "I cannot imagine anything more agreeable than to read a competent analysis of one of one's own poems . . . (L 344). In a subsequent letter Stevens warmed up to his critic, and wrote of Simons' essay: "What you have said is correct, not only in the main but in particular, and not only correct but keen . . . (L 350).

positive content, consisting merely or recognizing the stark realities of life, (3) an exotic realism, in which he sought reality in radical sensuousness, (4) a kind of grandiose objectivism, in which he speculated upon starting a sort of local-color movement in poetry, but which he presently saw as romantic, and finally, through (5) a disciplined realism that resulted in his accepting his environment on its own terms, so to speak, and (6) marrying and begetting children, to (7) an "indulgent fatalis[m]" and skepticism. The protagonist's marriage was actual but also symbolic of complete adjustment to society. From the point of view of the poem, this homemaking was an enriching experience, for which the hero was grateful; nevertheless, he was conscious that his eventual "return to social nature" was something of a capitulation to society. (98)

While subsequent critics have not directly taken up Simons' insistence on the poem's allegorical character, A. Walton Litz correctly calls Simons' outline "the frame on which we must stretch any interpretation of the poem" (126-7).

I do not mean to suggest that subsequent critics have failed to see the poem as an allegory, but that they have too infrequently inquired into how the poem's allegorical

character contributes to the manner as well as the matter of the poem. For example, Frank Kermode calls "The Comedian" "a narrative of obscurely allegorical intent, harsh and dream-like," and describes its manner as "a sustained nightmare of unexpected diction, so that one sometimes thinks of it less as a poem than as a remarkable physical feat" (41). While claiming "This is not autobiography in fancy-dress" (42), Kermode does conflate Stevens with Crispin, the protagonist: "And this resolution, to live in the world, to let turnips be turnips whatever he may produce in the way of comment and enhancement, is the point where Crispin is clearly once more Stevens" (44). On the contrary, I believe Stevens' production of "comment and an enhancement" seriously troubles Crispin's settling in the world. Thus, the poem does not actually reach resolution so much as it is "clipped," and Kermode can find resolution only by providing a translation (a domestication) of the poem that leaves out the "sustained nightmare of unexpected diction."⁶ It is not that Kermode reads Stevens' and

⁶ In describing Kermode's approach to the poem as translation, I am using the term rather loosely. However, in 1953 Renato Poggioli considered translating "The Comedian" into Italian, and Stevens remarked:

It may be a little difficult to translate *The Comedian as the Letter C*. The sounds of the letter C, both hard and soft, include other letters like K, X, etc. How would it be possible to translate a line like

exchequering from piebald fisks unkeyed,

Crispin's choices incorrectly, but that he neglects the ambivalence which Simons captures in describing the "homemaking" "as something of a capitulation to society."

Providing a fuller description, Helen Vendler argues that the poem "speaks one language in its narrative plot, another in the success or failure of its rhetoric" (*On Extended Wings* 38). This doubleness of language, the way the poem speaks otherwise, is linked to the double nature of Crispin and the extremity of his choices; all of this is characteristic of modernist allegory. As I have noted in the previous chapters, Mutlu Konuk Blasing reminds us that allegorical thinking

tends to be accompanied by a reductive formalism; and an esthetic of method, of creating effects by manipulating formal stimuli, only affirms the barrier between the mind and nature, the soul and the body, the spirit and the letter of language. This absolute split between force and form renders the body of the poem an imprisoning mechanism. And the poets in this mode often strike out at the body--their own bodies or their poems, the body of

and preserve anything except the sense of the words? (L 778)

Stevens expanded on his point, finding "it necessary for a translator to try to reproduce the every-day plainness of the central figure and the plush, so to speak, of his stage" (L 778).

nature or of literature. (8)

Certainly this is the case in "The Comedian," where Crispin finds his "relation" (both the relating of his tale and his relation with his environment) "clipped."

The barrier between the soul and the body is embodied by the character of Crispin, who is composed of an unhinged combination of past figures. A. Walton Litz describes some of Crispin's background:

Crispin as amalgam of comic valet and bad poet is the basic *persona* of the poem, but lurking within that ironic type are potentialities for both the commonplace and the transcendent. Saint Crispin, the patron saint of shoemakers, labored at a humble trade although he was of noble birth, and Stevens wishes his readers to recall this other Crispin. . . . Just as Crispin's decline from youthful romanticism has pathetic and even tragic overtones, so the comic language has from time to time the oversound of heavenly harmonics. (123)

This split in Crispin manifests itself more clearly in another 1922 poem, "Anecdote of the Abnormal," which concludes:

Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint!
 The exhausted realist beholds
 His tattered manikin arise,
 Tuck in the straw,
 And stalk the skies. (OP 43)

Litz suggests that here "Stevens, not Crispin, has become the 'exhausted realist,' while his minuscule *persona* rises before him in an apotheosis which is both comic and invigorating" (140). In the earlier version of "The Comedian," the 1921 "From the Journal of Crispin," Crispin survives his poem:

As Crispin in his attic shapes the book
 That will contain him, he requires this end:
 The book shall discourse of himself alone,
 Of what he was, and why, and of his place,
 And of its fitful pomp and parentage.
 Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres. (OP 59)

Of this earlier conclusion, Martha Strom suggests that "After shaping a poetic container for the Crispin part of himself, Stevens was free to 'stalk in other spheres'" (276). Taken together, "Anecdote of the Abnormal" and "Journal" suggest that Crispin is split and that Stevens feels torn concerning which aspect of Crispin to identify

his poetic project with.

In "The Comedian" Crispin is placed in the past tense as Stevens works to separate himself from Crispin's end, for the more Crispin strived to "stalk the skies," the more he was a valet to a mundane reality. The split in Crispin and in Stevens becomes the distance between Crispin and Stevens, as Stevens' rhetoric drives to counter Crispin's fate.

The rhetoric of "The Comedian" is, of course, its most striking characteristic, striking out at the reality Crispin will capitulate to. Rajeev S. Patke argues that the "language itself, as represented by naming epithets and by sheer and mere sound, as symbolic of man's capacity to conceptualize about his environment, bears a metonymic-synecdochic relation with Crispin as representative symbol and cypher" (20-21). The insistence on alliteration, especially, but by no means exclusively, of the letter "c" (foregrounded in the title), is extreme even for Stevens, and exhibits the exaggeration of language characteristic of allegories--what Benjamin calls the "violence of their manner" (54). (It is worth noting that "The Comedian" is an enlarged version of "Journal" and the material violence of its language only increased.) In three different letters Stevens points to c sounds repeating throughout the poem, functioning, as Ronald Sukenick suggests, "apparently as a kind of comic emblem for Crispin" (47). Writing in 1935, Stevens coyly states:

. . . I suppose that I ought to confess that by the letter C I meant the sound of the letter C; what was in my mind was to play on that sound throughout the poem. While the sound of that letter has more or less variety, and includes, for instance, K and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian. (L 294)

Whether or not these sounds have a comic aspect, Sukenick argues that the poem "is conceived as thoroughly comic" (47) and points to its diction with its "absurd comparisons," elegance "pushed to the brink of preciousity," "exaggerated inelegance," "and abrupt flatness of statement" (48). "In general," Sukenick concludes, "there are so many unusual words, even for Stevens, that the text abounds in eccentricity, incongruity, and its surface becomes grotesque" (49). This eccentricity problematizes Crispin's domesticity.

The goal of Crispin's quest is "The liaison, the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment" (34). His quest leads him from "Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next, / And then to Carolina. Simple jaunt" (29), but begins with a lack of liaison:

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,

The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates
 Of snails, musician of pears, principium
 And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
 Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,
 Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea
 Created, in his day, a touch of doubt. (CP 27)

For Kermode, this opens with a "just tolerably familiar note" (41), but the familiar fades as Crispin is severed from his soil, and, consequently, severed from himself. Indeed, "It was not so much the lost terrestrial" (28), but rather "What counted was mythology of self, / Blotched out beyond unblotching" (28). Patke, observing the poem opens "with descriptions of great metonymic bravado" (18), argues that "the more these opening descriptions proliferate the greater is the irony of the single proposition they are intended to figure forth: a proposition concerning the relation between an individual and his environment" (19).

One of the mythologies of the self which the sea blotches out is the idea of the gods. Anticipating the death of Phoebus in "Notes," Triton is shown "dissolving," until there is

nothing left of him,
 Except in faint, memorial gesturings,
 That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,

Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
 That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
 A sunken voice, both of remembering
 And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain. (29)

This section is titled "The World without Imagination," and as the imagined Triton dissolves, "Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved" (29).

"Made vivid by the sea," Crispin in Yucatan dismisses "the Maya sonneteer" (30), and so turns, in Simons' formulation, to "a kind of grandiose objectivism, in which he speculated upon starting a sort of local-color movement in poetry" (98). Crispin quests for "the relentless contact" (34) but can't shake the idea that

Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave
 The liaison, the blissful liaison,
 Between himself and his environment,
 Which was, and is, chief motive, first delight,
 For him, and not for him alone. (34)

The generalizing of tense ("Which was, and is") suggests Stevens' retrospective viewing of Crispin, the "introspective voyager." Finding objectivism, no matter how grandiose, unsatisfactory, yet worried that "Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not, / A minor meeting, facile" (35),

Stevens then describes Crispin's fluctuations as well as his own approach taken in *Harmonium*:

Thus he conceived his voyaging to be
 An up and down between two elements,
 A fluctuating between sun and moon,
 A sally into gold and crimson forms,
 As on this voyage, out of goblinry,
 And then retirement like a turning back
 And sinking down to the indulgences
 That in the moonlight have their habitude. (35)

Crispin, not wanting to turn back to the indulgences of romanticism, must reformulate his relation with the environment.

Section IV, "The Idea of a Colony," begins by inverting the poem's opening thesis into its antithesis:

Nota: his soil is man's intelligence.
 That's better. That's worth crossing seas to
 find.

Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
 His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
 Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
 Rex and principium, exit the whole
 Shebang. (36-7)

Patke reacts to this inversion, noting, "If Crispin is not 'the intelligence of his soil,' his status as representative man and majuscule is reduced to that of minuscule and comic cypher: Crispin as a diminished c" (19). In viewing Crispin as a "comic cypher," Patke obviously bows to Stevens' stated intention, but other readers--including Vendler and Harold Bloom--find the reduced Crispin less than comic.

At this point Stevens and his Crispin begin to diverge. The soil that is Crispin's intelligence is the soil of Carolina, but, as Crispin moves toward a realist position, Stevens resists. In "Journal" Stevens describes Crispin's docking in Carolina:

He notes the marshy ground around the dock,
 The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence
 That makes enclosure, a periphery
 Of bales, machines and tools and tanks and men,
 Directing whistles, puffing engines, cranes,
 Provocative paraphernalia to his mind.
 A short way off the city starts to climb,
 At first in the alleys which the lilacs line,
 Abruptly, then, to the cobbled merchant streets,
 The shops of chandlers, tailors, bakers, cooks,
 The Coca Cola-bars, the barber-poles,
 The Strand and the Harold Lloyd, the lawyers' row,

The Citizens' Bank, two tea rooms, and a church.

Crispin is happy in this metropole. (OP 54)

In revising and expanding the poem, Stevens deleted all but the first two of these lines. Louis L. Martz, in discussing "Journal," points to the to-be-deleted lines to stress "Stevens' alliance with the other writers who had stayed home in America, and who had, as [William Carlos] Williams reports, sought to create American art and literature through cultivation of the 'local'" (10). Martz correctly notes Stevens' awareness of the various American art and literary movements that sought to make a cult of the "local," but misleadingly describes this awareness as an alliance.

Conversely, Martha Strom argues that Stevens, far from making an alliance with the local and the localists, exhibits in both poems a reaction against the localists. Strom, suggesting that the local is included in "Journal" to test the imagination, points to these lines:

What was the purpose of his pilgrimage,
 Whatever shape it took in Crispin's mind,
 If not, when all is said, to drive away
 The shadow of his fellows from the skies,
 And, from their stale intellegence released,
 To make a new intelligence prevail.

.

Hence the reverberations in the words
 Of his first central hymns. Hence his intent
 Analysis of barber-poles and shops,
 Invaluable trivia, tests of the strength,
 Of his aesthetic, his philosophy,
 The more invidious, the more desired. (OP 56)

In "Journal," the "analysis of barber-poles and shops" includes the question: "At just what point / Do barber-poles become burlesque or cease / To be?" (OP 55). Stevens cannot merely describe, but must transform, or as Strom puts it: "He could not be a localist, gravely intent on imitating objects, because he refused to quell his comic vision or deny his belief that the exchange between the environment and the human mind is a more central subject for poetry than an unpopulated scene" (275). However, Stevens more than transforms; in "The Comedian" he excises all the lines involving barber-poles and shops. Apparently, a specific, modern, American place was not the kind of soil Stevens can allow to subject even Crispin. Stevens writes an allegory in which, because of the plethora of description, "Stevens's rendition of the physical presences of the inanimate as well as the animate, however vividly realized, partakes of the species or the genus, of the symbolic or the emblematic, not of the uniquely individual"

(Patke 20).

In the two sections added to conclude "The Comedian," Crispin does make "the return to social nature" (CP 43), a nature comprised of "A Nice Shady Home" (40), a wife, "And Daughters with Curls" (43). The return

. . . seemed a haphazard denouement.

He first, as realist, admitted that
Whoever hunts a matinal continent
May, after all, stop short before a plum
And be content and still be a realist.
The words of things entangle and confuse.
The plum survives its poems. (40-41)

While Crispin opts for the plum, it appears Stevens prefers the poems. And the allegory, as Vendler points out, offers only these extreme choices:

Like Stevens, Crispin has only two choices in respect to the natural world: to be repelled by it, or to abstract it and make it scan. . . .
There seems no middle ground in the *Comedian*--we have either the memorial gesturings of Triton or else resinous rankness, with the daughters, a simple perpetuation of the self, no real poetic solution. (*Extended Wings* 49)

Indeed, the poem offers no solution or resolution, but rather offers the same two unacceptable choices in conclusion. So, while "Crispin concocted doctrine from the rout" (45) and becomes the "fatalist" accepting the world "without grace or grumble" (45), Stevens is less convinced and walks away from the whole dilemma:

Or if the music sticks, if the anecdote
 Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
 Philosopher, beginning with a green brag,
 Concluding fadedly, if as a man
 Prone to distemper he abates in taste,
 Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,
 Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,
 Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
 By apparition, plain and common things,
 Sequestering the fluster from the year,
 Making gulped portions from obstreperous drops,
 And so distorting, proving what he proves
 Is nothing, what can all this matter since
 The relation comes, benignly, to its end?

So may the relation of each man be clipped. (45-6)

While with the one hand the poem claims a benign end, with the other hand "the music sticks" as the language grumbles

at the lack of grace.

Commenting on the poem's conclusion, Edward Guereschi claims:

By defining his poem at its conclusion as an "anecdote," an entertaining though didactic allegory, "invented for its pith," Stevens recalls its main purpose: the disavowal of myth and the acceptance of reality. Allowing the reader to judge its veracity, Stevens slyly admits that if his "disguised pronunciamento" is accepted favorably (he may have felt the unpopularity of his theme, arriving so soon after "The Waste Land"), then its hero's failure to foil the "quotidian" acknowledges the only possible truth.

(80)⁷

Indeed, writing to Renato Poggioli in 1953, Stevens describes the poem as "what may be called an anti-mythological poem. The central figure is an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that

⁷ Many critics have read "The Comedian" as a direct retort to *The Waste Land*. However, see James Longenbach who, although he too reads "The Comedian" as a critique of the "apocalyptic sensibility apparently embodied in *The Waste Land* (91), establishes a chronology of the writing of the poem and concludes that "none of its lines could possibly have been written in response to *The Waste Land* (90).

he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do" (L 778). However, writing to Ronald Lane Latimer in 1935, Stevens could view the poem otherwise:

In THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C, Crispin was regarded as a "profitless philosopher." Life, for him, was not a straight course; it was picking his way in a haphazard manner through a mass of irrelevancies. Under such circumstances, life would mean nothing to him, however pleasant it might be. (L 293)

In short, his philosophy would have profited from a mythology.

Most readers of the poem find Crispin's quest a failure, that his relations may have been pleasant but not meaningful.⁸ For example, Patke suggests "the poem satirizes Crispin for having failed to live up to the notion of man as 'the ideal synecdoche' (Burke 1945: 508), in which either the whole can represent the part or the part can represent the whole with sufficient faithfulness" (19).

⁸ A recent exception to this reading comes from James Longenbach, who, in *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, argues that by ". . . rejecting both the apocalypse of the isolated self and the apocalypse of a culture's demise, 'The Comedian as the Letter C' affirms historical continuity, a social and comic vision chosen over the tragedian's lonely fate" (93).

However, in satirizing Crispin's limitations, Stevens also drives himself to limitation. Blasing describes Stevens' reductive possibilities:

"Comedian" is regressive and limits the poet's options to subjection to the authority of "soil" or "intelligence"--a reductive natural truth or a reductive rhetoric. In linguistic terms, the options are silence--a "clipped" "relation" acknowledging the triumph of nature--or the verbosity of the "profitless / Philosopher" that marks the purely academic victory of the mind. The "Comedian" ends in resignation, for Stevens's etymological divagations and stylistic circumlocutions have unmoored the language of the poem beyond the kind of "relation" that was the impetus of its quest. (91)

Stevens comes to distrust Crispin's goal of the beautiful liaison, and the poem must be judged a failure. As Crispin, a fatalist, wanders toward a realist position, Stevens can only more forcefully resist. Charles Altieri presents the problem this way:

As the adventures of Stevens's Crispin make all too clear, the effort to locate a specific

doctrinal core for allegory would only lead to a self-defensive set of parodic gestures, binding the author even more to the world of appearances that allegory must resist. If Modernist art were to engage the abstract and self-referential force of allegory, it would have to find more immediate access to the formal or interpretive energies of spirit that govern the mind's engagement in appearances, without the support of doctrine or conceptually coherent systems. (*Painterly Abstraction* 49)

Crispin, locked in allegorical content, "contained in a book," has come to an end. This teleological intention and its delays comprise what I term the allegorical process. The forms which embody this process are always fatal to the process--such is the case in "Comedian"--unless process can be viewed as transcending its forms. Stanley Fish observes such a process in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, where he describes the dialectical character of some seventeenth-century literature in the Platonic-Augustinian tradition. Fish explains his intended sense of his title:

the reader's self (or at least his inferior self) is consumed as he repends to the medicinal purgings of the dialectician's art, and that art,

like other medicines, is consumed in the working of its own best effects. The good-physician aesthetic, then, is finally an anti-aesthetic, for it disallows to its productions the claims usually made for verbal art--that they reflect, or contain or express Truth (3)⁹

Fish goes on to note that "a self-consuming artifact signifies most successfully when it fails, when it points away from itself to something its forms cannot capture" (4). "From the Journal of Crispin" and "Anecdote of the Abnormal" more clearly point away from their forms than does "The Comedian." Stevens would need to figure forth a man who can freshly conceive of the world without being subsumed by facticity or relying on a static formal system. Stevens will create that man in the figure of the poet, in the figure of himself. In doing so he posits the allegorical process of the imagination as an absolute. I shall now turn to "Notes," where Stevens relies on allegorical process shuttling between imagined origins and unrealizable ends, and where the failure to reach either origins or ends

⁹ In his introduction Fish admits to sitting on the fence concerning the possible application of his readings of seventeenth-century texts to more contemporary texts. Fish explains, "I am not here making a claim beyond that made for the works I discuss, but, on the other hand, I will be pleased if others find this study helpful to their consideration of more modern (or, for that matter, more ancient) documents. As a matter of fact, I tend to find self-consuming artifacts everywhere I look . . . (xiii).

becomes the success of the process of the imagination.

3. "From that ever-early candor to its late plural":

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

In the early 1940s Stevens often displays a distrust of abstraction. In "The Man on the Dump" he rather unconvincingly insists on a man "not like an image of a man." So too Canto XII of "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" argues that "there is no image of the hero," and, making qualifications, continues:

Instead of allegory,
We have and are the man, capable
Of his brave quickenings, the human
Accelerations that seem inhuman. (CP 278-79)

Nevertheless, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens takes the opposite tack, beginning with allegorical abstractions and attempting to humanize them, embody them, make them abstractions blooded.

The poem shuttles between the poles of the abstract origin of the "first idea" and the end, the supreme fiction,

which the notes move toward. In that these poles are unattainable, they function in much the same way, stretching out a temporal space in which the imagination may be bodied forth but, at least theoretically, not contained. To name either of these ideals is to risk failure by reducing them to particular tenets not universally endorsed, or, existing in temporality, soon no longer believed and consigned to the dump. After making a small, impossible gesture at returning to origins, the rest of the poem moves forward toward its goal. Stevens does name the first idea of the sun, but the arbitrariness of this name reveals its failure, revealing our allegorical distance from origins. The allegorical distance makes apparent our lack, and this creates the desire propelling the poem forward. Wishing to avoid closure, Stevens does not name the supreme fiction, but does suggest qualities it would possess.¹⁰ This abstraction must

¹⁰ Stevens in various letters was quite coy in describing the supreme fiction. Writing to Henry Church Stevens claims to have no idea and points to poetry:

I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract. Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure. (L 430)

But to Hi Simmons Stevens argues he went too far in nominating poetry for the supreme fiction:

Some odds and ends: I think I said in my last letter to you that the Supreme Fiction is not poetry, but I also said that I don't know what it is going to be. Let us think about it and not say

include change and, as I've shown in discussing Stevens' motive for metaphor, this change brings pleasure.

Commenting on the role of desire in the poem and paralleling Fish's discussion of the self-consuming artifact, Patke notes that

the title of the poem is characteristic of Stevens in withholding as much as it declares about the form and the purport of form in the 'Notes.' . . . It points to a doctrine of metaphor as metamorphosis, a parallel to the flux of a world in change. The change of metaphor approaches an ideal of figuration which becomes obsolete no sooner than it is achieved, leaving the desire for the future consummation of a further ideal unassuaged in what is the true health of such desire. (117)

The poem indeed concerns consummation (in its several wedding scenes) and generation of imagination through the ephebe and the allegorical figures.

The first section, "It Must be Abstract," opens with the poet giving the ephebe instructions that echo Genesis:

that our abstraction is this, that or the other.
(L 438)

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . . [.]

(380-81)

The poet's relation to the ephebe parallels other relationships hinted at in these lines, that of father to son and God to Christ, while the instructions paradoxically deny these relationships. These lines express the allegorical conviction that the past is no longer available to us and yet we desire to redeem it. The ephebe is asked to "begin" at the origin, the origin which cannot be returned to, "the inconceivable idea." The ephebe is a beginner and, thus, a latecomer in need of instructions.

"The son is an ephebe, a diminutive Phoebus," Joseph Kronick argues, "who is himself a rhetorical figure dragging his father on his back like a double inscription (271).

Kronick elaborates on this point:

Asked to perceive the idea of the sun, the ephebe, a youth just entering manhood, must strip away all the metaphors that this metaphor, the sun, has accrued. Yet the sun is present to neither the mind nor the senses; man only perceives the world in and as a metaphor, thus the need to be ignorant again, for it is only the ignorant man, one free from the accretions of language, who has access to the first idea. . . . The first idea, however, is a fiction, a belated reimagining of origins in which the lateness of the son is inscribed in the father's instructions for him to forget the old names. (274)

Once it is clear that origins cannot be returned to, and the poem will make this point again and again, the poem turns briefly to expel those heavenly images. Once these images are wiped away, the poem can rebody the imagination by moving forward through a series of allegorical figures.

The allegorical personae involved in their fables are possible loci of belief. Though the personae are not

related to each other, the series does move from the gods to the human, or to the more-than-human "giant," "hero," or "major man."¹¹ The poem possesses narrative intention; as its title clearly announces, these are notes toward something. These are allegorical personae and even the human figures are abstractions, with the last abstract figure being the poet, the "I" that enters late in the poem, now in the form of the ephebe.

Vendler, "conferring on them the capital letters we use to distinguish allegorical personae as if they were proper nouns," conveniently catalogues the allegorical figures:

the Arabian "With his damned hoobla-hoobla-how";
 the Giant of the weather, "Not to be realized
 because not to / Be seen"; the MacCullough who is
 MacCullough; Major Man in his "old coat" and
 "sagging pantaloons"; the Seraph who "Is satyr in
 Saturn, according to his thoughts"; the President

¹¹ For a discussion of the presence in "Notes" of what Stevens called "the history of the imagination" (NA 21), see chapter three of B.J. Leggett's *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*. Examining Stevens' reading of Vico's account of the invention of poetry in H.P. Adams' *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico*, Leggett proposes that "It might be argued that Stevens reorders Vico's three ages to those of gods, men, and heros, reserving the final age, not yet achieved, for one in which 'Man must become the hero of his world' (CP 261)" (51-2). Leggett concludes that ". . . Stevens' anticipation of a supreme fiction that includes man as hero assumes the Vichian interpretation of human history as a history of the progressive mental states of the race . . . (52).

whose curtains servants adjust "to a metaphysical
 t"; General Du Puy on his horse; the Planter who
 loved his island; Nanzia Nunzio stripping herself
 before Ozymandias; the Blue Woman who abjures the
 pathetic fallacy; the weathered Head in the
 jungle; the Dead Shepherd; the Captain and Bawda
 who marry in Catawba; Canon Asprin and his sister
 with her children; the Angel in his lapis-haunted
 air; the Fat Girl. ("Notes" 147)

Echoing J. Hillis Miller's argument, Vendler observes that
 the poem's "own point of origin for these figures [the
 allegorical personae] is the demise of Phoebus" (148),
 announced at the end of Canto 1:

The death of one god is the death of all.
 Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
 Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
 A name for something that never could be named.
 There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
 Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
 In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(CP 380-81)

The poet, the instructor, contradicts his own injunction and arbitrarily names the sun that "must bear no name." This is a fine demonstration of allegory, as it arbitrarily names what, by its own logic, cannot be named, "a mode of action" in Fish's description, "that is simultaneously assertive and self-effacing" (40). Doomed to failure, allegory nevertheless aims at revelatory failure.

Phoebus is described as an allegorical figure: "a name for something that never could be named." And, as "the death of one god is the death of all," Stevens announces the demise of all of his allegorical figures. "The static names for gods must be forgone," Vendler explains, "in favor of fresh names forever arriving on the scene. Stevens' momentary gods arrive, do their work, and leave" (149). Vendler accurately describes the movement of the imagination through these allegorical figures, but, while the specific figures are momentary, the idea of these gods, the desire for an ideal remains to propel the poem through fresh figures. Thus, Eleanor Cook notes that "the name of Phoebus dies into the uncreated, but part of it reemerges in the word 'ephebe'" (219).

This remaining ideal provides the intention of the poem, for

It satisfies

Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these
points:

From that ever-early candor to its late plural.

(382)

"The poem situates man," according to Kronick, "between beginnings and ends, between the pure origin and the innumerable. The 'ever-early candor' opens the poem to the 'late plural' out of which the first idea is reimagined; the first idea, then, is never original, or derived, and like Nietzsche's 'first metaphor' is always already (in) language" (270). Stevens employs allegorical language to propel the poem forward in an attempt to keep from falling into the already has been.

Canto VIII of "It Must Change," in which "Nanzia Nunzio / Confronted Ozymandias," aptly describes the movement and needs of the whole poem. Nunzio performs an unrevealing strip-tease:

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
 The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
 Beyond the burning body that I bear. (395)

Nunzio would strip herself to her essential ideal in an act that recalls the opening instructions of the poem. Stevens claims of this section, "The poem about Ozymandias is an illustration of illusion as value" (L 431) and, indeed, this perception concludes the canto:

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
 Is never naked. A fictive covering
 Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.
 (396)

In the same way Hawthorne employed veils to make the point, the fictive covering here veils and marks the object. In this way allegory in its failure, what Stevens terms illusion, provides a kind of revelation. Making a similar argument, Patke reminds us that

'Notes' had begun by entertaining the proposition that the stripping away of all metaphor might restore the power and joy of the purest perception of reality. Now, in the trope of marriage, the immanence of metaphor is accepted as intrinsic to

even the purest perception of the nakedest object.
 The naked object is as much a fiction as the 'the
 innocent eye.' Metaphor both reveals and clothes
 the first idea. (161-62)

This may well be true of all metaphor (if one accepts that
 all language is allegorical), but it is the specific
 function of allegory to refuse mystification of this logic.

Presumably the poem could continue dialectically in
 infinite motion, but this is not practically possible. The
 Canon Asprin figure settles for "the whole, / The
 complicate, the amassing harmony" (403), but the harmony is
 not achieved and praise is reserved for the "amassing." In
 Canto IX of "It Must Give Pleasure," Stevens describes how
 he will conclude his own poem; to the birds the poet
 instructs, "Cock Bugler, whistle and bugle and stop just
 short, / Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing / Mere
 repetitions" (405). To conclude would be fatal, but of the
 "mere repetitions,"

These things at least comprise
 An occupation, an exercise, a work,

 A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
 One of the vast repetitions final in

Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,

.

Perhaps,

The man-hero is not the exceptional monster
But he that of repetition is most master. (405-6)

Concerning the design of the poem, Vendler argues that

All the larger-than-life caricatures are in the service, finally, of disestablishing both the classical god (Apollo) and the Christian angel that haunt his poem. In the end, the Planter is realer to us than Phoebus in his autumn umber, and the poet is realer than the angel. In our mind, the personae in their plentitude have ousted their predecessors, as they were designed to do.

("Notes" 160)

On the contrary, the predecessors linger; indeed they haunt the poem. When the the last canto recalls the mock-academic tone of the first canto, the ephebe's impossible task is also recalled. Unable to return to the first idea, he is equally unable to rid himself of the idea of the first idea.

The poem concludes by addressing the earth:

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?

(406)

The poet is tempted to fix the "moving contour," to collapse the difference; this temptation has provided the teleology of the poem:

. . . I should name you flatly, waste no words,
Check your evasions, hold you to yourself.
Even so when I think of you as strong or tired,

Bent over your work, anxious, content, alone,
You remain the more than natural figure. You
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.
That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it right one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

(406-7)

As has been his practice throughout the poem, Stevens provides allegorical names, fictions that admit difference. As a wary idealist, Stevens must believe that they will one day--but not yet--"get it right," for it is this belief which gives his poems a telos. To avoid fatal closure, Stevens shifts to the future perfect tense. Of the last line, Joseph Carroll argues that "The crystal globe suspends the revolving earth within the fixity of poetic representation" (176). This is allegorical representation which in its failure, its fixity, looks forward to its own demise in further figures.

Chapter Five

Allegories of Modernity: Frank Bidart's Poetry of Limits

*Man needs a metaphysics;
he cannot have one.*
"Confessional"

The poetry of Frank Bidart seems to fit most definitions of postmodernism. The poems attempt to give the stage to the marginalized (the physically and mentally diseased, the literally fragmented, the gay, the dead, the criminal) and demonstrate the ways these (and all) subjects are decentered or non-narratable. Helen Vendler shows, perhaps inadvertently, how this move cuts both ways when she claims that the grotesque, one manifestation of the decentered subject, "becomes in Bidart the figure of the ordinary, the human, the 'normal,' and casts an eerie, oblique cloud over normalcy itself" ("Ten Poets" 360-61). Bidart's subjects attempt but fail to narrate themselves by connecting their lives to grander narratives, the history of the French revolution in "The Arc," for example, or the history of philosophy in "The First Hour of the Night." Furthermore, formally reflecting the subjects' contingency,

Bidart employs a wild range of typographies visually signaling the signifier's materiality and contingency. Bidart's poetry is certainly, to use Alan Wilde's description of postmodernism, a "radical vision of multiplicity, randomness, contingency, and even absurdity . . ." (10). Or as the narrator, an amputee, of Bidart's "The Arc" phrases the vision:

I used to vaguely perceive the necessity
of coming to terms with the stump-filled, material
world,--
things; bodies;

CRAP--

a world of accident, and chance--; (86)¹

Wilde asserts that the "radical vision" of postmodernism "abandons the quest for paradise altogether--the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so simply) accepted" (10). Here Bidart parts with postmodernism, for,

¹ Bidart's *In the Western Night: Collected Poems, 1965-90* includes his three earlier books, *Golden State* (1973), *The Book of the Body* (1977), and *The Sacrifice* (1983), reprinted here in reverse chronological order. The collection opens and closes with two 1990 sections--"In the Western Night" and "The First Hour of the Night"--and includes an appendix consisting of a 1983 interview with Mark Halliday. All quotations of Bidart's poetry are from this collection and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

while insisting on our postmodern condition, the poems never simply accept this condition. Fredric Jameson argues that "the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism" (*Postmodernism* 54) without following the logic of postmodernism, that is, its anomie. Bidart is fully aware that we live *In the Western Night* (the title of his collected poems) yet remembers that he was born in a *Golden State* (the title of his first collection ironically referring both to the state of California in which he was born and also to an edenic state). The golden state is subsumed by the western night but still longed for. Bidart's characters display an incredible desire for wholeness, and Bidart, in the steadfastness of his theme over thirty years, displays this same will.

Bidart's poetry embodies the allegorical impulse by pointing to and longing for what it cannot have. Characteristic of much postmodern poetry, the poems insist on the failure to achieve wholeness, presence. Yet, demonstrating the continued relevance of the modernist project in our postmodern condition, the poems take our longings and desires seriously. Bidart dramatizes the desire of splintered characters to transcend mere facticity and contingency and their inability to do so. Bidart states this theme with a total lack of subtlety at the conclusion of "Confessional": *"Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot*

have one" (74). Bidart's incorporation of so many disparate characters in one theme, and his absolute unwillingness to allow them the symbolism of achieved transcendence, qualifies him as an allegorist. Making his poetry particularly relevant to my argument, I suggest, Bidart writes allegories of our condition in modernity. As an allegorist, Bidart can take seriously our desires for a metaphysics (or our nostalgia for a purer past) by dramatizing the barriers to the satisfaction of these desires.

The crisis of modernity has been described in various ways, usually emphasizing a split between systems of value and our inability to ground these systems. Matei Calinescu proposes "two conflicting and interdependent modernities--one socially progressive, rationalistic, competitive, technological; the other culturally critical and self-critical, bent on demystifying the basic values of the first" (265). Calinescu's two modernities represent the double bind of modernity, for rationality is turned against itself to problematize any enlightenment grounds while, at the same time, positing a gap between the present and any prereflexive past. Thus, Anthony Cascardi sees

a number of signs that the projects of secularization and rationalization--including the banishing of archaism, the substitution of enlightened reason for

fancy, the elimination of romance, and the definitive separation of the present from the past--remained internally incoherent and radically incomplete. (123)

The past persists in our desire to realize ourselves as whole selves rather than as split subjects. Yet it is only our subjectivity that drives our desire for wholeness. While we may misrecognize and idealize the past (and ourselves as unified subjects), it nevertheless persists. Allegory reflects both the limits and the persistence of narrative desire to connect the past and future self and the individual to society.

The structure of allegory acutely renders the double bind of modernity, for, as Craig Owens describes allegory, "a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present--these are its two most fundamental impulses" (203). Paul de Man points to the first of these impulses when he argues that allegory exposes the "self-mystification" stemming from a denial of temporality as fragmentation and counters that it is allegory which reveals the self's "authentically temporal predicament" (208). But, as Benjamin and Jameson suggest in their different ways, within the temporal persists a narrative desire to connect the past and future self and to connect the individual to society. The characters in Bidart's first book, *Golden State* (1973), find themselves in

just such a predicament and seek narrative coherence.

1. Returning to a Golden State

Characteristic of allegory, Bidart's poetry often mixes philosophical abstraction with extreme autobiographical details, prompting Vendler to describe his work as a "strange combination of excruciating confession and clinical detachment" ("Frank Bidart" 424).² After praising Bidart's poem "Herbert White" (a dramatic monologue of a homicidal necrophiliac) for "trying to draw instruction from the sort of story that the *National Enquirer* would simply capitalize upon" (193), Robert von Hallberg notes that "the details of Herbert's narrative overlap with those of his own [Bidart's] autobiography in a later poem . . ." (194). Indeed, Bidart has admitted giving Herbert White "a family history related

² While Bidart's poetic style developed before meeting them, it's worth noting his friendships with both Robert Lowell (whose work, beginning with *Life Studies*, is associated with confessionalism) and Elizabeth Bishop (whose work was most frequently praised during her life for its detachment) in relation to Vendler's observation. Bidart worked closely with Lowell and Bishop in the early 1970s, and devoted much effort to helping Lowell revise the poems for *History* and *The Dolphin*. See Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (420-23), for Bidart's and Bishop's responses to Lowell's confessional poems of this period. Bidart's recollections of Bishop may be found scattered throughout Gary Fountain's and Peter Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography*. Bidart is literary executor of Lowell's estate and co-executor of Bishop's estate.

to my own" ("Interview" 28), and, yet, in the presumably "confessional" poems Bidart exhibits extreme self-reflexivity.³

The dramatic monologue of "Herbert White" begins the book, and White, like Wordsworth, would like to "see into the life of things." Here White presents his wish:

--You see, ever since I was a kid I wanted
to *feel* things make sense: I remember

looking out the window of my room back home,--
and being almost suffocated by the asphalt;
and grass; and trees; and glass;
just *there*, just *there*, doing nothing!
not saying anything! filling me up--
but also being a wall; dead, and stopping me;
--how I wanted to see beneath it, cut

beneath it, and make it
somehow, come alive . . . [.] (128)

³ This combination of personal contingency and the longing for transcendence is now sometimes referred to as the postconfessional lyric (or dramatic lyric). For example, Jeffrey Gray, discussing Bidart's "Ellen West," finds it "in fact almost representative of a genre--one might call it 'postconfessional'--which Bidart has created" (725). And Gregory Orr, in his "The Postconfessional Lyric," suggests that "among the younger postconfessionals Frank Bidart's work, and especially his first book, *Golden State* (1973) occupies a special place" (662).

Confronted with the facticity of the world, White cannot make sense of the things. He can't find a connection of order that would give these things life and allow him to see a meaningful place for himself in the world. In his desire to break through, he can only repeat. Rather than employing the trope of metaphor, which would assume a connection to a whole order, the trope employed here is that of metonymy. The nouns cataloged, as in the lines "the asphalt; / and grass; and trees; and glass," don't add up. They spin out in time, having only the arbitrary connection of "and." Furthermore, Bidart separates them with semi-colons. The logic that might connect these things (the grass and trees are green, grass and glass rhyme) is the arbitrary ordering of metonymy. While the repetition (as opposed to the sequencing of narrative) reveals White's desire, even compulsion, to make sense, it also exhibits his frustration. As there is no conclusion to come to, the passage trails off.

White's desire to make things come alive results, paradoxically, in his murdering a girl and engaging in necrophilia. The poem begins by describing the murder with an allusion to *Genesis*: "When I hit her on the head, it was good" (127).⁴ For White, destruction is a way of making and

⁴ It is not surprising that Bidart, as an allegorist concerned with origins, should show particular interest in *Genesis*. Bidart concludes his third book, *The Sacrifice*, with a translation of *Genesis* 1-2:4, the description of the seven days of creation.

ordering the world. Following the murder, White feels everything

fit together; was alright;

it seemed like

everything *had* to be there, like I had

spent years

trying, and at last finally finished drawing this

huge circle . . . [.] (129)

But, of course, the world he makes falls apart. Bidart literalizes White's desire to make things come to life by having White have sex with the corpse. The results are predictable, though White's illusion that his desire may be fulfilled is chilling:

but still, just like I knew all along,

she didn't move.

When the body got too discomposed,

I'd just jack off, letting it fall on her . . .

--It sounds crazy, but I tell you

sometimes it was *beautiful*--I don't know how

to say it, but for a moment, everything was

possible--;

and then,

then,--

well, like I said, she didn't move: and I

saw

under me, a little girl was just lying there in

the mud: (127)

By placing "beautiful" and "everything" in italics, Bidart illustrates White's desire to connect the two terms, to arrive at a symbolic moment of unity. For the New Critics, taking the point of view of Coleridge, the symbol manifests an organic wholeness. Here, the only organicism is the girl "in those ordinary, shitty leaves . . ." (128). And the hope that everything is possible, that White could be the God of Genesis, is only a moment. The narrative propulsion of allegory demystifies the illusion of eternal moments and reveals the speaker's being in time, what de Man calls the self's "authentically temporal predicament," as the short lines continue "and then, / then,--" (127).

While the narrative moves forward from the murder to White's repeated returns to the decaying corpse, White also describes past events in his life in an attempt to find connections with his present situation. White finds that the past is a decaying corpse. Describing a meeting in a hotel room with his father, Herbert reveals that he, himself, is a bastard. Later, once again looking through a

window, he sees his father, now remarried, playing with his wife's children in ways he never played with Herbert. From this realization that affection is arbitrary and that he has no organic connection with his father (or, conversely, perhaps his need to see the relationship as arbitrary), White proceeds to murder the girl. After this narrative turning back, in an attempt to connect past with present in order to discern a possible motivation, the poem nears conclusion:

--The woods were scary!

And the seasons changed, and you saw more and more
of the skull show through, the nights became
clearer,
and the buds,--erect, like nipples . . . [.]

(130)

Time drags him forward. The insight sought becomes merely seeing "more and more / of the skull." In a final attempt to bring the scene to life, he characteristically tries to eroticize the scene. This attempt, as previous attempts at making things come alive, brings him only closer to death; his chosen simile for the buds is the dead language of the poetic cliché--"erect, like nipples." Finally, no connections can be made and "nothing in the sky / would blur like I wanted it to" (130). Then the trees seem to tell

him, "'That's you standing there. / You're . . . / just you'" (131).

Attempts at understanding the past, in order to escape the past, inform much of *Golden State*. The title refers to California, where Bidart was born. It also refers--ironically, for Bidart's childhood seems to have been anything but golden--to the desire to create an edenic past, or to master the past in order to achieve a golden state. In the final section of the ten part title poem, Bidart addresses his father and explains, "you had to become a character: with a past / . . . / which if I could once define, would at least / begin to release us from each other . . ." (162). Not surprisingly, no such definition occurs. Bidart is left with photographs of his father which "stare back at me / with the dazzling, impenetrable, glitter of mere life . . ." (162).⁵ Looking at a photo of his father in his youth, Bidart concludes the poem:

and though I cannot connect this image

⁵ This image of the photos as "the dazzling, impenetrable, glitter of mere life" echos Bidart's sense of Lowell's poems in *Life Studies*. Of Lowell's poems Bidart states: "these poems are great glowing static panels in brilliant super-saturated technicolor, a world that refuses knowledge of the causes beneath it, without chance for change or escape" ("Interview" 27). Bidart continues, "my poems had to be about trying to figure out why the past was as it was, what patterns and powers kept me at its mercy (so I could change, and escape)" (27).

with the end of your life, with the defensive
gnarled would-be cowboy,--

you seem happy at that fact, happy
to be surprising; unknowable; unpossessable . . .

You say it's what you always understood by
freedom. (162-63)

Robert Pinsky points to the mixing of a "naturalistic voice"
with abstractions in this poem and claims:

Between . . . "mere life" on one side, and the
vast, remote idea of freedom on the other, the
dead figure . . . embodies an ideal: no matter
how corrupt or trivial circumstances and
possibilities of life may be, one can try to live
free of them, and that idea of freedom survives
the particulars and necessities of life. (141)

Here, Pinsky very well describes the desire of allegory, but
fails to see the irony of allegory. Ideals are mechanically
tacked on to "dead figures" by the poet. Bidart explores
the temptations and consequences of ideals cut free of "mere
life" in his later books.

2. Striking the Body: "I shall defeat 'Nature'"

The two long poems of *The Book of the Body* (1977) focus on an amputee and an anorexic, both of whom are confronted with the disparity between their bodies and their ideals for their bodies. For Ellen West, "heaven / would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream . . . / But my true self / is thin, all profile ("Ellen West" 109). West states her goal: "I shall defeat 'Nature'" (112).

The desire to, and impossibility of, defining and defeating the temporal process of nature is a primary feature of allegory. As noted previously, Mutlu Konuk Blasing explanation the allegorical framework of thinking clarifies the connection between textual bodies and human bodies:

the text is an always belated representation of a prior presence, or truth. This reductive rhetoric tends to be accompanied by a reductive formalism; and an esthetic of method, of creating effects by manipulating formal stimuli, only reaffirms the barrier between the mind and nature, the soul and the body, the spirit and the letter of language which renders the body of the poem an imprisoning mechanism. And the poets of this mode often strike out at the body--their own

bodies or their poems, the body of nature or of literature . . . (7-8)

Brad Crenshaw notes Bidart's "several personas to be inspired by an extraordinary disgust for the human body--a disgust not only for its lusts and gluttonies and sloths, but as well for its life . . . (59). As Bidart's characters strike out at their own or other's bodies, so, too, Bidart strikes out at the body of his poems. Vendler calls this striking out, "violence to the printed page" and gives a partial list of examples:

interpolation, captions, parenthesis, blank spaces on the page, idiosyncratic punctuation, quotations, italics, capitals, asterisks, printed matter, lists, and flashes of interior speech.

("Ten Poets" 361)

David Young complains of these devices, which remind him of the Beats "and the easy attempts at EMHPASIS through obvious devices" (88). In assuming it is the mind or voice of the characters being reproduced, he is half right and all wrong. Young hints at this himself when noting that "the same style does service for the voices of all the characters in the collection" (88). Willard Spiegelman comes closer in claiming that "the flaunting of technique comes to match the

psychological exhibitionism, the need for self-justification, that is the mainspring of all of Bidart's memorable speakers, whether semi-real versions of himself or fully invented, or borrowed, characters" (437). While these different devices do signal the desire that words may carry the full weight of feelings and ideas, the violence of these devices finally serves to remind us of the materiality of words, that material signifiers can't possibly be wholly joined to the signifieds they try to point to. Jeffrey Gray points to "a self-conscious and extreme prosody which reminds us of the thick materiality of language," and describes Bidart's characters as "embedded . . . in material language" (737). Indeed, as Matthew Flamm argues, "artifice marks this poet's work from its surface to its core" (170).⁶

Walter Benjamin recognizes the materiality of the signifier in his study of baroque allegory, and argues, "the desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script . . . leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics" (175). From here, Benjamin concludes, "allegories are, in the realms of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). The

⁶ In an interview with Mark Halliday, reprinted as the conclusion to *In the Western Night*, Bidart devotes several pages to questions of artifice and voice. He admits that he strives for, in a phrase he borrows from Keats, "the true voice of feeling." Bidart tries to explain: "I think 'the true voice of feeling' is a necessary and useful ideal. . . . We have to have the imagination of it. But in practice, I'm sure there is no one way--free verse or formal verse, striving for 'originality' or 'imitation'--for us to achieve it. It's certainly not the opposite of 'art'" ("Interview" 20).

connection Benjamin draws here is made explicit in "The Arc." The one-armed narrator goes to Paris so as not to be reminded of his life before the accident, an accident that occurred merely by chance, leading the narrator to remark, "I tell myself: / 'Insanity is the insistence on meaning'" (86). In Paris he sees a three-legged dog who "seemed without consciousness / of what he lacked" (92). The narrator responds:

I felt that I too must erase my past,
that I could, *must* pretend (almost
as an experiment) I had never had more
than one arm, that the image
faced in the mirror

was the only, the inevitable image . . .

--For a time, it worked;

I was happy;

without a past, I seemed not to exist
in time at all,--

I only remember a sense of release, ease,
proportion--

I am now one, not less than one . . . [.]

This illusory acceptance, of course, cannot last, and the narrator in dismay notes "after about two weeks, imperceptibly / everything I saw became / cardboard . . ."
(92). Clearly, the narrator suffers as a postmodern subject as he and the world are flattened out, deprived of historical meaning. The poem concludes with the narrator's analysis of his inability to sever himself from his past:

I had to try to cut from my brain
my phantom hand
which still gets cramps, which my brain still
recognizes as real--

and now I think of Paris,

how Paris is still the city of Louis XVI and
Robespierre, how blood, amputation, and rubble

give her dimension, resonance, and grace. (93)

The narrator, to have any self at all, returns to his amputated self, just as he returns history to Paris so that it may resonate in the present, even if this means he finds his ruined self in the rubble. The narrator both fragments

and enlarges himself by comparing himself to Paris.

As the allegorical text "is an always belated representation of a prior presence, or truth" (Blasing 7), the matter of Bidart's "Ellen West" is certainly belated in its attempt to express its narrator. The poem is based on Ludwig Binswanger's account of "Ellen West" (a pseudonym), and, in fact, large portions of the poem are taken verbatim from Binswanger's case study. We have, in Gray's attempt to link Bidart with the postmodern, "a work composed of other works, so that questions of textuality and origins are problematized" (724).

Ellen West wrestles with the relationship between her body and her ideal. Following the dualism of allegory, West considers and reconsiders:

--But then I think, *No*. That's too simple,--

without a body, who can
know himself at all?

Only by
acting; choosing; rejecting; have I
made myself--

discovered who and what *Ellen* can be . . .

--But then again I think, *NO*. This *I* is anterior
to name; gender; action;

fashion;

MATTER ITSELF,--

. . . trying to stop my hunger with FOOD
is like trying to appease thirst

with ink. (117-18)

As she posits a self anterior to the gendered body, Jeffrey Gray points to "the ink simile marking the self's anteriority to the act of writing as well" (728). The self's anteriority to the text, as Blasing notes, is the emphasis of allegory. The poem concludes with the material ruins of her desire: her last letter to a fellow patient, a suicide note, her material remains. In the note West concedes the news the note is meant to convey "might well reach you / before this letter" (121).

As ink will not appease her thirst, Bidart, in his allegories, demystifies the power of art. He shows that it cannot heal our condition in modernity. It may well be that, as a description, allegory is actually a symptom of modernity. The title poem of *Book of the Body* dramatizes this double bind:

Wanting to cease to feel--;

since 1967,

so much blood under the bridge,--

the death of both my parents,
 (now that they have no
 body, only when I have no body

can we meet--) (106)

Alan Nadel notes the pun on "nobody" and argues:

This suggests that being nobody means having no body; yet only without that body can he meet his parents, the parents he has so much trouble facing and hearing in the earlier poems. The self, however, is that entity which has limits, and the body is that medium which gives form to those limits . . .; it is thus the necessary means to all which is desirable, as well as the necessary obstacle. This paradox becomes the refrain of the poem: "the NO which is YES, the YES which is NO."
 (324)

As such, one may argue that dramatizing our condition is not enough, that what we need is a way out of our double bind. Indeed, Bidart's allegories offer no way out. Yet they recognize precisely this need, this desire, without ignoring or wishing away the conditions which produce our need.

3. The "Wound and Balm" of the Past

"The First Hour of the Night" opens with the announcement that the narrator is dead: "*This happened about twelve years before I died*" (183). The narrator relates,

What I have to tell you

is the narrative of an evening and night, little
more than

a succession of dreams, one
anxiety following another,--

the whole, somehow, for me (at least) *wound* and
balm. (183)

The poem, as Bidart's note indicates, is based on Wilhelm Dilthey's "The Dream," and presents a dream of the history of Western philosophy. Bidart's narrator's dream is spurred by Raphael's "The School of Athens," appropriate, according to Steven Cramer, because "its two presiding figures, Aristotle and Plato, aptly represent the conflicting allegiances--the former to phenomena, the later to numina--that most of Bidart's speakers have struggled to unite"

(99).⁷ This dream of philosophy is followed by a more personal dream of loss and sacrifice concerning the narrator's childhood pony. (This second dream is actually based on a dream reported in a letter to Jung.)

These two dreams are prompted by the narrator's visit to the son of his best friend, the friend having died three years before. The son confesses to several dreams of his father's return, each forcing the son to realize he continues to wish the father dead. To this confession the narrator responds with the tale of his pony that had died when the narrator was a child. Williard Spiegelman summarizes:

Later, in adolescence, he (too) had a recurring dream in which the pony comes back to ask him to play, but he refuses--his retribution, obviously, for having been abandoned early--saying that '**HE WAS TOO SMALL**' [192]. The friend's son is responding to his father's death with the same mingling of guilt and hurt that the speaker had in regard to his pony. (438-39)

The obvious parallel between the son's and the narrator's

⁷ The cover of Bidart's collected poems is illustrated with a detail from Giovanni Volpato's etching of "The School of Athens" by Raphael, and shows Plato (his finger pointing up) and Aristotle (his hand pressing down).

feelings leads the narrator to conclude:

I told my friend's son that what he had felt
in his dream

was nothing so simple as GREED
or SELFISHNESS--;

that later, in my thirties,
again I had known very similar emotions

after other deaths--;

THAT THERE SEEMED TO BE

SOMETHING

STRUCTURAL IN HUMAN RELATIONS

MAKING WHAT WE HAD FELT

--well, 'IMPERSONAL'. . . [.]

(192-93)

From this sense of the impersonal structure of human relations, the narrator, lying beneath the etching of Raphael's fresco, falls to dreaming the history of philosophy.

The dream turns out to be a nightmare vision revealing

that "Time / now has effaced":

the Neo-Platonic Christian-Humanist
 CONFIDENCE that the world's obdurate
 contradictions, terrifying
 unintelligibility,

can be *tamed* by

CLASSIFICATION,-- (196)

The narrator feels pain in seeing "**PHILOSOPHY** itself /
 divided, torn" because the result is a loss of confidence in
 the subject, as the narrator feels "the unity of my being /
 torn" (211). Following a catalogue of historical
 massacres, the narrator concludes that the Kantian "'moral
 law within,'"

is near to **MADNESS**--; everything terrible
 but buried in human motivation

released, justified

by **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** and

FANATICISM--; (214-15)

Then, with the temple collapsing, the speaker, "infected
 with the desolation of / HISTORY's / leprosy" (214), wakes.
 The dream has demonstrated what Vendler calls "postmodern

truisms" ("Imagination" 100), that searches for ahistorical truth are shown to be historical claims to power.

Vendler is right to call these points "truisms," but the poem has made them matter by dramatizing them. Spiegelman comments on this central part of the poem:

It's hard to imagine a more cogent proof, in recent poetry, of the late Paul de Man's hypothesis that grammar itself always possesses a figurative dimension. Bidart's pages make concrete and visual the *sound* of his sentences; they also map the ramifications of his intellectual allegory, showing how one branch of thought descends from, struggles against, or parallels another. (439-40)

From the dramatic structure of the dream of history, the poem turns to the personal and psychological in another dream.

In a desolate landscape without boundary, the narrator realizes ". . . that on my back I was carrying // --HAD carried / all my life,-- / the *ENTRAILS* of my horse--; "(215). Seeing his horse in a pit, he offers the entrails (having taken on the narrator's color) to the horse. The horse eats its own entrails and the narrator climbs on, finding the horse "somehow *NEITHER / NOT THE SAME SIZE, NOR*

THE SAME SIZE,--" (218), and they climb out of the pit.

Here, finally, the narrator fully wakes, and in true allegorical fashion comments:

. . . though I had no impulse to relate this dream
to

the categories and Figures dreamt earlier,--

though I had no evidence whether it issued from
the Gate of IVORY or the Gate of HORN,--

(from which Gate *true* dreams come, and which
FALSE, frankly

I've never been able to remember,--)

as I retell it, the **ASHHEAP** begins to

GLOW AGAIN--; (218-19)

For Spiegelman the poem forces us to acknowledge "the taut interrelationships between philosophical abstraction (what one might wish or choose to believe) and lived experience (what happens apart from conscious intellection)" (441). The poem doesn't actually share Spiegelman's confidence in "the taut interrelationships," for the narrator claims he had never meant to relate the various parts of the poem.

Yet we may question this lack of intention--the pun on the poet's name may undermine the frankness--for the poem concludes with the speaker waking with a sense of "beneficence":

an emotion which, though it did not
erase, TRANSFORMED

what earlier had overwhelmed
consciousness lying SLEEPLESS between dream and
dream. (219)

Bidart demonstrates that history cannot be erased or changed, but his desire to understand, to map his place, allows him to view the past not as meaningless, but, rather, as necessary and, in its constructed structure, shared. For Alan Wilde "what characterizes the modernist consciousness above all is the energy of its desire" (48). With his energy, even obsession, Bidart continues the modernist project.

Chapter Six

Jorie Graham's Veils and Shrouds of Allegory:

The Resurrection of the Invisible

"Allegory thereby declares itself to be
beyond beauty." Walter Benjamin

The poets examined in this study generally employ allegory as a means to foreground the split or gap between the letter and the spirit or the letter and the world, and these poets usually lament this split as it signifies our distance from an idealized past. Likewise, Jorie Graham's allegorical poems often lament this split; indeed, as she puts it in the title of her selected poems, she still holds to *The Dream of the Unified Field*. And, particularly in her later poems, Graham, like Stevens before her, can view the gap as a moment of freedom. The gap, in her description from "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them [Adam and Eve]," is "The rip in the fabric where the action begins."¹

¹ *The End of Beauty*, page 3. I employ the first substantive word in the titles of Graham's volumes of poetry when citing them parenthetically by page number in the text: *Hybrids--Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*; *Erosion--Erosion*; *The End--The End of Beauty*; *Region--Region of Unlikeness*; *Materialism--Materialism*.

The gap itself represents possibility, but "the action" that begins here is plot, narrative, or, more generally, history. In postmodern fashion, Graham strongly distrusts these "actions" as potentially falsifying. Her poetry exhibits the allegorical impulse, a yearning for a symbolic correspondence that, again recalling Stevens' allegorical poetry, resists and delays the action. But finally, as allegory, her poetry does not deny plot, narrative and history because it insists on registering temporality. To a far greater degree than in Stevens, this registering of temporality occurs through an immersion in detail. Graham exhibits the most tendencies of postmodernism of the poets examined here, yet, importantly, the main thrust of her poetry stems from modernist ambitions. Bonnie Costello lists characteristics of Graham's recent poetry (including "the fragmentation of linear plots and arguments; indeterminate allegory; parodic language; fragmented allusion and misquotation"), noting that "these are all qualities commonly identified with postmodernism" ("The Big Hunger" 36). But Costello goes on to claim that Graham's "theatricality . . . engages her in a search for meaning" and she concludes that "Graham's work is still driven by ideas, however subverted, and by metaphors of the spiritual" (36). Commenting on "poets writing today," Graham herself remarks in an interview with Thomas Gardner that, ". . . we need to recover a high level of ambition, a rage, if you

will--the big hunger" (81). In short, Graham intends to recover the project of modernism. And, although this is not a study in influences, Graham's models exhibiting "a high level of ambition" are the work of Eliot and Stevens. Indeed, Peyton Brien notes that Graham "has suggested that it is between Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot that the central definitions of her own concerns may be found" (97). Like Eliot, her work reveals a desire for an absolute figured as a mythic past and she appropriates chunks of past texts that block her in belatedness but which nevertheless allegorically represent the possibility of an ideal. And, also like Eliot, she strives for no less than a spiritual transcendence--although Graham treats Christianity as a form of mythology.² Charles Altieri hears Graham "echoing Eliot in part because she is adamant in refusing what she considers the banal secularity of the generation of (male)

² Graham can sound remarkably Eliotic in her aspirations for poetry. As editor of *The Best American Poetry 1990*, Graham in her introduction writes:

The bedrock role of poetry, ultimately, is to restore, for each generation anew, the mind to its words and the words to their world via accurate usage. . . . Each image achieved, each moment of description where the other is seized, where it stains the language, undertakes that same vast metaphysical work: to restore the human word to the immortal thing; to insure that the relationship is, however momentarily, viable and true. Free of decor. Free of usury, exaggeration. To make the words channels between mind and world. To make them full again.
(xxxviii)

poets immediately preceding hers" ("Eliot's impact" 204).³ Her work recalls that of Stevens' allegorical poems in its insistent forward motion as the mind ranges and expands human possibility, its awareness of telos and its delaying of closure. Her poems also share characteristics with Bidart's poems, particularly the persistence of narrative desire and a willingness to register this in autobiographical details. In short, with these other allegorical poets, Graham shares the subjectivity of modernity--a sense of postlapsarian incompleteness creating a desire for wholeness. "It is the aftermath of this genesis of separation"⁴ in Paja Faudree's formulation, "that Graham is concerned with--the persistent quest for wholeness in the face of crushing fragmentation, the defiant dare to

³ I presume Altieri's source for this claim is Thomas Gardner's interview with Graham. Here Graham comments:

However great their enterprise, we have been handed by much of the generation after the Modernists--by their strictly secular sense of reality (domestic, confessional), as well as their unquestioned relationship to the act of representation--an almost untenably narrow notion of what that in between space [the moment between the desire to create and the created thing] is capable of. (81)

⁴ With the phrase "genesis of separation," Faudree is referring to the separation of Eve from Adam as figured in "The Creation of Eve" by Bartolo De Fredi which is reproduced on the cover of Graham's *Selected Poems*. Graham's notes to "Chaos" describe this work of art exploring "the moment where she [Eve] is created and awake but not yet released from Adam's sleeping body" (Region 129). The same moment was earlier alluded to in "Updraft" from *Erosion*.

hope for the impossible in spite of its futility" (14).

Graham is finally interested in the ways the invisible or the immaterial manifest themselves in material, with the possibilities and problems of resurrecting the spirit into bodily forms. "The oscillation between the indefinite invisible and the defined visible propels all thought," according to Helen Vendler, "and Graham has taken it as the propulsive system of her poetics" ("Married to Hurry and Grim Song" 239). Thus Graham is fascinated by material and its relation to spirit, whether that material be cloth, the body, or, of course, the textual body of the poem.

One of her most frequently explored forms of material is the veil, for veils are traditional allegorical markers. In this chapter I follow Graham's use of allegory by examining her use of veils and shrouds as figures for allegory. Angus Fletcher describes one connection between allegory and the veil where

allegory itself is a "veil" interposed between the exegete and the true vision of God's Word. For example, St. Augustine, echoing Origen, in *The City of God* (Bk. XVII. 20): "But now the Song of Songs is a certain spiritual pleasure of holy minds, in the marriage of King and Queen-City, that is, Christ and the Church. But this pleasure is wrapped up in allegorical veils, that the

Bridegroom may be more ardently desired, and more joyfully unveiled, and may appear." (260 n69)

Fletcher's connection of the veil to allegory and his use of Augustine as an example raise several topics relevant to Graham's preoccupations.⁵ Graham explores the theme of marriage between spirit and bodily pleasure, where "spiritual pleasure" cannot be divorced from the body but needs to be figured through the body. In her poems desire is not simply granted but prolonged through the wrapping of veils, and this wrapping, the delay of allegory, paradoxically figures the resurrection of the invisible.

In her initial two books, which I will turn to first, Graham concerns herself with the fulfillment of desire, the closing of the gap. These earlier poems long for the joyful unveiling which Augustine describes. In Graham's subsequent books (as the poems grow longer and longer), her interest turns to the wrapping, the embodiment of the gap. Furthermore, she comes to view the unveiling as exhibiting a will to power.

The way Graham focuses on the veil itself in her later

⁵ It shouldn't be surprising that poets exhibiting the allegorical impulse are strongly drawn to Augustine. Eliot alludes to Augustine several times in his work (and refers to Origen in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"). In "Confessional" Bidart devotes nine pages to exploring the relationship between Augustine and his mother, Monica. And Graham takes her title, *Region of Unlikeness*, and several epigraphs from the *Confessions*. (Of course Robert Lowell titled one volume *Land of Unlikeness*.)

work recalls Ozymandias' response to Nanzia Nunzio in Stevens' *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. After she has unveiled herself, he responds that "the bride / is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind." B.J. Leggett points to what he calls a "Nietzschean intertext" informing Stevens' canto, a passage from "Nietzsche Contra Wagner":

As to our future: we shall scarcely be found on the track of those Egyptian youths who break into temples at night, who embrace statues, and would fain unveil, strip, and set in broad daylight, everything which there is excellent reasons to keep concealed. . . . We no longer believe that truth remains truth when it is unveiled For this it is needful to halt bravely at the surface, at the fold, at the skin, to worship appearance, and to believe in forms, tones, words, and the whole *Olympus of appearance!* (81-2)⁶

I suspect Graham believes in a "naked" truth, but for the allegorist this is not humanly accessible. Rather, the truth is mediated by a veil, by a fiction, by a figure of allegory. Leggett reads Nietzsche as claiming "that truth

⁶ For a discussion of the connections between this passage and Stevens, see Leggett's *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, pages 246-52.

is always protected (that is, hidden) by a fiction . . ."
 (*Early Stevens* 251). But, as I suggested in the chapter on
 Stevens, truth, while not revealed, is also pointed toward
 and marked by a fiction or veil. Graham's later work
 focuses on veils and shrouds as just such allegorical
 markers.

1. The "beautiful lie": Art Against Erosion

Graham's first two books, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980)⁷ and *Erosion* (1983), focus on a variety of
 works of art, with an emphasis on paintings. In describing
Erosion Bonnie Costello correctly asserts that

it boldly reasserted modernist values and
 ambitions which she has never entirely
 surrendered--the pursuit of the timeless, the
 impersonal, the beautiful over the brutality and
 flux of history, the desire of the mind for the
 eternal and the drive of art to pursue it.

("Art and Erosion" 374-75)

⁷ The title is taken from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Graham uses Nietzsche's fuller formulation of the human as her epigraph to this volume: "But he who is wisest among you, he also is only a discord and hybrid of plant and of ghost." In later volumes she places greater emphasis on the "discord."

The images of material in these volumes are generally of canvas--emphasizing the spatial over the temporal as the ground for the aesthetic--or of other aesthetic objects, as in "Kimono" and "The Lady and the Unicorn and Other Tapestries." Costello explains:

Graham imagines design in terms of fabric--the world securely woven into a tapestry or sewn into a garment. The complex metaphor of stitching suggests that art is a means of mending a world we experience as broken, uniting the horizontal and the vertical, the temporal and the eternal, in its movement. This tapestried nature also clothes a mystery, giving a sense of depth to the physical world, a vanishing point in the design. The numinous is not dispersed, then, but hidden and disclosed in art. ("Art and Erosion" 375)

Costello overstates Graham's confidence in art, but she does get at the paradox of allegory as it "clothes a mystery" wherein spirit can be "hidden and disclosed." This allegorical relationship will receive greater attention in Graham's later books, but it is explored even her early work.

"I Watched a Snake" links sewing, stitching, and pattern with the visible and invisible. The poem begins

with the speaker watching the snake,

hard at work in the dry grass
behind the house
catching flies. It kept on
disappearing.

And though I know this has
something to do

with lust, today it seemed
to have to do
with work. (*Erosion* 34)

She later declares, "Desire / is the honest work of the body / its engine" and concludes: "Passion is work / that retrieves us, / lost stitches. It makes a pattern of us, / it fastens us / to sturdier stuff / no doubt" (35). Her claiming to feel no doubt that we can be retrieved into whole cloth raises, of course, doubt. Though the desire or lust for the ideal is unfulfilled, it is not unproductive. The work connects one to the real, produces a pattern of meaning. This recalls the same insistence on faith and belief found in "The Way Things Work" where the speaker claims "I believe / forever in the hooks. / The way things work / is that eventually / something catches" (*Hybrids* 3). The repetition of "I believe" (four times in a one page

poem) tends to undercut its own assertion.

The chasm between the real and the ideal is made even more apparent, less bridgeable, in "Reading Plato," though the desire to cross remains. Here a man ties flies for fishing. Constructed of deer hair, they are the knot of artifice attempting to pass as the natural. Made in winter to be used in spring, they are described as "Past death, past sight, / this is / his good idea, what drives / the silly days // together" (*Erosion* 6-7). Though "his good idea" is admired and is clearly a metaphor of art, the poem begins with a warning: "This is the story / of a beautiful / lie . . . "(6).

The beautiful lures us with completion, but some of the poems in *Erosion* suggest that the beautiful is a lie that will not catch or else will hook us fatally. For example, "At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body" the painter dissects bodies, including that of his own son, in order to perfect his knowledge of anatomy:

Luca Signorelli
in the name of God
and Science
and the believable
broke into the body

studying arrival.

But the wall
of the flesh
opens endlessly,
its vanishing point so deep
and receding

we have yet to find it,
to have it
stop us. So he cut
deeper,
graduating slowly
from the symbolic

to the beautiful. How far
is true? (75-6)

Certainly this foreshadows the preoccupation of her next book, *The End of Beauty*, by questioning the goal of the beautiful. But the point here is still to follow the straightest line to the end, to conclusive meaning. This is an attempt to resurrect the mind in bodily form that results in bodily destruction, the "cutting, / unfastening, // until his mind / could climb into / the open flesh and / mend itself" (77).

Vendler sees a turning point in Graham's intention in the poem "Updraft" where "the movement chronicled . . . is

the dissolution of meaning into unmeaning" (*The Breaking of Style* 77). Now fulfillment is not the work, but the evasion of pattern. According to Vendler:

The poet, now distrusting the closure of form,
implores a God-like figure to let Eve, the mother
of creation, symbol of the world of formed shapes,
slip back into the uncreated. (*The Breaking of
Style* 77)

The poem figures the body as a garment and implores ". . . so let her slip / out of her heavy garment then, let her slip back / into the rib . . . / . . . back, deep into the undress, back / before Your needle leapt in Your fingers, meaning" (*Erosion* 71). Vendler equates the "undress" with "what Kristeva calls by the Platonic name of the *chora*--the presymbolic matrix of language, where rhythm and syllable and semiosis have not yet coalesced into sign and meaning. But since we cannot go backward to the *chora*, we must, in our resistance to closure, go forward, by entropy, into randomness and shapelessness" (*The Breaking of Style* 78). Thus Graham's subsequent art registers erosion, slowing it to examine it, but not countering it.

2. *The End of Beauty*: "The story and its undoing"

Graham's third collection, *The End of Beauty* (1987), more fully explores the change of direction signalled by "Updraft." Indeed, it is particularly interested in the moments of breaks, gaps, rips, and not so much in crossing them, but rather in occupying them. Certainly this punning title is meant to convey a double meaning, but, as Mark Jarman points out, the two meanings are very similar:

The title must be read as it first announces itself: this book will show the destruction of beauty and, by analogy, hint at the end of the world. The reason for this reading, and the one ambiguity we can entertain, is that in Graham's lexicon *end* and *beauty* are synonymous. (254)

To avoid the end that beauty becomes or leads to, she grows suspicious of closure, the "beautiful lie" of story, and plot, and pattern. Vendler claims:

Graham redefines the human aim of verse as an earthly, terrain-orientated lateral search . . . rather than a Signorelli-like descent into depth or, as in "Updraft," ascent into prayer. Earthly

desire itself is the thing allegorized by Graham's
 long horizontal line, desire always prolonging
 itself further and further over a gap it
 nonetheless does not wish to close. In this
 search by desire, mind will always outrun body.
 And the linear ongoingness necessitated by the
 continuation of desire means that the absence of
 shape, far from meaning dissolution and mortality,
 now stands for life itself. (*The Breaking of*
Style 79)

Vendler, in contrasting this lateral search with the early
 poems of descent or ascent, relies on the contrast between
 metonymy and metaphor, and metonymy, following the
 horizontal axis, is the trope for allegory. And, recalling
 the passage from Nietzsche, this "terrain-orientated lateral
 search" shows a new willingness to "halt bravely at the
 surface." Certainly Vendler is correct to assert that
 these poems exhibit "desire always prolonging itself," but,
 as I have tried to demonstrate with Stevens' allegorical
 poems, desire cannot register in the absence of shape or
 bodily form. Thus Graham must find markers (material) which
 register this desire without closing it; these markers are
 allegorical markers.

Given Graham's ongoing focus on material and her
 growing distrust of the "sturdier stuff" of pattern, it is

hardly surprising that Graham would find the story of Penelope, as expressed in "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay [Penelope at her Loom]," an irresistible topic. Costello observes that ". . . Graham takes myths as allegories of consciousness, in fact as 'self-portraits'" ("The Big Hunger" 37). And, indeed, there are six dual self-portraits in this volume.⁸ "Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay" is written in 23 numbered sections which give a sense of linearity. But the numbers fragment continuity by intruding within sentences rather than between them, making for a radical foregrounding of enjambment. In short, form is not formless, but rather attempts to register temporality--one complete section reads "Reader, minutes: "(50)--while also delaying the movement. The poem and Penelope wish,

5

to have them for an instant in her hands both at
 once,
 the story and its undoing, the days the kings and
 soil they're groundcover for

⁸ Self-portraits have a curiously allegorical element to them, as they are actually an attempt to represent the other, to make visible the invisible. Vendler reminds us that "The self portrait as a visual genre has always depended on some mirror-strategy by which the painter can depict an object normally inaccessible to vision: his or her own face" (*The Breaking of Style* 81). The allegorical doubleness is foregrounded in Graham's dual self-portraits. Graham's preoccupation with the nature of the self continues, as she titles four different poems "Notes on the Reality of the Self" in her most recent volume, *Materialism*.

6

all winter, (48-49).

The poem concludes before the end of the myth:

22

under the kissing of the minutes under the wanting
to go on living

23

beginning always beginning the ending as they go
to sleep beneath her. (52)

Here, evasion is a kind of work. Critics have compared this numbering of lines to freeze-frames in film (Graham did study film at New York University), but, whatever their source, the effect is to slow down the lines without denying temporality. The numbers mark the gaps and, in their sequencing, mark the force of teleology which closes them.

The same technique of numbering lines is employed in the middle section of "Pollock and Canvas," where the gap is figured as the moment after paint has left Pollock's brush but before it comes to rest on the canvas. Altieri summarizes what is at issue in the poem:

"Pollock and Canvas" equates the painter with the

Fisher King, whose wound, and consequent refusal of mastery by the brush, becomes the only means of redeeming a land where the prevailing art kills what it tries to define. So she turns to Pollock for guidance in facing up to the contradictory pulls exerted by an ideal of the end of beauty: how can we at the end of one dream of beauty, repudiated completely in his destruction of illusionist space, still posit beauty as an end, and hence still desire the woman whom we must know we can no longer contain within our paintings?

("Eliot's impact" 205)

Graham proposes that what Pollock chose was

to no longer let the brushtip touch,
 at any point,
 the still ground,
 was to not be trans-
 formed but to linger
 in the hollow, the about-to-be whispering Yes
I understand you whispering
tell me then what will render
the body alive? (82)

The middle of the three parts of the poem attempts to enact

what the first part has described. Here are the first five sections of Part II, in which the Fisher King's cast line is compared to Pollock's drip painting:

1

Here is the lake, the open, he calls it his day;
fishing.

2

The lake, the middle movement, woman's flesh, maya.

3

And here is the hook before it has landed, before it's
deep in the current,

4

the hovering--keeping the hands off--the gap alive,

5

the body of talk between the start and beauty [.]

(82-3)

Part II falls "between the start and beauty," and, in being in-between, attempts to enact process, but it cannot finally forestall a Part III.

Part III deliberately ends inconclusively, if this is

possible, for she asks "Where is the border of *stopping* and *ending*?" (87). Graham attempts to balance the pure materiality (the dripped paint) produced by the process with the human need for meaning--"the story talking louder / than the paint" (89). For Altieri, Graham's "questions themselves carry a new definition of desire, cast out into an 'open,' free to take its own forms ("Eliot's impact" 205). Graham asks,

Where does the end

begin?

where does the lifting off of hands become

love,

letting the made wade out into danger,

letting the form slur out into flaw, in-

conclusiveness? Where does the end of love

begin? . . .

Where is the border of *stopping* and *ending*?

And the land was waste but the king

did not die . . .

and the meaning of the rose rises up

(shedding the meaning of the rose)

and the memory of the rose rises up

(shedding the memory of the rose)

(EB 86-88)

Her description is apt, as the poem does slides into a standoff of inconclusiveness.

This inconclusiveness can be wearying, as in "The Veil," where Graham exhibits a postmodern tone of ennui:

In the Tabernacle the veil hangs which is (choose
one):
the dress dividing us from _____; the sky; the
real,
through which the x ascends (His feet still
showing through on this side)
into the realm of uncreated things (45)

Nevertheless, she seems certain that we are divided (though it is hard to say from what). Contrasting Graham with Eliot, Altieri argues that Graham

wants a transcendental register without being able to trust any ideas about that transcendence (although her more recent book *Region of Unlikeness* sounds much of contemporary thought in quest of those ideas). Therefore she cannot just testify to the power of certain principles--her poems must constitute both the idea and its

efficacy, and hence they are haunted by a pressure to make gestures of breathless excitement bear much of the burden in giving content to what cannot actually be said. (207)

Graham continues to find herself needing to say otherwise, for she finds herself in a region of allegory.

3. *Region of Unlikeness and Shrouds of Glory*

One of the most striking features of *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) is the Forward to the book, where Graham provides, linked serially by numbers, a sequence of quotations: four from Augustine's *Confessions*, three from Heidegger's *What Is Called Thinking*, and one each from Isaiah, Revelations and *Moby-Dick*. Jarman summarizes that the "Separation from God is the theme that links them, especially in this timebound world with its inadequate mimetic forms" (257). Reaching a similar conclusion, Costello suggests that the sequence of epigraphs "tell, in philosophic terms, a story of desire to recover lost presence, of thinking as a drawing toward what withdraws" ("The Big Hunger" 38). Graham again employs a sequence of epigraphs (combined to produce the poem "A Cappella") as a

forward to *Materialism* (1993).⁹ Vendler claims, "All of these excerpts [in *Materialism*] treat in some way the materiality of the world and the materiality of language, and Graham has included them, presumably, to trace the long effort of the Western world to come to terms with the fact of matter" (*The Given and the Made* 123). Taken together, the two sequences of epigraphs serve to emphasize Graham's allegorical sensibility, as they insist on a transcendent absolute, our distance from it, and the way the materiality of language signals this distance.

Summarizing Graham's method in *Region*, Costello finds that "Graham records the constant 'click click' of the mind taking up the world 'in pieces.' The mind inhabits a region of temporality, history, representation 'unlike' the wholeness and the presence that it longs to unveil" ("The Big Hunger" 38). Graham's discovery of the world in pieces is what she describes in the first poem, "Fission." Laurence Goldstein describes "Fission" as involving an "epiphanic visit to a movie theater, and the discovery of how the poet has insinuated herself into the mediated body of historical reality" (227). The narrator describes herself as a girl of twelve viewing Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*; on the screen "the greater-than-life-size girl

⁹ Not only does Graham employ a sequence of epigraphs to begin *Materialism*, she also intersperses throughout the volume adaptations or direct quotations from other writers, including Plato, Columbus, Bacon, Marx, Jonathan Edwards, Wittgenstein, and, of course, Benjamin.

appears" and then "the man who has just stopped in his tracks / looks down / for the first / time":

Tick tock. It's the birth of the mercantile
dream (he looks down). It's the birth of
the dream called
new world (looks down). She lies there. A
corridor of light
filled with dust
flows down from the booth to the screen.
Everyone here wants to be taken off
somebody's list, wants to be placed on
somebody else's list.
Tick. It is 1963. The idea of history is being
outmaneuvered. (3)

To be more specific, the poem is set in November of 1963, and the sound to the movie is interrupted in order to allow an usher to announce that President Kennedy has been shot. The fission of the title is the splitting of one version of history in the form of the tale of Camelot from subsequent historical events, as well as the parallel splitting of innocence and experience in both Lolita and the narrator. The death of Kennedy and the death of Lolita's mother serve to rupture being into a sense of past and future for Lolita

and the narrator respectively. Goldstein argues that "Graham reads the event as a moment of rupture and reproduction, of mortification and achieved freedom, as her new self splits off from the innocent she had been when she entered the theater" (227).

This rupture where the action begins is figured largely through the compressed plot of *Lolita*. As was the case in *The End of Beauty*, Graham desires to remain in the gap, but the plot continues:

There is a way she lay down on that lawn
to begin with,
in the heart of the sprinklers,
before the mother's call,
before the man's shadow laid itself down,

there is a way to not yet to be wanted,

there is a way to lie there at twenty-four
frames
per second--no faster--
not at the speed of plot,
not at the speed of desire--

the road out--expressway--hotels-motels--
no telling what we'll have to see next,

no telling what all we'll have to want next
(right past the stunned row of houses),
no telling what we'll have to marry marry marry
marry (6)

These stanzas show Graham's two responses, what she terms "immobilism" and "forwardness."

Where the three lights merged:

where the image licked my small body from the
front, the story playing
all over my face my
forwardness. . . . (6)

Graham sees that history has set in, that the speed of plot and desire have propelled her forwardness. She has been inscribed by history. "The child at the bottom of all these twists and turns of point of view," according to William Olsen, "is almost lost, a victim of spectatorship, as detached from the dual narratives of history (the

assassination) and art (the movies) as she is an unwitting product of both" (85). Olsen goes on to suggest that the child is also a victim of the poem as it puts her on display.

The poem concludes rather abruptly:

choice the thing that wrecks the sensuous here
 the glorious here--
 that wrecks the beauty,
 choice the move that rips the wrappings of
 light, the ever-tighter wrappings
 of the layers of the
 real: what is, what also is, what might be that
 is,
 what could have been that is, what
 might have been that is, what I say that is,
 what the words say that is,
 what you imagine the words say that is--Don't
 move, don't
 wreck the shroud, don't move--[.] (8)

As I suspect the movie theater is analogous to Plato's cave, the "real" conveys the sense of "reproduction" as it is equated with beauty and light. Having just informed us of "choice," her injunction to not move, to not wreck the shroud, may well be intended to raise in readers the

possibility of wrecking the shroud. This is Goldstein's conclusion, for he suggests that, "our act of choice that wrecks the completed beauty of the text by escaping from its spell simulates the movement of the poet out of her predicament of 1963 toward the achieved mastery of the poem 'Fission'" (234).

Cindy Weinstein's description of Benjamin's historical sense of allegory helps make sense of Graham's conclusion. Weinstein points out that Benjamin argues that the "body, which up until the Reformation had usefully performed good works, was now consigned to the status of an object of contemplation" (50). This of course is the status of the girl's body (and *Lolita's*) as depicted by the narrator. Weinstein describes this "object of contemplation" as "the corporealized experience of the loss of agency" (50). Weinstein then goes on to describe the reversal that should by now be familiar:

This loss, however, becomes the precondition for an even greater gain: 'The false appearance of totality is extinguished' in order to behold 'the lack of freedom, the imperfection, the collapse of the physical, beautiful, nature' (176). It is only by giving up the illusion of totality, by experiencing one's own lack of freedom, that one can begin to be truly free. It is only by seeing

oneself (and all objects) as completely inscribed by history that one can begin, in the words of Terry Eagleton, to be 'liberated into polyvalence.' This loss of agency, which is figured in the Baroque drama as a depersonalized relation to one's own body, becomes an occasion for a peculiarly postmodern paradigm of liberation. (50)

Certainly the object of contemplation in this poem sees herself beyond beauty and completely inscribed by history. But perhaps there is no escape, for Goldstein's conclusion suggests that "our act of choice" is impelled by "the achieved mastery of the poem," one more narrative inscription.¹⁰ Wrecking the shroud (and, really, there is no choice) has not revealed truth but rather the poet's will to power.

The function of a shroud is explored again in "Holy Shroud," which concerns the Shroud of Turin. Graham's note informs us that "Some detail concerning Secondo Pia's photograph is from an essay by Georges Didi-Huberman . . ." (*Region* 130). Graham actually uses very little of Didi-

¹⁰ A historical complication hovers behind this poem, one I have to believe Graham is aware of. Oswald, he who outmaneuvered history, following the assassination of Kennedy, was arrested in a movie theater. Out of the choice of wrecking one narrative, he has become consumed in numerous contending narratives.

Huberman's "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," taking most of the ideas from the essay's first two pages. In addition to describing Pia's developing of the negative (producing a positive image because the shroud is said to be a "negative"), Didi-Huberman describes the dissatisfaction of the viewers of the procession when the shroud is occasionally publicly displayed. He then goes on to note, "But the dissatisfaction and the attempt to see constitute *something*. . . . Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than *nothing* was visible in that *almost*. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desiring of it" (63). And "this raises the very question of the advent of the visible" (63). Graham depicts the scene this way:

When they held it up to us
 we saw nothing, we saw the delay, we saw

 the minutes on it, spots here and there,
 we tried to see something, little by little
we could almost see,
 almost nothing was visible,
 already something other than nothing
 was visible in the *almost*. (74)

Didi-Huberman also comments on the paradoxical role

photography played in confirming the aura of the shroud:

As the photographic 'evidence' objectified an aspect of the shroud, it became proof of a miracle. Not only did it sanction an unprecedented sort of expository value for this relic heretofore hidden from view, it reestablished the aura of the shroud, investing the object itself with a counterpart to its semiotic status. (65)

Both of Didi-Huberman's observations rely on Benjamin's sense of allegory, and I suspect this is what drew Graham to the article. Didi-Huberman suggests that the very insistence on the materiality of the shroud, its objectification or reification, and its registering the time of our separation ("the delay," "the minutes on it") produces the sublime, a view of it as holy.

The examination of the shroud of Turin comprises the second half of the poem. The first half of the poem attempts to make visible a winter landscape. To render the invisible, Graham once again employs a shroud, this one made up of "every last cardinal for miles" (71). It is "deadwinter" and a thornberry drags in the birds. The birds lift "as a large cloth would" following the scent of the berries which is "a prayer that / matter is praying."

Graham writes of watching the birds behind

the mall, threading in and out of the discarded
 photobooth, necklacing it, trying
 to nest in the plexi face-plate
 someone kicked in
 after maybe three thousand faces had leaned
 their images upon it. (72)

Clearly she wants to connect this to the photographic image of the Turin shroud, although here it is the shroud of birds embodying the photographic images; each half of the poem is a kind of negative of the other. The birds finally "fold down again," "seeking the almost invisible stickiness out" (72). The bird's hunger signals the poet's hunger, and the birds function as a shroud, marking deadwinter, and, in covering it, they enact a resurrection.

The final poem of *Region of Unlikeness*, "Soul Says," is spoken by Prospero as he attempts to give up his art, figured here as a garment:

O pluck my magic garment from me. So.
 [lays down his robe]
 Lie there, my art--
 (This is a form of matter of matter she sang)

(Where the hurry is stopped) (and held) (but not
 extinguished) (no)
 (So listen, listen, this will soothe you) (if that
 is what you want)

Now then, I said, I go to meet that which I liken
 to
 (even though the wave break and drown me in
 laughter)
 the wave breaking, the wave drowning me in
 laughter--[.] (125)

Graham questions Prospero's ability to lay down his art, for the poem's artful delays contradict Prospero's claim to relinquish his garment. The garment marks who he is. In "Notes on the Reality of the Self" Graham humorously makes this same point, asking "do you want to be *covered* or do you want to be *seen*?-- / And the garment--how it becomes you!" (*Materialism* 61). When Prospero goes to meet his end, the ultimate form of the other, what he likens to his end becomes his end. In this region of unlikeness, the art, the fiction, the veil, the garment, the allegorical markers, are the truth.

Graham, like each of the modern and contemporary

American poets examined here, desires more than she can make present. By employing allegory, these poets embody desire and illustrate the limits of any form produced by this desire without foreclosing on the desire itself. As idealists, they fail to make the ideal (different for each poet) manifest. And yet these failures articulate our limits in modernity. For these writers of allegory, this sense of incompleteness proves to be productive, driving them forward to create new forms of what is humanly possible.

In defending certain modernist practices, and insisting on the necessity of abstraction as the means to a culturally accountable intersubjectivity, Altieri distinguishes between "doctrinaire" or "systematic allegory" (*Painterly Abstraction* 49) and what he argues is modernism's "rediscovery of allegorical space" (49). This is the space in which both modernist and contemporary poets who employ allegory work. In occupying this space, they are not so much bridging the gap between signifier and signified or world and idea as they are constructing arguments for the need to find the means to continue the problematic inclusion of both.

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