UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Wilderness of Language: Toward a "Wild" Reading of American Nature Writing

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Ian Kirk Jensen

Dissertation Committee:
Chancellor's Professor R. Radhakrishnan, Chair
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2015

DEDICATION

To

My wife Kristen, my son Dylan Rhys, and to my parents and grandparents, especially Dorothy LeVeque

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor R. Radhakrishnan who with his rigor of thought, estimable knowledge, genuine curiosity, almost unbelievable personal generosity has been not only an adviser and a chair but also a friend and supporter. Thank you, Radha. None of this would have been possible without your help.

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“Deferment and the Stakes of Subjectivity in Judy Blunt’s *Breaking Clean*.” Western Literature Association Conference, 2010.

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Indigenous literatures

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Literature and philosophy

Aesthetics

Place and space

The American West

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Wilderness of the Language: Toward a "Wild" Reading of American Nature Writing

By

Ian Kirk Jensen

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor R. Radhakrishnan, Chair

This project comprises of a response much recent ecocriticism that has, in a polemical move, dismissed nature writing and the notion of "nature" as uncritical. In what follows, I attempt to outline a symptomatic method of reading that critiques these texts while at same time insisting on their relevance to contemporary critical thought. My primary theoretical approach consists of an active repositioning of the work of deconstructive literary critic Paul de Man. I use de Man's rhetorical critique of hermeneutics to argue that reading texts of nature writing—Henry David Thoreau's "Ktaadn," Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*—succeed in producing the experience of alterity commonly attributed to the "natural" in the ways they force us to examine the nexus of language and meaning. Put simply, reading these texts "wildly," which is to say rhetorically in such a way that they begin to disarticulate themselves, produces an encounter with otherness in that which is most human—language. In doing so, I argue that the close reading of literature has a crucial place in critical environmental studies because it problematizes the very position with which it begins, the human. What is typically lost in the contemporary critical humanities is otherness. The stakes here are high. Without an insistence on the otherness of the nonhuman, what we call nature, we struggle—as do many in the critical humanities—to articulate a case for both active conservation and non-

intervention in the nonhuman world. Without an ability to articulate such a case, we seem doomed to continue down the road of the Anthropocene—the road of extinction and environmental crisis.

Introduction

Although there is a great deal of framing work necessary to establish the arguments and readings to follow, I will only be able to do that work summarily here. The present monograph is lengthy as it stands, and one hesitates to make it more so. Also, and in defense of a certain lack of depth that the reader will find in these introductory remarks, I should note that a great deal of that framing work is explicated in the chapters. I hope then that in the reading of those chapters, the overall picture becomes slightly clearer.

By way of introduction then, I should acknowledge the text of criticism informs my arguments in a central way. Timothy Morton's epochal *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007). That study's impact on ecological literary criticism has been immeasurable, at least in terms of its broad claims. Much of what I have written herein is a response to the gauntlet Morton has thrown down in that book in one way or another. Prior to his intervention, what has been called ecocriticism—the study of environmental matters in the humanities—had been both a marginal field and, one has to say, a largely uncritical one. I discuss some of the reasons for this in my third chapter, but briefly what we might call the first wave of ecocritical endeavor arises more or less directly from the environmental movement of the latter third of the twentieth century. That movement, although certainly not uniform, tended to take a "back to nature" approach that for very good reasons, namely the tendency to border on hard right positions, critical theorists tended to ignore or even dismiss. Perhaps with the exception of Max Horkheimer's *The Eclipse of Reason*, one struggles to find a major text of radical left socio-political theory that sees nature as either A) another name for what Adorno and Benjamin call the mythic, or B) as a social construct that obscures certain political reifications (e.g. Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*). In fact, in *Against Nature* (1996) the

Marxist philosopher Steven Vogel has, correctly I think, pointed out that the reliance of the early Frankfurt School theoreticians on a certain unexamined view of "nature" is fundamentally inconsistent with their socio-political critique. It is no surprise then that as radical socio-political theory evolved in its post-structural aspects in the later twentieth and early twenty-first largely under the influence of Derrida and Foucault (as well as their predecessors, peers and interlocutors, and descendants), it largely dispensed with the notion of "nature" as either un-theoretical or un-theorizable.

As a result, the ecocritics of the 1980s up to and including the early 2000s—and it was during this time that ecocriticism came into its own as a subfield—often struggled to incorporate radical theory into their work. Some, Glen Love for example, pointedly turned away from many post-structural accounts, while others like Lawrence Buell more or less ignored them. Those ecocritical scholars who did embrace post-structural tenets, Carolyn Merchant for example, tended to not so subtly offer a critique of the concept of nature as a central part of their work.

At the same time, roughly beginning in the 1980s, the influence of critical spread outside of literature and cultural studies departments and into history, geography, and the social sciences. In some cases, a somewhat simplified and repurposed version of Foucault's genealogies and Derrida's deconstruction took hold in these fields, usually for the purpose of demonstrating that some commonly held belief or supposed fact (gender, for example) was and is little more than a discursive paradigm and not, as was previously assumed, a hard fact. The benefits of these types of analyses hardly need to be discussed here. Suffice to say that they have had a major part in the de-stigmatizing of oppressed populations, a process that is far from over of course but that has some important gains in the past thirty years in the United States. In the case of "nature" or environmental matters, similar analyses, such as those of historian William Cronon and those

that inaugurated the field of environmental justice, tended to react strongly against the ostensibly romantic view of the natural world as both other and as a natural. Indeed, Cronon's major work is titled *Changes in the Land*, and it rigorously articulates the ways in which notion of wilderness and empty land were both colonialist tropes and simply untrue as indigenous peoples had radically altered the landscape of New England long before white colonists arrived. Cronon's work is just one example of the critique of nature as "natural" or "untouched," of course. One can see it as early as in the opening pages of Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) as well as in Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), to name only two well-known examples.

When this radical, more mainstream scholarship began to follow theory in, and I use the term loosely in this case, deconstructing the idea of nature as Edenic, or purely natural, or essentially other, it marked nothing less than an attack on the tenets of ecocriticism up to that point. For some time, and really until the success of Morton's book, ecocriticism found itself either increasingly intellectually irrelevant when it stuck to its second wave environmentalist guns, or incoherent as it struggled to articulate itself in the face of this critique. As I address elsewhere in this monograph, it may be the case that the essential predications of both the humanities and critical theory only exacerbated these difficulties. Nevertheless, Morton's book marks a significant turn in which the formerly theoretically naïve ecocriticism found a new, highly theoretical approach in Morton's deeply theoretical claim that nature and nature writing are rhetorical productions that work against and not for ecological consciousness. That argument's details are far too sophisticated to go into here, but it is worth noting that Morton is trained as a literary critic and that he puts that training to work in the first chapter of *Ecology without Nature* in which he powerfully disarticulates the tropes of nature writing.

It is this disarticulation, in turn, that I take as positive inspiration. Too often, the rhetorical moves of nature writing and thinking of nature go unnoticed. Those moves are artifice, of course, and in seeking to depict the so-called natural world, what they really depict is in fact an ideology of nature. This is true as far as it goes. But Morton's argument that because of this there is something disingenuous about these moves and this ideology and that therefore both ought to be discarded is, I think, an unsatisfactory one. I go into detail about why I think this in chapter three, so I will forgo that discussion here. Suffice to say that Morton's rhetorical approach to nature writing is a central influence on what follows, as is, in a different way, his conclusion.

That conclusion, and it is not *sui generis* nor entirely unique to Morton, has been at the heart of the recent explosion of the many subfields of what we can call Critical Environmental Studies. Under this rubric would fall not only ecocriticism, but its sub-fields like environmental justice, zoopoetics, critical animal studies, but also the influence of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology—two variants of what is called new material in fields as diverse as sound studies and political theory. All of these approaches and fields have one founding principle, which is legible in the adjective "critical" in Critical Environmental Studies. Critical here means many things, but most importantly it means something like critical of ideologies of "nature." It is all to the good that nature as ideological construct has come under scrutiny in as far as that scrutiny allows a critical examination of the ways in which such an ideological manifestation makes possible the very environmental destruction it explicitly opposes.

The problem with all of this, and it is one that runs like a current through all vectors of the new materialism and of critical environmental studies, is that it seems incapable of developing any sort of robust ethic of conservation. In the past three years, it has become

increasingly clear that we are in the early states of a mass extinction event caused largely by anthropogenic climate change. Although it has not been officially accepted, some have even argued this climate change is so radical that we ought to consider the human influence on the environment as a new geologic age, namely the Anthropocene. All too simply, at the core of CES is the notion that we ought not privilege "nature" or the natural because A) they are incoherent constructs, and B) their reifying power obscures a counterrevolutionary, right-wing logic that actively threatens the socio-political goals of the radical left. Ultimately, I accept point A, with the proviso that it is at this point banal.

The problem then lies with B, and this is evident in three ways. First, and perhaps least important, even if A is true it in no way implies B. Second, it rests on the notion that any critique of human instrumentalism is essentially right-wing, a faulty assumption. Third, it is entirely committed to ideological reification as an either/or proposition. A given point either is an ideological reification, in which case it ought only to be shown as such and discarded, or it is not, in which case it is simply a statement of fact that is more or less unavailable to critical analysis. It takes no particular acumen to see that this dichotomy is both a false one and that at base it is deeply simplistic version of dialectical or critical thought in as far as it has no room for the possibility of ideological reflexivity, of critical consciousness. To take an example from Morton, somehow the kitsch of a snow globe can be a locus of ecological thought but we assume that Wallace Stegner's so-called Wilderness Letter cannot. Leaving aside the empirical evidence that in actuality the case would seem to be precisely the opposite, CES approaches err when they assume that the work of "deconstruction" stops with ideological demystification. While it is trite to repeat, it is crucial to remember that for Derrida at least, the work of deconstruction is ongoing. That avowedly does not mean that there is always something new to deconstruct, but

rather that a given deconstruction does not and cannot be a final word on any matter, and that we must be especially aware of the dangerous allure of thinking that these analyses have the potential of closing the book, so to speak, on any given conceptual issues.

So it is on the matter of nature that I part ways with much current ecocriticism. It is certainly an ideological reification. It is a term that describes the ontological factuality of the nonhuman world. To critique the first does not necessitate or imply an incoherence in the second. So while it may be the case that for what I regret to refer to as the general populace that "nature" is a concept or term in need of critical attention, in the case of the academic humanities, it is notions of critique and ideology that are in need rigorous analytical attention. I try to offer that attention, in a highly perspectival manner, in the present work.

There is one final issue implied in contemporary ecocriticism that my work addresses: What, if anything, can literary study offer us as a critical practice in a time of environmental crisis? If it were the case that literary study served only as one way of many of looking at cultural products, particularly artworks, it would seem that its relevance to ecocritical matters and/or conservation would rise and fall with the relevance of cultural study as a whole. I want to insist though that thinking of the study of literature as the study of one aesthetic form among many is fundamentally misguided. It is not mine to say that literary study is more or less important than the study of other cultural objects, only to say it is different. That difference comes down the issue of reading, or more precisely literary reading. I discuss the problem and promise of the literary throughout the following chapters, so I will simply say here that by literary works I mean texts that we read in certain way and with certain expectations in mind. To a very large degree, what follows concerns itself with that means and what its implications might be for ecocritical study. Put very simply, I argue that to read literary texts is to read aesthetically,

which in a basic sense means first to read with a certain sense that there is no definitive reading of such a text, and second to read with specific attention to the medium of language. These are both well-worn points, but too often when we read we forget them. Reading, put simply, takes that which is closest to us—language—and makes it an object of profound consideration. In the case of literary study or criticism, this manifests in what is called close reading, something like a formal practice of reading. Although it is typically supposed that the practice of close reading reveals hidden truths in a text that support or even work in tension with its explicit meaning, that close reading is a constructive process, there is another model of close reading that points out not the felicities of the work but ways in which a given text can deeply, even inexorably, problematize itself. This model or theoretical approach is of course "deconstruction" in what one hesitates to call its original form—a way of working specifically with texts. This textual deconstruction is inexorably tied to what is now called the Yale school, which included among others Derrida, Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson, and Paul de Man.

My arguments draw, it is fair to say, primarily from those of de Man. We need not repeat the well-known facts about de Man's at times sordid personal life and World War II writings for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* while it was under control of a German collaborationist regime. As is no doubt obvious, I am not at all convinced that de Man's theoretical insights are fascistic or anti-Semitic, but to say this is of course not in any way to excuse his gross political and moral failures. The question, as it always is in these matters, revolves around whether or not the work stands, and clearly I think it does. That work, as strange and high-minded and obscure as it often is, is unique in literary criticism, and perhaps in the roughly contemporary humanities, for its deep and abiding skepticism about what de Man calls aesthetic ideology. It is incorrect, I think, to say that de Man is hostile to literary works, although it can seem so at times. I would argue

that rather than being cynical about literature, de Man instead realizes that we must read truly reflectively, and that in order to do so we must read at the level of language. To fail to do so is to betray the point of literature, its reading, in the first place. And if it is the case that in order to read well we must read almost excruciatingly closely, if the ethical call of reading is to take reading entirely seriously on its own terms, then in a paradoxical way de Man's critical practice is an ethical one, at least in a Nietzschean sense. What de Man does better than any other critic is not merely to force us to gaze into the literary abyss, but to allow that abyss to stare back into us. It is this fact that makes his work so indispensible to mine.

The importance of tropological analysis to these chapters cannot be overstated. In my readings of select aesthetic thought and literary theories, and ultimately of literary works—Thoreau's "Ktaadn," Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*—I follow de Man in as far as it can be said that his later work focuses on such analysis as a way of demonstrating the undecidability inherent to trope, and thus to the literary as well. The point of this work is to demonstrate that the condition for the possibility of literature and its reading, i.e. figural language in textual form and our relation to it, indicates that close reading, that literary study, is not a progressive, constructive, or revelatory hermeneutic practice but in fact the opposite. To read ethically is to call the relationship of language to meaning into radical question, and to do this is call let us call it the transparency of meaning as such into question as well. The work of the critic is then avowedly not the work of the poet, for if the poet makes something, the critic shows the impossibility of that making. Again this is not a stance of aggression or cynicism, or it shouldn't be at least. Instead, it takes to its object with a stringent seriousness that cannot be overstated.

Other than the mostly false attribution of cynicism, and much more accurate, although reductive, accusations of nihilism, de Man's work is typically criticized as being at best apolitical, and at worst akin to fascistic dark romanticism. In both cases, the objection is that this manner of criticism is ahistorical as well as being little more than a scholastic exercise. The relation of de Man's work to the problem of historicity—and Fredric Jameson's commandment to "Always historicize!" can be seen in part as in direct response to de Man's approach—is too complicated to go into here.[1] The second objection is understandable but finally, I think, wrong. Indeed, the deconstruction of aesthetic ideology is a political project, albeit a theoretical one. It is political in that it not only resists but actively critiques the progressive narratives of modernity in which the essence of the human species is thought to be its capacity to "create." The point of course is not that we do not create; we clearly do. Instead, the point is that creative activity ought not be seen as the keystone of humanity's Promethean struggle to become self-defining, and self-sufficient. In my reading of de Man's later work at least, the argument is that literature and the literary allow for a radical critique of the way in which Western modernity defines human beings in terms of *homo faber* and its very literally deadly consequences.

What all this means then is that de Man's reading practice offers, I think, what Heidegger once called another vista, another thinking than that of instrumental modernity and it articulates that vista through literary theory and analysis. This then is the answer to what to do with de Man, and to the question of what literary study has to do with climate change and conservation. In short, literary study done a certain way can perform something like the opposite of what Heidegger calls *poeisis*, as I discuss at length in my first chapter. In this way, we do not let the text be, again to paraphrase Heidegger, but the work we do on it is not the work of progress, or

[1] A good place to look for more on that topic is the volume *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (2000, eds. Tom and Barbara Cohn).

of regress, but of essential critique of human arrogance and instrumentality. This critique is especially powerful in the case of precisely what Morton and many of advocates of CES wish to dismiss, the idea of nature and the texts of nature writing.

In what follows then, I look at three texts of "nature writing" construed broadly with something like a de Manian lens. I call this reading them wildly. That reading is rhetorical, and deconstructive, but rather than using those moves to dismiss the texts and their ideological valences and commitments, I go a step further by reading them—as I put in chapter two—to closely for comfort, by turning them back in on themselves as a way of calling modern narratives of progression, of creativity, of technological progress in question. For if it is the case that language exceeds us, speaks us, is outside of us, perhaps it language is "wild" to the extent that it cannot ever be fully controlled. And if control is the ultimate goal of modernity in both its left and right aspects, if that is control is the ultimate goal of power, of technology, of the essentially instrumental urge of modernity's *homo faber*, then a confrontation with the ways in which language "controls" us and is thus essentially out of our control, and with the consequent realization of language as not only the possibility of meaning but of its own impossibility, might provide a way of reconceptualizing the human and its relationship to other beings.

The goal of the wild reading is to show that language and meaning are not carefully controlled products of the human, but in fact that the illusion of that control rests on a kind of radical autonomy of language. The close reader becomes not an interpreter in this case but something like a conduit for the absurdity of meaning as a form of creative control. Like an urbanite getting lost in a massive wilderness, she realizes that her fundamental orientation to the workings of the world will do her little good here. Language is this wilderness, and its wild autonomy comes forth in the sometimes-excruciating reading of literature. This is not an

epiphany, rather it is an ontological shock—it is the force of the primordiality, irreducibility, and radical otherness of the nonhuman world revealed through the rigorous critique of "human" artifacts. I have addressed these matters through my readings, delaying the articulation of the texture of such an encounter until I had no time remaining to write it. As I continue my work on this project then, I have all intentions of doing so.

Thus far, I have laid out my theoretical agenda and methodology. It remains then only to address a few objections before I give the traditional short précis of each chapter. First, why nature writing? As I argued above, it seems to me that nature writing has been largely discarded as an object of study in era of Critical Environmental Studies. While I understand the force of the polemic moves that have banished it, I think that as is typically the case, those moves have their own problems. What I have argued below is that even if we acknowledge their ideological valences and their literary failures, we need not discard these works—that they retain important critical potential. Since my argument is an ecocritical one, too, it make sense to work through some of the ways these texts problematize both, what I call in my second chapter, "naïve" and "sophisticated" interpretations of themselves and of "nature" as the nonhuman.

Why "American?" One wishes it were sufficient to simply say "Because I am Americanist." Better perhaps is to say that I am particularly interested in the ways in which ideas of nature and wilderness have informed multiple versions of national discourse in the United States. The forcible colonization of the Western hemisphere in both its inconceivable cruelty and horrific consequences was in part made possible by some of the conceptual schemata I have mentioned so far: nature, wilderness/wildness, progress, technology, *homo faber*, and perhaps even aesthetics. In addition, those of us who were born, reared, and continue to live in the U.S.,

see the effects of that colonization every day in place names, historical placards, and every day culture.

Finally, what of history or capitalism or race or gender or sexuality? In everything that the West does in modernity, these topics are of crucial importance. As such they most certainly merit a central place in any analysis of literature, literary and aesthetic theory, national discourse, nature and the like. It is never the case that theses contexts are ignored in what follows. At the same time like most such works there is no sense in which the present one is intended to be comprehensive. In fact, the basic theoretical point of undecidability and its relation to literary study means quite explicitly that in these matters there is no possibility of the comprehensive study. What I have argued here is one view, one take, one approach. It rises and falls on its level of rigor and persuasiveness, but is never meant to be a final word. Indeed I would encourage and welcome other perspectives and other lenses.

Each of the three chapters below focuses on reading a primary text through rhetorical and theoretical analysis. Indeed, in each I focus on a different figure or set of figures that are important to the primary text in some way or another and then use a discussion of those to frame my readings. Throughout, I work with Paul de Man's thought, as well as with a number of aesthetic and literary theorists. Among those are Kant, Emerson, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Henry James, Walter Benjamin, Morton, Walter Benn Michaels, and a number of others. Rather than producing a "theory" chapter then, I have pursued my theoretical argument throughout all three chapters, and while each chapter has its own character and set of organizing questions, my larger argument runs through all of them

The first chapter discusses Henry David Thoreau's early essay "Ktaadn" and what I am calling that long piece's anxiety of cliché. I argue that "Ktaadn" marks a crucial point in

Thoreau's development as a thinker and writer. In "Ktaadn," and I think other early works, Thoreau was more or less evenly dedicated to both Emersonian transcendentalism and to the importance of "nature" as radically nonhuman actuality. The latter position manifests in the uncharacteristic, and deeply clichés, sublimity of the "Contact" passage. In fact, "Ktaadn" again like much of Thoreau's earlier work, is marked by clichés—the centerpiece of the essay, the famed "Contact" passage, for example. The Thoreau of *Walden* and after was scrupulous about avoiding cliché, for a number of aesthetic reasons implicated in Emerson's thought. But in that avoidance, Thoreau ultimately falls prey to the very instrumental logic that he rails against, precisely because he cannot or does not see that his *poiesis*, his production of meaning or truth through writing, is itself of that very logic. Ironically then it is the utter failure of his attempt at the sublime in "Ktaadn" and the way the attempt forces him into cliché that indicates his most radical environmental commitments—commitments that figuratively silence his poïetic practice, and that he therefore abandons more or less immediately after. Ultimately, and the work that sets up this analysis occurs in no small part in the chapter's three appendices, I argue that although the sublimity Thoreau aims for cannot be produced because it is fundamentally cliché, the examples of cliché in "Ktaadn" radically undermine the model of language and meaning the mature Thoreau and his mentor Emerson endorse. In doing so and when read in a certain way, the sublime material of the text itself comes forth to the reader, engendering in her nothing other than the very sublime experience Thoreau cannot write. That sublime experience is produced not through naiveté, reification or poetry, but through one of the cardinal aesthetic sins—cliché.

Chapter two reads Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* in terms of allegory and narrative voice. I discuss at some length why it might be that London's novella remains despite its continuing general popularity largely absent in the critical literature. This seems especially odd

in light of the rise of interest in animal studies and animality in the past decade. I argue that one reason for this lack of scholarly engagement is the fact that the text has an important allegorical valence. In the case of allegory, we have two meanings in play—one literal and one allegorical. Although it is the case that an allegory must have a literal meaning or narrative, that narrative is always secondary to the allegorical meaning. So *The Call of the Wild* is an allegory for a certain kind of naturalist social Darwinism as well as being an animal story. Following de Man in "Semiology and Rhetoric," I discuss the ways in which *The Call of Wild* has these two opposed meanings in play simultaneously and how this is illustrated in the text's narrative strategies, namely in how London represents the consciousness of his main character, the dog Buck. What this examination brings to light is that when the close reader dismisses the text because its allegory is too transparent, because Buck's voice is too human in this case, she is failing to consider the instability of allegory in much the same way that the naïve reader confuses the literal meaning for the "true" meaning. That is, reading *The Call of the Wild* for meaning is not an either/or proposition and in fact its allegoricity, that which leads us to believe it is, essentially suspends either/or logic. Here it is the allegory that is shown to be obscure, wild, autonomous, very much in the face its illusory transparency and the apparent absurdity of the text's narrative.

Chapter three reads Edward Abbey's seminal *Desert Solitaire* in terms of metaphor and what Timothy Morton calls ecomimesis. As a radical advocate of wildness, Abbey wants like London to avoid anthropomorphism. Of course, to use language to depict or invoke the nonhuman other is to anthropomorphize it. So Abbey finds himself at a difficult crossroads, one that he explicitly thematizes with the repeated phrase "paradox and bedrock." Human society is paradox while the ontological factuality of the world is bedrock, at least in the early use of this figure. This view only complicates Abbey's conundrum, however, for the moment he posits it he

must realize that as the paradigmatic medium of the human, language—the medium of the text—is all paradox and no bedrock. This leads Abbey to propose something like a Cratylistic theory of language in which language is somehow naturally equivalent to the world, i.e. that language is fully symbolic. I read a particular section of the chapter "Water" as posing this view via metaphor, but by sticking with the close reading, we realize that the text works exactly in opposition to this posited theory. Our takeaway from this is not that Abbey has failed but that to paraphrase Shakespeare, text will out—whether the writer or reader wants it to or not. This of course is the wildness of the text, and ultimately the wilderness of language.

Chapter 1

Anxiety, Materiality, Sublimity: Reading Cliché in Thoreau's "Ktaadn"

"Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read." *Walden* 146

Introduction

Although my central object of study in this chapter is Henry David Thoreau's "Ktaadn," it will be necessary to establish some groundwork before I can proceed to it. That is, I believe we cannot understand what happens in the text of "Ktaadn," and it is a text that happens in important ways, without looking at Thoreau's intellectual context. That context, the context of what we now call American Transcendentalism, and specifically the thought of Thoreau's mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson of course is the paradigmatic transcendentalist, but he did not come by his reputation as a great American man of letters easily. Indeed he only began to achieve true pre-eminence after his most of his important work was completed. During Thoreau's lifetime and Thoreau died well before Emerson, those affiliated with the transcendentalist movement were often regarded as—if not fools—moon-eyed idealists and bleeding hearts who were in many ways very much out of touch with the tone of their times. Not every person affiliated with the group was as driven and talented as Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Thoreau himself, and while social and political issues were important to the movement its approaches to those issues were

often abstract and utopian. Bronson Alcott, a man greatly respected by both Thoreau and Emerson, is an object lesson in the excesses of transcendentalism—particularly in the case of his ill-fated utopian community in Harvard Massachusetts called Fruitlands. Thoreau's favorite walking companion, a certain Ellery Channing, nominally a poet, was another example of the more shambolic side of the movement. To those not affiliated with the movement, then, the name "Transcendentalism" implied a focus upon "transcendence," upon the spiritual world or the ideal. These interests seemed opposed to so-called Yankee efficiency and to the hardheaded pragmatic realism of the times. So if the name was not quite one of opprobrium, neither was it devoid of contempt.

But what Thoreau saw, even and especially early on, were the limits of Emerson's transcendentalism when it comes to the nonhuman world. Although Emerson could certainly be called a mystic and a transcendentalist, he was, unlike Thoreau, no "natural philosopher." To be sure, Emerson was a philosopher.[1] What he was not was, though, was interested in the natural world. For Emerson, as we shall see, nature was little more than an aesthetic object. To be sure "nature" served a vital philosophic—even dialectical—purpose for him to be sure, but Emerson had no interest in what we might call the "in itself" of the natural world; he had little or no curiosity about its details. And it is here that Thoreau as the self-proclaimed "natural philosopher" differs so drastically from his more properly philosophical mentor. Like Emerson Thoreau is deeply interested in nature as an aesthetic object, but Thoreau's work speaks too of his abiding concern for the particulars of the natural world. And it is this concern juxtaposed with the more Emersonian "philosophical" view of nature that animates the best in Thoreau.[2]

[1] Nietzsche held Emerson's work in great esteem and was significantly influenced by the American.
[2] In *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* Jane Bennett takes the perhaps analogous view that it is the "tension between [Thoreau's] ideal of a deliberate life and his ideal of Wild life" that is the "central tension driving his work" (35).

But Thoreau's interest lies first, if not only, with the world around him. And while this contrast between his Emersonianism and his engagement with the natural world is powerfully productive, it also points to a deep tension between the two sides. That tension provides Thoreau no end of trouble for the simple reason that the two sides cannot be reconciled. Thoreau then, perhaps the most paradoxical of American writers, is ultimately stymied by the very paradox of the natural world, understood simultaneously as an autonomous "structure" and as a philosophic-aesthetic object.

These issues are played as out through the issue of cliché and is relation to the sublime in "Ktaadn" in a way that I argue is a symptom of Thoreau's warring sides and his eventual turn to a more purely Emersonian form of transcendentalism in *Walden* and after. What I offer then is an analysis of Thoreau's anxiety of cliché in "Ktaadn," an anxiety that will ultimately make him a better writer but which will at the same time undermine the autonomy of the nonhuman world. But my reading of "Ktaadn" is not merely symptomatic. In fact, I want to push the critique a little further when reading the logic of cliché that I argue undergirds "Ktaadn." That logic, and the reader's encounter with it, paradoxically produces a sublime experience: the very same experience that Thoreau himself has on the top of Mount Katahdin but that he cannot represent. And this fact indicates that while the sublime is very much always already and essentially clichéd in a way I will attend to below, that the reverse must also be true. The cliché, that is, is sublime.

Indeed, the manner in which "Ktaadn" works, or doesn't work, will reveal the text's own strange materiality. In doing so the text will show that far from reducing the experience of the nonhuman to kitsch (a term Timothy Morton favors in *Ecology without Nature*), cliché points to something crucial about linguistic figuration and what Paul de Man calls aesthetic ideology.

Ultimately then what Thoreau seems to have perceived as a failure, even a threat, in "Ktaadn," i.e. its logic of cliché, is in fact its greatest strength. This is because it is able to radically alienate the reader from language and thus from the aesthetic, from herself, and from "kitschy" ironic remove as well. What the wild reader can take from this is that something like a material sublime of text is available to us through critique and cliché, not in spite of it. And this fact opens up the possibility of theorizing the nonhuman, that is the autonomous, that is the wild as itself a critique of anthropo-morphism and -centrism, perhaps the most pressing task facing us in what is being called the Anthropocene.

The "Sounds" of Silence: Sublime Absence in Walden

Although it may seem odd to say this, I want to argue that in a certain way *Walden* is obsessed with the sublime. More properly, that text is obsessed with avoiding it. The oddness stems from the fact that in *Walden*, nature is typically portrayed as miniscule or microcosmic, harmless, pure, and even friendly.[3] It is also at least in some places entirely humanized:

> In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. (176, emphasis added)

[3] Bennett might imagine that this view results from what she calls Thoreau's "microvisioning" (*Thoreau and Nature* 26).

If the foregoing is not a comprehensive account what nature "means" or does *Walden*, it does illustrate the text's programmatic anti-sublime. What we have here is nothing else than a full-throated rejection of nonhuman otherness, and thus of the sublime as such. The legacy of this approach, which is found in great many of Thoreau's "excursions" or nature essays, is nowhere stronger than in the rather precious work of Thoreau's self-appointed heir John Burroughs. I argue below that this view of nature is an almost pathological veer away from the sublime experience of "Ktaadn." But it is not just the turn away from what Kant called the *schlechthin groß* or the absolutely large and toward the tiny in which *Walden*'s rejection of sublimity is manifested (*Critique of Judgment* 105). It appears also in what must be one of the strangest moments in *Walden*, one that occurs at the beginning of the chapter called "Sounds" and in which Thoreau one of the great writers in English rejects linguistic figuration.

"Sounds" of course comes directly after the chapter "Reading." "Reading" has been, as the title suggests, concerned at least partly with books. In classic Thoreauvean fashion, "Sounds" begins by controverting what came immediately before it. Behold the chapter's opening words:

> But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. Much is published but little is printed. (156, emphasis added)

As Leo Marx writes, this passage is concerned with "the hope of making the word one with the thing, the notion that the naked fact of sensation, if described with sufficient precision can be made to yield its secret- its absolute meaning" (249). Here Thoreau, one of the most allusive, paradoxical, and ironic of all American writers seems to reject trope as such then, to seek to go beyond it. The fact that he expresses his anti-figuralism through prosopopoeia should not be

overlooked of course, but for now allow me to remain with the spirit of the words rather than anything else. The passage is clear enough in what is says: metaphor, which we should understand as linguistic figuration per se, is deceptive and in fact is the enemy of true language in "which all things and events speak without" figure. But as the reader will notice, Thoreau does not take long to contradict himself:

> When I meet the engine with its train of cars moving off with planetary motion — or, rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve — with its steam cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths, like many a downy cloud which I have seen, high in the heavens, unfolding its masses to the light — as if this traveling demigod, this cloud-compeller, would ere long take the sunset sky for the livery of his train; when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I don't know), it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. (161)

Note how rhetorically complex this passage is. It consists of an extended metaphor, which is an example of an important Thoreauvian device I call the mock mock epic.[4] More interesting for now is the preponderance of similes within that metaphor (there are four "likes" and one "as if" in this one very long sentence), a preponderance especially interesting in light of a passage that follows about two pages later:

> Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than they did in the stage-office? There is something electrifying in the atmosphere of the former place. I have been astonished at

[4] See my "Case Study" below for more on mock mock epic in Thoreau.

> the miracles it has wrought; that some of my neighbors, who, I should have prophesied, once for all, would never get to Boston by so prompt a conveyance, were on hand when the bell rang. To do things "railroad fashion" is now the byword; and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track. There is no stopping to read the riot act, no firing over the heads of the mob, in this case. We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos* that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.) Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man's business, and the children go to school on the other track. We live the steadier for it. We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then. (163)

At first glance, this passage appears to be just another of Thoreau's broadsides against modern life and an iteration of what Leo Marx calls "an ancient literary device:" "the contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication" (19). But as Marx notes here the steam engine "is the type and agent of an irreversible process: not mere scientific or technological development, but the implacable advance of history" and Thoreau is "elated" by it (252). In rendering it, Thoreau has contradicted the predicate with which he began the chapter; he has resorted to intense figuration. In Marx's reading it is the engine itself that "compel[s] Thoreau to admit a debt to Art as great, if not greater, than his debt to Nature" (253). What Marx doesn't discuss in detail though is the importance of that engine's name: *Atropos*.

Obviously, Thoreau plays with Greek mythology here by evoking the Μοῖραι, the Fates: *Clotho*, *Lachesis*, and *Atropos*. These three goddesses divide the labor of human fate between

them through metaphor of spinning thread. *Clotho* is the spinner of the thread, *Lachesis* measures the thread of each life, and *Atropos* cuts the thread and in doing so determines the manner of death of each individual. Thoreau is less interested in the roles of each goddess than he is in playing off of the name of the third Fate: *Atropos*, or without turn *(A-tropos*). While it is clear that he wants us to see the railroad tracks as a figure for something like the threads of fate, something else is going on. Philologically trained Thoreau, an almost obsessive punner, knows full well that "trope" refers to figurative language. When he christens the locomotive *Atropos*, then, he is not simply saying that it goes on without turning, but also that it is without trope—without metaphor as it were, without figure. We cannot help but see that the picture of pre-figural true language given to us in the opening sentence of the chapter has been directly aligned with the engine itself, with what Leo Marx calls the rhetoric of the technological sublime. Both are without turn, without figuration, and as a result they are—if not poetic—then at least reliable. Like the "car-load of torn sails" Thoreau sees going by, both this true language and the railroad itself are unlike trope. In contrast to tropic figuration then, true language is reliably legible. Like torn sails, "they are proofsheets which need no correction," proofsheets that Thoreau himself proceeds to read:

> Here goes lumber from the Maine woods, which did not go out to sea in the last freshet, risen four dollars on the thousand because of what did go out or was split up; pine, spruce, cedar, —first, second, third, and fourth qualities, so lately all of one quality, to wave over the bear, and moose and caribou. (165).

True language and the railroad then are, in one of *Walden*'s most analyzed tropes, bottoms—but not false or figural bottoms.[5] Instead they are essentially a-tropic; that is, they are non-figurative

[5] See Walter Benn Michael's well-known "*Walden*'s False Bottoms" (*Glyph* 1, 1977) and Michael Warner's "Thoreau's Bottom" for examples (*Raritan* 11, 1992).

and it is this fact that makes them so reliable. So while Thoreau's admiration for the technological sublime of *Atropos* is qualified, his view of a-tropic true language is not.

But why would this most figural of writers, about whom Jane Bennett writes that "he is such a wonderful rhetorician… that it is tempting to focus on him exclusively as a literary figure," reject figuration here (*Thoreau's Nature* 21)? I argue that Thoreau's vision of a pre-figural language in *Walden* and his critique of trope can be understood as analogous to that same text's miniaturist anti-sublimity. That is, it is no coincidence that the "proofsheets" he reads in "Sounds" come from the Maine woods, for it is to the Maine woods themselves, indeed at the top of Mt. Katahdin, that Thoreau's suspicion of linguistic trope comes to a head.

Stylistically "Ktaadn"—like much of Thoreau's writing prior to *Walden*—is less rhetorically dense and evocative than the so-called mature work. But it is not just that "Ktaadn" is less sophisticated than *Walden*. The centerpiece of "Ktaadn," the so-called Contact passage, is a passage of pure romantic sublimity that occurs as Thoreau summits the eponymous Mt. Katahdin and encounters a stunning view. In that passage, as we shall see, Thoreau violates the key principles of Emersonian transcendentalism—the very same principles he enacts and inscribes in *Walden*. In and of itself, this is perhaps not particularly notable. But in doing so, Thoreau commits a number of rather egregious literary sins that I want to argue open up the possibility of a wild reading of "Ktaadn," one that puts sublimity and cliché into play in important ways. On this argument then, these literary sins should be seen as symptoms of the ways in which the radical otherness of nature can disrupt and erode attempts to sublate it into aesthetic experience. The anxiety of cliché we find in "Ktaadn" then is nothing other than the anxiety of wildness in "nature," an anxiety that the later Thoreau, in good human and aesthetic

fashion, actively represses in the ways we have seen and that lead him to renounce his stock and trade at the beginning of "Sounds."

The Instrumentality of Poetry: Nature in Emerson

Before I can turn to "Ktaadn," though, I must delineate what I mean by Emersonian transcendentalism specifically in regards to its relationship to nature.[6] The fully mature, and thus fully Emersonian, Thoreau of May 10th 1853 is clear about what "nature" means to him. Again in his journal, he writes "He is the richest who has most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life" (*The Journal 1837-1861* 195). Nature here is understood in terms of its aesthetic use value, an idea that Thoreau echoes in "Chesuncook," the second of the three essays that along with "Ktaadn" and "The Allegash and East Branch" comprise *The Maine Woods*. There Thoreau writes in an extended meditation on what is almost a throwaway line from Emerson's *Nature*:[7]

> Is it the lumberman, then, who is the friend and lover of the pine, stands nearest to it, and understands its nature best? ….No! no! it is the poet; he it is who makes the truest use of the pine… it is the poet, who loves them as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand. …. It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still. (121-122)

There may not be a better statement of Thoreau's brand of transcendentalism than is found here. And crucially, that brand is both instrumental and aesthetic, as the appearance of "the poet,"

[6] What follows is by now means intended to do full justice to Emerson's thought, much less to all of transcendentalism. Instead, I offer a reading that seeks to bring out certain important aspects of Emerson's view(s) that are germane to my argument.

[7] Emerson: "When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet" (*Nature* 183). Clearly there is an important distinction here, but both the wood-cutter and the poet have an instrumental view and thus both are, by Hannah Arendt's definition in *On Violence*, violent. The materially crucial difference is one of physical violence versus epistemological violence.

which is of course how Thoreau sees himself, demonstrates. In fact the journal entry from May 10th, 1853 goes on to state this Emersonian view of the role of the poet even more boldly still:

> He is the richest who has most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life. If these… golden willows affect me, they correspond to the beauty and promise of some experience…. nature will be my language full of poetry, - all nature will fable, and every natural phenomenon be a myth…. I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant. (195, emphasis added)

This passage begs for extended exegesis, but for now we need only note that nature's value lies entirely in its ability to "correspond to the beauty and promise of experience," and not in its haecceity—its existence as such. This then is an instrumental logic, one predicated on means and ends, on use. It is "experience" that is the goal, and nature is merely the road one uses to get there. Indeed, when Thoreau writes that nature "will fable," he seems to be saying that nature is fabulous in the sense of *fabula*—that is, not founded on fact. Nature is not itself, and is not even factual, here; instead it is a metaphor for, or a symbol for, poetic language. On this model of language is prior to the materiality of the world. As linguistic creatures, perhaps it is not so strange that we should so often end up using the medium of metaphor as the metaphor itself. Nevertheless, to do so is problematic and this is especially so when we use that metaphor to deny the ontological primacy of the nonhuman.

To do this is to fall into the error of what Paul de Man rather cryptically calls "the confusion… of reference with phenomenalism" (*The Resistance to Theory* 11). Emersonian transcendentalism of the kind we see Thoreau articulating above conflates the figural dimension of language with reality. Interestingly, it is this same confusion that persists in much *au courant* ecocriticism. It might be useful here to give the full and rather controversial quote from de Man:

"What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" (ibid, emphasis added). Saying that "nature" is a metaphor for ideology, as Timothy Morton seems to do in *Ecology without Nature*, is then no different than saying that nature is a metaphor for language, as Emerson and Thoreau do. Both views see the nonhuman in terms of its use value, and both phenomenalize the linguistic referent (here the metaphor) and thus mistake it for what de Man, not unproblematically, calls natural reality. In the case of Emerson (and thus Thoreau), a misunderstanding of Kantian thought is to blame for this error.[8]

I note again that without Emerson there would be no Thoreau as we know him.[9] And indeed it is from Emerson's reading of German idealism—a reading largely inherited from the British romantics Coleridge and Wordsworth—that Thoreau gets his most transcendentalist conceptual schemata.[10] In fact, in *Nature* Emerson says directly that "Nature is a symbol of spirit," and that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture" (193). For Emerson, then, it is what he calls—after Kant, or really after Coleridge—"Reason" (as opposed to "Understanding") that in an act of what can only be called aesthetic interpretation allows us to perceive the symbolism of nature, its symbolic essence nature. Again in *Nature* he writes, "Reason transforms [Understanding's] lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind" (200). It should be clear that "reason" here is aesthetic Reason. And because Emerson like Coleridge[11] placed "intuitive" Reason in a superior position to calculating "Understanding," we can say without

[8] See Appendix I for a discussion of this error.
[9] Especially considering Emerson's choice to publish Thoreau upon the former's taking up of editorial duties at *The Dial*, something the previous editor Margaret Fuller did not deign to do, and Emerson's lobbying for financial support during Thoreau's student days at Harvard.
[10] Patrick Keane's *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day*" for a detailed genealogy of Emerson's reading of idealism.
[11] And very much unlike Kant!

hesitation that Emerson's thought was aesthetic to the core. "Nature" has value as raw material upon which intuitive, aesthetic Reason works its magic, a magic that ultimately reveals that Matter (nature) and Mind (aesthetic Reason) are "married," thus allowing the transcendentalist to encounter God, or Spirit, or the universal Soul. And Spirit is nothing other than the capacity for aesthetic Reason itself, a capacity that lies behind our lives and behind our individual subjectivities.[12] This view informs Emerson's choice of a paradigmatic example of "nature." That example is not a mountain, or forest, or the sea, but a "charming" rural, agricultural landscape to be glossed by, who else, the poet.[13] So it is only the poet has the "eye" to truly see the figure here, the analogy that marries Matter and Mind. This sounds well and good, at least if we are willing to accept Emerson's intensely romantic view. But Emerson misspeaks here. It is not the poet's eye that really matters. Rather it is her ability to allow readers to perceive the analogy through her poetry. The poet then brings forth the world though her poetry, a poetry that takes language and life produces (aesthetic) meaning through them.

Such a view should not strike us as unfamiliar. Indeed it is at the heart of romantic aesthetics and as such has been tremendously influential in the way that we consider art. In fact, this schema provides one of the most important continental philosophers of the twentieth century with a linchpin to his thought. I speak of Martin Heidegger and his ideas of *poeisis* and *aletheia* and a brief discussion of these ideas will, I hope, serve to clarify the issues.[14] In his 1935

[12] "Man in conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life…. This universal soul he calls Reason; it is not mine or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men" (194).
[13] "Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (183).
[14] Heidegger of course lived long after Thoreau and Emerson. But the aesthetic thought that is so central to him is derived from the same tradition that Emerson and Thoreau borrow from. And because Heidegger's thoughts on these matters are arguably clearer and certainly temporally closer to the present moment, it seems to me useful to make use of his thought here.

Introduction Metaphysics, Heidegger notes the centrality of poetry and the poet to philosophy going so far to say as to say that

> [o]nly poetry is of the same order as philosophical thinking…. the poet always speaks as if beings were expressed and addressed for the first time. In the poetry of the poet and in the thinking of the thinker… each and every thing… completely loses its indifference and familiarity. (28, emphasis added)

This identification of thinking with poetry is a tossed off remark. In fact, it forms the very basis of Heidegger's philosophy, a philosophy in which *poiesis* is the uniquely human process of interpretation that discloses truth (*aletheia*). Heidegger strives to replace the correspondence theory of truth with an interpretive procedural understanding that is historically and culturally situated. He calls this model of truth *aletheia*. The word itself is an allusion to the second part of a poem often referred to as *On Nature*, by fourth century BCE Greek philosopher Parmenides. Heidegger translates *ἀλήθεια/aletheia,* the ancient Greek word for truth, into German as *Erschlossenheit*–in English, "disclosure."[15] That is, truth for Heidegger is disclosure, and more precisely it is the disclosure of significance, or meaning, or of something though *poeisis*. When we read poetry then the pleasure we derive is one of world disclosure and language disclosure, of we might say "truthing." And crucially, this disclosure becomes possible when through the medium of language and the act of interpretation. For Heidegger, poetry in its writing and reading is the metaphor for thought and it points to a specifically human capacity to disclose meaning. Emerson's Reason, as I discuss at more length in the first appendix, operates more or less on this same model.[16] I propose then to borrow this notion of *poeisis*, which is a term that does not prominently occur in Emerson, from Heidegger as a way to explain what I take to be the

[15] See Mark Wrathall's 2010 volume *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, History* for an in depth account of Heidegger and disclosure/concealment.
[16] There are some key differences regarding the aesthetic, or poetic, or poïetic to which I will return below.

ground of Emersonian transcendental aesthetics. *Poeisis*, in turn, is an ideological position in Althusser's sense, which is to say that it is predicated on convictions of which it is simultaneously unaware and unable to theorize.[17] My task in what follows will be to work out these points and to examine their implications. Since the ideology of *poeisis* is fundamentally aesthetic, then, and since its ur-figure is the language of the poet, we would do well to look at the dimension of language that can be poïetically disclosive, its tropological or figural dimension. With this concordance between Emerson and Heidegger at least partly established, let us turn to the problems of language and trope in Emerson and Thoreau, problems that I hope will be instructive.

Of all aesthetic media, language is often understood to be richest in its disclosive potentiality precisely because of its figural dimension. Language's ambiguity, the fact that for example a given noun can mean a variety of things depending on the context in which it is used, makes it especially suited to the aesthetic ideology of *poiesis*. Put brutally, words can have two types of meanings: literal meanings in which the word functions as a reference to a thing very broadly construed (object, action, concept) and figurative meanings in which the word refers to something that it is not. Understood this way a word, say "glass," can have any number of literal meanings (pane of glass, water glass, spyglass), certain established figurative meanings (the glass ceiling, the glass is half empty), and the potential to figure in new ways.[18] It is the last of these, the open-ended relation of word to semantic content, that enables *poeisis*. The figurative dimension of language, to put a finer point on it, is what allows poetry to make in Heidegger's words "each and every thing—a tree, a mountain, a house, the call of a bird—completely lose[…] its indifference and familiarity."

[17] The clearest version of Althusser's discussion of ideology and its critique occurs to my mind in "Marxism and Humanism" (*For Marx* 219-247).
[18] I am no poet so I shall not attempt to provide an example of the third case!

What does this have to do with Emerson and Thoreau? When in *Nature* Emerson writes that

> [l]anguage is a third use which Nature subserves to man. Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and three-fold degree.
>
> 1. Words are signs of natural facts.
> 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
> 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit. (193)

we must note that as signs (we can only assume that the distinction between sign and symbol here is between the arbitrariness of signs and the epistemological reliability of the symbol), words for him signify so-called natural facts about the world. Those facts are not simply facts but symbols, i.e. figures, of "spiritual" facts. As he goes on to clarify,

> Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. (193-194)

It may seem that Emerson is making the claim that humans are, again to use a Heideggerian motif, worlded beings that use their orientations in and to the world to figure abstractions ("spiritual facts"). But he is careful to say not that our states of mind correspond to the appearances in nature but vice versa: "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind." And as the examples he cites make clear, it is not that we use the lamb as an arbitrary sign for innocence but that the "lamb is innocence" <u>prior</u> to being a lamb. The word "lamb" is a <u>sign</u> for the young sheep, that is, but it is a <u>symbol</u> for innocence.

What Emerson models here, of course, is the figurative reading, or we might say the literary reading. To understand the word "lamb" as signifying only that to which it refers, to read the word literally as it were, is to fundamentally misunderstand it on Emerson's view. Words must be understood figuratively, meaning that they must be understood to symbolize something over and above their literal meanings. And it is in the act of interpretation, of passing over naïve literal signification in favor of figurative symbolism, that the interpreter whether thinker or poet discloses the truth of the word, and thus of the world, as "spiritual fact." Very much as in Heidegger then, revelation in Emerson occurs through linguistic *poiesis*, through human meaning-making that begins and ends with language. As a result Emerson implies—and Heidegger says this outright—that reading, specifically in the manner we read literature, i.e. figuratively or "poetically," is a philosophical enterprise of meaning-making. As Romanticist Patrick Keane notes in his *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason*: "A poet, as no one would have to tell Emerson, was a master of language, a maker of metaphors that draw their enduring power from the relationship—perceived, created, felt, and thought through—between nature and ourselves, with the human perceiver and metaphor maker the dominant partner" (485). The linguistic act of metaphor-making here is one of *poiesis*, more exactly an *aletheiaic* or disclosive *poiesis*.[19] So trope as both praxis and as the object of interpretation makes and reveals truth.[20]

[19] Emerson's thought does differ from Heidegger's, though, regarding what the former calls "correspondence." Correspondence to Emerson is a metaphysical claim about the structure of things, and again here Emerson seems closer to the absolute Idealist Hegel than to Kant or Heidegger. Emerson claims that our intuitive and Reasoned aesthetic experience, whether of nature or of poetry, discloses natural facts, which in turn symbolize transcendental spiritual facts and he uses language as the symbol of this poïetic process. Emerson's view of correspondence is in practice closer to something like the theoretical foundation of the New Criticism, which assumed the stable meaning of literary artifacts in their formal concerns, than to Heideggerian *aletheia*. (Heidegger's *aletheia* does not reveal truth about natural facts or symbols of spiritual truth, but is instead a hermeneutic and dialectical excavation of the historical and contingent truth of Being). This theory of correspondence then posits the transcendental connection of Matter and Mind by aestheticizing the Kantian transcendental method in order to make metaphysical claims about structure of ultimate reality and uses language as the paradigmatic illustration of this move. And we should not

What we have just seen means nothing other than that romantic aesthetics and the importance of the figural dimension of language fundamentally ground Emerson's thought. And as we have seen as well, Thoreau the transcendentalist follows Emerson on these matters. But the critical tension between this transcendentalist heritage and his simultaneous status as a "natural philosopher" reminds us that for Thoreau—at least as first—there was a healthy skepticism about the ideology of *poeisis*. To put a finer point on the matter, Thoreau must perceive at least two major problems with aesthetic, poïetic, romantic Emersonianism as it relates to the nonhuman.

The first is in essence a logical problem about value that troubles a great deal of present ecological thought in the humanities. If it is important for Thoreau, as it clearly is, to A) maintain or preserve wild places, while it is also the case that B) he accepts the instrumental logic of *poeisis*, it would seem that the only way to argue for A would be to do so with a logic that is troubling intertwined with B. That is, the argument for conservation would one that sets up a hierarchy in which nature's use value as poïetic material is argued to be more important than its economic value. Put another way, how does one argue for preservation if nature's value for the transcendentalist is just as instrumental, even if on a different register, as it is for the logger or for the ice crew? An example might be useful here. In what is perhaps the most famous passage from the second essay in *The Maine Woods*, "Chesuncook:"

> Is it the lumberman, then, who is the friend and lover of the pine, stands nearest to it, and understands its nature best? Is it the tanner who has barked it, or he who has boxed it for turpentine, whom posterity will fable to have been changed into a pine at last? No! no! it is

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forget that the claims that he makes about ultimate reality are, as we have seen, in the end about Mind (the human) rather than Matter ("nature").

[20] Emerson, along with the idealists, is a heart a metaphysician. For him, Matter is Mind in an almost Hegelian sense, which is to say that on his model of *poeisis* the act of aesthetic interpretation discloses a metaphysical truth and discloses that Matter is merely a symbol for Mind. Heidegger the anti-metaphysician takes, with his existential, hermeneutic phenomenological approach the interpretive act that is so crucial to Kant and the post-Kantians as something that *makes* a certain kind of situated "truth" rather than disclosing a metaphysical "fact."

> the poet; he it is who makes the truest use of the pine, -- who does not fondle it with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane, -- who knows whether its heart is false without cutting into it, -- who has not bought the stumpage of the township on which it stands. All the pines shudder and heave a sigh when *that* man steps on the forest floor. No, it is the poet, who loves them as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand. I have been into the lumber-yard, and the carpenter's shop, and the tannery, and the lampblack-factory, and the turpentine clearing; but when at length I saw the tops of the pines waving and reflecting the light at a distance high over all the rest of the forest, I realized that the former were not the highest use of the pine. It is not their bones or hide or tallow that I love most. It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts. It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still. (121-122)

That this Thoreau is invested in a transcendental, aesthetic, and thus instrumental, logic regarding the "use" of nature here could not be clearer. Not so different from arguments presented by groups like Ducks Unlimited or the response from the Maori Conservancy to the recent online outrage regarding television host and big game hunter Melissa Bachman's lion hunt,[21] the kind of conservation Thoreau endorses in this passage is based on a logic of use. No doubt the "poetic" use Thoreau endorses is less materially violent than the other examples, but it is still a matter of use. But, and this is the important point, as with all conservationists who attempt to protect or conserve nonhuman spaces and beings through an appeal to instrumentalism, Thoreau seems bound to lose any reasoned debate on whether or not it is better (at least on the short term) to harvest trees, and thus provide both jobs and materials for building

[21] Cf. "Melissa Bachman's African lion hunt draws anger," *Christian Science Monitor*, Web.

homes, or to leave them for the poets—a rather small and not always popular group, even in Thoreau's time. In politics, necessity—real or perceived—will always trump poetry and *poeisis*.

It could be objected, of course, that profoundly influenced by asceticism as he was Thoreau points out that with a little "economy" of our own we can obviate the need for a material economy predicated on exploitation. While Michelle Neely has convincingly argued that Thoreau's defense of vegetarianism in *Walden* is not apolitical but rather part of a highly politicized movement tied to Sylvester Graham's reformist "Graham diet," the idea that we ought to the tell the hungry to eat less, that acceptance of the conditions of poverty is the solution to economic woes, remains a weak argument. It is important to remember when we seek to re-politicize Thoreau, as Neely and Bennett both do, that his tendency to advocate what we would now call a "mindful" brand of asceticism comes in the context of a great deal of personal and national economic distress.[22] People needed decent wages and creature comforts in addition to the barest necessities of, say, unleavened bread and there is a certain way in which Thoreau's politics failed to account for this. The point is that Thoreau's investment in transcendental *poiesis* and its instrumental logic opens up any argument for conservation based on that investment to materialist/economic objections in addition to pragmatic or utilitarian objections.

In terms of logic and argument then, the matter of instrumentalism in poïetic ideology seems to demonstrate the difficult position Thoreau sometimes puts himself in. And of course, the problem with instrumentalism is not simply that it weakens arguments but that in an important way it poses an ethical problem. The autonomy of nature is crucial to Thoreau, of course, but he cannot claim that nature is an epiphenomenal manifestation of Spirit brought forth by poïetic

[22] According to The National Bureau of Economic Research's 1926 *Business Annals*, compiled by future Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Willard Long Thorp, there were no fewer than twenty-eight economic downturns, ranging in intensity from "mild recession" to "financial panic," during Thoreau's forty-four years of life including the Panics of 1819, 1837, and 1857 (118-128).

interpretation and that it is primordial and autonomous. Indeed if it were the latter it would have to precede language, figuration, and the human as such. Put another way, Thoreau well knows that nature cannot be both a symbol of something else and at the same time itself.[23]

I mentioned that an Emersonian argument for conservation would seem to ignore material conditions and utilitarian concerns. It is also exclusionary in an important way. The poïetic use of nature is different from material use. It does not take a lumberman, that is, to turn tree into lumber and in fact anyone with an axe and a rip saw may do so. It does however take a special kind of person to "love[] the[trees] as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand." And person is of course none other than figurer and interpreter: the "poet." Thoreau addresses this in a passage from his journal of late 1859:

> How is it that what is actually present and transpiring is commonly perceived by the common sense and understanding only, is bare and bald, without halo or the blue enamel of intervening air? But let it be past or to come, and it is at once idealized. As the man dead is spiritualized, so the fact remembered is idealized. It is a deed ripe and with the bloom on it. It

[23] To say this is to say a great deal. Unfortunately I do not have the space to argue the point here. For now, I shall have to lean on the first of British psychoanalyst and neurologist Ernest Jones' list of six characteristics or attributes of the symbol in his "The Theory of Symbolism." Jones writes that a symbol "is a representative or substitute of some other idea, from which in the context it derives a secondary significance not inherent in itself. It is important to note that the flow of significance is from the primary idea, to the secondary, the symbol, so that typically a more essential idea is symbolized by a less essential" (183). In a similar fashion, Walter Benjamin famously writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that they symbol is typically understood as "a concept which, as it were categorically, insists on the indivisible form and content" and that at least in its theological aspect relies on the paradox of "unity of the material and transcendental object" (160). Although we may differ on the meaning of the word symbol, at least on these analyses we can understand "symbol" to mean something other than metaphor or allegory. In his discussion of symbolism in the essay "Figura," Erich Auerbach refers to the symbol as something essentially supernatural or magical in that it is two things at once. His example is the Christian sacrament that as "figure and symbol" is historical while at the same time "gives us the purest picture of the concretely present, the veiled and the tentative, the eternal and supratemporal elements contained in the figures" (60). If we take Auerbach's example of the sacramental host, we can see that its figurality rests not in its symbolic value but in the way that it is both materially present and at the same time historically and theologically figurative. The host's symbolic valence on the other hand exists only after the transubstantiation when the wafer becomes something other, i.e. the flesh of Christ and simultaneously the wafer. At this time, we could argue, the wafer is no longer (only) itself as it was before its transubstantiation. This is legible in one of the words for the sacrament, "host." In both its common meaning as a kind of receptacle for holding and in its derivation from the Latin *hostia*, which the Oxford English Dictionary renders as "victim of sacrifice."

> is not simply the understanding now, but the imagination [what Emerson calls Reason], that takes cognizance of it. The imagination requires a long range. It is the faculty of the poet to see the present things as if, in this sense, also past and future, as if distant and universally significant. (qtd in *Thoreau on Writing* 53, emphasis added)

This excerpt comes from a longer passage detailing one of Thoreau's most consistent concerns, one that he adopted from one of his major influences, Thomas Carlyle: the error of reliance upon the past as the place of greatness[24] and the subsequent lack of an epic or heroic imagination in the present day. *Walden* is, among many other things, an attempt to bring the epic to the everyday and to the present moment. "Ktaadn" too plays into this strategy, as we shall soon see, if perhaps less successfully. More importantly, though, in this excerpt Thoreau gives us another gloss on the role of the poet: to eulogize, figuratively speaking, those who still live. It is the poet's special faculty to be able to perform this eulogy for the living. Above, in the excerpt from "Chesuncook," the role of the poet could be said to be to perceive and feel in a certain identifiably romantic way. Crucially missing in that account and only hinted at in the second account, is the praxis that makes the poet in the first place: the use of language in a way that discloses. The poet is not simply a sensitive observer or an aesthete; she uses language to produce *poiesis*. That is to say in the case of the poet, and in the case of *poiesis*, there is always a product, an end result: the "poem," i.e. the linguistic work of art. But of course a linguistic artwork must be read (or heard) and interpreted as well. And it is here that we can see how *poiesis* differs from mere personal revelation. *Poiesis*, we might say, takes the raw material of perception and language and through an occult alchemy produces with them something new. But if we dwell a moment, we find that gloss does not seem quite right. *Poiesis* occurs only in and through an object. Emerson seems to think, like Kant and Heidegger, that "the poets"

[24] Here might lie a Thoreauvian critique of romanticism and of Heidegger if one had the time.

experience in a special way and that it is this experiencing and its translation into language that produces *poiesis* in the form of poetry. But if the animating force of poetry is *poiesis*, and *poiesis* itself is the product of poetry, it would appear that something strange is going on. Put another way, and this is nothing novel or exclusive to Thoreau, *poiesis* seems to be simultaneously a quality of the poet, the poem or artwork itself, and also the reading of the poem.

Our intuition of what I am calling *poeisis* is something like Emerson's then in that we tend to think that it is the capacity of the poet to turn the material of language and the world into an artwork, which then discloses something to the reader through its synthesis of conception with form. The fact that this disclosure occurs at the level of interpretation and not at the level of intent, though, makes it clear that there is some way in which the meaning of the artwork is independent of the author's intent. To the extent that the artwork means at all then, it means disclosively rather than referentially. And in order to do this, it makes use of its distinct formal properties. The primary formal property of the linguistic artwork is its reliance on the figurative or rhetorical dimension of language. If this is true, it implies that the condition of possibility for meaning in a linguistic artwork is figuration as form. Considered in concert with the non-correspondence of artist intent and meaning, we are warranted in concluding that the possibility of poïetic meaning resides in some sense in form per se. In doing so, we have effectively banished the poet in favor of the reader or critic, and although Stanley Fish is correct to note that we assume intent in matters of interpretation, in literary studies we often do so only to suspend that assumption.[25] What all of this comes down to is that in the linguistic artwork poïetic disclosivity relies on a presumption of the meaning-making ability of linguistic figuration <u>as such</u>. And this in turn would mean that far from pointing to a fundamental coherence to the

[25] See Fish's "Intention is All There Is: A Critical Analysis of Aharon Barak's Purposive Interpretation in Law," in *Cardozo Law Review* 2007-2008.

world and the human as it does for Emerson and Heidegger, *poeisis* threatens instead to disarticulate them. In order to illustrate, let us look at an example of how *poeisis* works for Thoreau in *Walden*. This example will serve as a paradigmatic example of Thoreauvian *poiesis*, but it will also enable a thumbnail genealogy of Thoreau's rhetorical evolution and point the way toward the way in which his poïetic practice is problematized in "Ktaadn."

Case Study: Mock Mock Epic in Walden

In the chapter of *Walden* entitled "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," we find an example of one of Thoreau's most characteristic poïetic devices, what I am calling the mock mock epic. With this device, Thoreau ironizes the form of the mock epic, in which the banal is depicted in epic fashion (e.g. *The Rape of the Lock*), repurposing it so that instead of gently mocking the everyday, it instead makes the banal "heroic" in Carlyle's sense.[26] In "Where I Lived" then Thoreau rather famously writes "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (128). This is a complex figure, but what I want to example here is the way in which he evokes a well-known mock epic, Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and ironically reconceives it.

The clear point of this passage is the declaration of what Lewis Hyde calls Thoreau's "prophetic" purpose (*x*). He rejects dejection in favor of sounding the alarm bell in order that he might help others. He does so, as we will see again below, with allusion, of which there are alt least two here. The first of course is a reference to Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode." The other and presently more important is an allusion to Chaucer, with whose work Thoreau was deeply familiar (cf. Thoreau's "Homer, Ossian, Chaucer"). The story of Chanticleer and Pertelote found

[26] This mode of ironizing and repurposing literary tropes is a hallmark of Thoreau's, one we that we will see again in the reflexive use of cliché.

in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” is both a mock epic and a morality tale, both of which serve important purposes for Thoreau.

There, Chaucer gives us the beast fable of prideful Chanticleer and his mate Pertelote, a rooster and a hen, in epic style. The plot gets into motion when Chanticleer is tricked through flattery by a fox into closing his eyes and stretching forth his neck as he crows. Upon doing so, the fox snatches Chanticleer by the neck and absconds with him. Clever Chanticleer, though, is ultimately able to turn the table on the fox by fooling him into thinking he can talk his pursuants out of their pursuit. As the fox opens his mouth to speak, Chanticleer escapes to a nearby tree. The moral of the story is to beware of pridefulness, flattery, and speaking out of turn. Although he was no flatterer, Thoreau’s own pridefulness, at least if Emerson’s biographical “sketch” is to be believed, is undoubted. The prophetic voice and the epic mode, mock yes but not mocking, seem at the very least at odds with the self-deprecating aspect of the allusion. This is a complex rhetorical strategy that, like the war of the ants elsewhere in *Walden*, uses irony—here Thoreau’s self-mockery about his own pridefulness and his vocation of speaking out of turn—to de-ironize the mock epic. Just as a double negative grammatically produces a positive, Thoreau’s self-awareness here renders the “everyday” subject matter fully prophetic and ironically epic. This effect is produced by *poiesis* in action, through the process of linguistic figuration.

This example is only one, and a minor one, of the rhetorical device of the mock mock epic in Thoreau. Nevertheless, it is instructive. Recall the journal entry above in which we are told that the poet’s role is to see “present things” as if they are the “past or future,” distant and “universally significant.” When in that excerpt Thoreau laments that it is only the “fact remembered” that is typically “idealized” while the present appears banal, he uses the simile of death: “As the man dead is spiritualized, so the fact remembered is idealized.” In the same

manner that a dead man is "spiritualized," which is to say immortalized, Thoreau says, we only appreciate the present when it becomes past. The master image here is one of the power of remembrance, such that we could say that Thoreau wishes both in this excerpt and very much in *Walden*'s mock mock epics to "remember" the present, as it were. But it is here that we can begin to see something troubling about such a formulation. It would seem, as in the case of the dead man who is spiritualized, that something must pass in order for it to be remembered. And this in turn would seem to imply that the present, the banal world, must be somehow eradicated before it can be remembered. The poet must then do rhetorical or semantic or temporal violence to the world in order to make it able to be remembered at all, and this has important implications for the Emersonian view of nature.

While remembrance might enable a kind of immortality, it emphatically does not do so by preserving or resurrecting the departed. Rather, memory, in addition to being notoriously unreliable, preserves something related to but not equal to the deceased. As we saw trope or *tropos* means turn, or shift. The definition of linguistic trope is that of linguistic and conceptual substitution and transfiguration. This is why metaphor is often considered the paradigmatic trope.[27] But as the paradigmatic linguistic figure, metaphor embodies the trouble with linguistic figuration: it problematizes both linguistic correspondence and meaning itself through its figurative capacity. That is, the central action of a metaphor is to make one word or sound-image mean something other than its established or agreed upon meaning in order to supplement the meaning of another word or sound-image. Because of this, in metaphor the object or idea referred to by the figure naturally takes precedence over the pre-figural meaning of the word or ideas used to figure.

[27] In "Reading (Proust)," Paul de Man writes that "substitutive tropes [are] ultimately always retraceable to metaphor" (*Allegories of Reading* 65).

Put more clearly, a figure like a metaphor is composed of two parts: that which is figured and that which figures. In a simple metaphor like "Achilles is a lion," Achilles is the figured and the lion is that which figures. In order for the lion to become Achilles, of course, the lion must die. Achilles is, by definition, a person and not a lion (unless of course we were to name our pet lion Achilles!). In figuring, the lion dies—or put more bluntly, the lion is murdered by the poet—but its "spirit" or ghost lingers as Achilles vampirically feeds off its death to become something new: lion-Achilles.[28] In becoming lion-Achilles, Achilles becomes more than he was before; he is enriched, he becomes mythological and heroic if not yet immortal. In order for this to happen, though, the lion must (figuratively of course) die. But that which figures in a metaphor has a persistent, almost residual presence within the figure; it does not completely disappear like those dead lost to history. Rather its content understood as meaning is replaced by that of the newly trans-figured figured. The body (the word "lion") remains but the soul (the meaning of "lion") has died and been assimilated or in Hegelian terms sublated into the new term lion-Achilles. Metaphor is murder we might say.

In this way, although the goal of the mock mock epic is to make the present heroic through *poiesis*, we can see that it cannot do so without "killing" the present. And indeed this same problem permeates Thoreau's attempt to idealize or spiritualize the natural world as a trope for higher laws. In order to do so, he must in some way make the natural world into something it is not, thereby negating the very haecceity that makes it powerful to him in the first place. In Thoreau's view, this murder is at least partly justifiable because the purpose of *poiesis* and of poetry and thus of trope is nothing less than to result in what Hegel called *aufheben*: the dialectical sublation and/or overcoming and/or transcending (or transcendentaling!) of the simple

[28] This is not a unidirectional effect, as I indicate in my third chapter. For now, we need not address the directionality of figures.

(or in Hegel's words "abstract") term into the complex (or "concrete") term.[29] The content of that which figures is overcome or transcended, but a trace or residue of it remains in the figured.

The mock mock epic is an example of *poeisis* in action then, one that demonstrates both its power and danger. In the sense that it uses literary trope strategically to bring forth something new, in this case the transfiguration of the present moment into the heroic, it is productive. But in order for this transfiguration to occur, in order for the present day to be troped, it must cease to exist so that its actuality and particularity do not interfere with its status as fodder for *poeisis*. In short, the meaning or significance or haecceity of that which is troped cannot survive the troping. This is turn suggests that whatever meaning the trope produces results from the trope's ability to produce something like an afterlife for that which was troped. It is trope that both sublates and synthesizes. The implication is that it is trope as form divorced of any specific content that accounts for poïetic disclosure, that form produces poïetic disclosure in the destruction of content. And it is my argument that this is not specific to the mock mock epic, nor to Thoreau, Emerson and/or Heidegger. In fact, the relation of the mock mock epic to *poeisis* is itself one of literal to figurative. It is an allegory of *poiesis* per se. *Poeisis*, the very ability to disclose through figuration that for Emerson and Heidegger is the highest capacity of the human, is in some way founded on death. If this seems vaguely worrisome to us, it is because it is. What we seem to have here is the logic of poet as murderer and disclosive *aletheia* as a ghost or specter and this is precisely the opposite of how Emerson understands the disclosive potential of *poeisis*.

The foregoing analysis should help us decode the passage from Thoreau's 1853 journal that I excerpted above, but which should be considered in its entirety: "He is richest," Thoreau writes, "who has most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life" (qtd. in Richardson 260). An instrumental logic is on display here, yes. But at the same time

[29] One needs only see Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* to see the violence of this process.

there is a generative process here. Nature as other must be sublated into the transcendental unity of mind and matter through human *poiesis*.[30] For Thoreau, trope at its most successful and alive, whether metaphor or mock mock epic or other, then is both a practice, albeit a necromantic one, and an allegory for *poeisis* itself. As we have seen, for Emerson what is lost in the act of *poeisis* is not particularly important as for him the phenomenal world is little more than a symbol for other things. But to Thoreau the natural scientist, the implications of the foregoing are dire and as such, a persistent source of anxiety. Indeed to the extent that his insatiable curiosity about the natural world has made him the consensus primogenitor of American nature writing and even American conservation[31], Thoreau is well within his rights to be concerned by the apparent loggerhead he is at when poïetically instrumentalizes nature.

The Anxiety of Cliché in "Ktaadn"

> Generally speaking, a howling wilderness does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveller [sic] that does the howling. Henry David Thoreau "The Allegash and East Branch" (219)

So these are the problems that Thoreau is up against, and they are especially prominent in "Ktaadn." They manifest themselves in two aspects of the text. The first is the conceptual and

[30] A passage from Walden's "Economy" bears this point out, even as it contradicts the passage from "Chesuncook" we saw above:

> On the 1st of April it rained and melted the ice, and in the early part of the day, which was very foggy, I heard a stray goose groping about over the pond and cackling as if lost, or like the spirit of the fog. So I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber, and also studs and rafters, all with my narrow axe, not having many communicable or scholar-like thoughts, singing to myself, -- Men say they know many things; But lo! they have taken wings -- The arts and sciences, And a thousand appliances; The wind that blows Is all that any body knows. I hewed the main timbers six inches square, most of the studs on two sides only, and the rafters and floor timbers on one side, leaving the rest of the bark on, so that they were just as straight and much stronger than sawed ones. Each stick was carefully mortised or tenoned by its stump, for I had borrowed other tools by this time. My days in the woods were not very long ones; yet I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped, at noon, sitting amid the green pine boughs which I had cut off, and to my bread was imparted some of their fragrance, for my hands were covered with a thick coat of pitch. Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it. (*Walden* 85)

[31] He may not have been the first "nature writer," a dubious epithet that stands in need of a great deal of qualification, but he was certainly the most important.

aesthetic problem that the sublime poses to Emersonianism. "Ktaadn" is Thoreau's major statement on the sublime, so it struggles mightily with that problem, as we will see. The second is a stylistic problem that I argue results from the first, the problem of cliché. These problems should not be seen as separate though. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. Style—rhetorical richness, aesthetic beauty, and linguistic complexity—is crucial to Thoreau's poïetic, transcendentalist project. The poet helps us see anew through style; she discloses truth with it. As I will show, Thoreau does not seem up to this task in "Ktaadn," a fact that is often attributed to its status as an early text. While it would be foolish to disregard this biographical fact, if is that case that some kind of adequacy between style and subject matter is both at the heart of the notion of *poeisis* and a definition of the successful artwork it is entirely possible that the "failure" of style might indicate something other than writerly immaturity.[32]

The epigraph above is a standout example of Thoreau's many great one-liners, one that offers us a way into the matter of cliché, and eventually the matter of the sublime. It appears roughly midway through "The Allegash and East Branch," the essay he was poring over at his death. And indeed Thoreau's last words (as reported by his close friend Ellery Channing, "moose" and "Indians") reflect that this essay was foremost on Thoreau's mind at the end of his life (*The Maine Woods* 355).[33] *The Maine Woods*, then, is an interesting chronicle in that takes us from Thoreau's first major published work in "Ktaadn" to what could be argued to be his final one in "The Allegash."[34] Because they are primarily travel writing, the three long essays that make up *The Maine Woods* are not always considered canonical works of Thoreau worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience." Despite this fact, the essays

[32] For Hegel at least, true art is that in which sensuous form and meaning are entirely appropriate for each other: "the perfect amalgamation of spiritual and sensuous existence" of what he calls classical art (151).
[33] The Allegash" appeared as a complete piece for the first time in *The Maine Woods*, which was published almost exactly two years posthumously.
[34] "Ktaadn" appeared in print roughly a year before Thoreau's self-published 1849 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

that make up the volume clearly indicate some of Thoreau's abiding concerns. He returned to Maine again and again as a traveler and as a writer in the latter case revising and revisiting his work and ideas. While some of those concerns were—as his last words indicate—Indians, moose, and as the epigraph suggests, wilderness, another central and on-going issue for Thoreau was that of language play.[35] More specifically in the present case, Thoreau loved punning and paradox as a way to unseat established rhetorical expectations.

The quip about the howling wilderness does precisely this by interrogating a figure that had already become cliché in Thoreau's time, the "howling wilderness." The formula "howling wilderness" is taken from the King James translation of the Bible, chapter 32 verse 10 of Deuteronomy: "[God] found [Jacob/the Israelites] in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye." The importance to the Puritan settlers of the trope of the godless wilderness and its binary opposite "the city on the hill" are well-established in early American studies, literary and historical. It is certainly not hard to see how this verse from Deuteronomy might appeal to those settlers right away. In fact, the phrase appears as early as 1645 in direct reference to Thoreau's own Concord. Captain Edward Johnson writes of the founding of Thoreau's lifelong home in *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior in New England*: "Thus this poore people populate this howling Desart, marching manfully on (the Lord assisting) through the greatest difficulties, and forest labours that ever any with such weak means have done" (Rath 147). In his *How Early America Sounded*, Robert Cullen Rath reports this and other notable Puritan uses of the trope, which occurs perhaps most importantly in Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* (ibid). James Fennimore Cooper too makes use of it in the first chapter of 1823's *The Pioneers*, where he puts

[35] See Michael West's exhaustive *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (2000) for more on this matter.

it into no lesser mouth than Leatherstocking's his own: "I travelled seventy miles alone in the howling wilderness with a rifle bullet in my thigh and then cut it out with my own jackknife" (26).[36] All of this is to say that by the time of Thoreau's death in 1862, the phrase would have been little more than a stock formula, a cliché. And of course it is the fact that "howling wilderness" has become a cliché by the time of the writing of "The Allegash" that animates the joke we see above, a joke predicated on an ironic use of the clichéd formula. As a writer who at least in *Walden* sought nothing more than to shake people out of the kind of lazy, inherited "common sense" beliefs and thoughts we consider typified by clichés, it should come as no surprise that Thoreau makes great rhetorical use of them: usually as punch lines.

Originally published in the 1848 run of *Union Magazine of Literature and Art*, and based on an 1846 journey to Maine, "Ktaadn" is not perhaps as rhetorically sophisticated as *Walden* or other fully mature works. Indeed Joseph Moldenhauer refers in his essay on *The Maine Woods* in *The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau* to "Ktaadn" in euphemisms for simplicity, calling it "youthful, high-spirited, and fast moving," even if it does "exhibit[…] a large repertoire of literary devices" (131). Taking Moldenhauer's view into account, the reader might not be surprised to run across what appears to be a singularly unironic use of the same howling wilderness cliché seen above at the end of "Ktaadn." Thoreau writes:

> There stands the city of Bangor, fifty miles up the Penobscot, at the head of navigation for vessels of the largest class, the principal lumber depot on this continent, with a population of twelve thousand, like a star on the edge of night, still hewing at the forests of which it is built, already overflowing with the luxuries and refinement of Europe, and sending its vessels

[36] As Paul K. Johnston shows in his essay "A Puritan in the Wilderness: Natty Bumppo's Language & America's Nature Today," Cooper is well aware of the genesis and cultural weight of the phrase even if the illiterate Natty is not.

to Spain, to England, and to the West Indies for its groceries, — and yet only a few axe-men have gone "up river," into the howling wilderness which feeds it. (82-83, emphasis added)

Clearly enough, the young Thoreau mobilizes the cliché of the howling wilderness in this case to work through the reliance of his "civilized" New English home on the natural resources of the Maine woods. But to use a cliché to do such work, or at all, likely strikes most readers as lazy and even amateurish. If the reader were in the mood to judge Thoreau's originality upon reading "Ktaadn," she might be inclined to think rather less of the young Thoreau than of the Thoreau of *Walden*.

Recall that "The Allegash" comes years after "Ktaadn," a fact that makes the juxtaposition of the two invocations of the same cliché particularly striking. By the time of "The Allegash" it would appear that Thoreau is very much aware of his own tendency to fall into cliché, and skewers himself for it. "The Allegash" illustrates a very self-reflexive exercise of control upon his own legacy, an exercise in which he symbolically casts aside his callowness in favor of the irony rich prose of his later, greater works. So if the reader were to find other examples of naively used clichés in "Ktaadn," surely she can simply chock them up to the same youthful exuberance and lack of self-awareness Moldenhauer mentions and that we have seen that the older Thoreau himself is very aware.

In fact, we do not get very far into "Ktaadn" before we run across a particularly hoary cliché. On the fourth page of the Princeton Writings of Henry D. Thoreau edition of the *Maine Woods*, Thoreau writes of the lumber industry and the transformation of a tree to a log, "and then the once green tree, long since white, I need not say as the driven snow, but as a driven log, becomes lumber merely" (4-5). The cliché "White as the driven snow" is most likely adopted from the opening line of Autolycus' peddling song in Act IV, Scene IV of Shakespeare's *The Winter's*

Tale: "Lawn as white as driven snow;/Cyprus black as e'er was crow" (4.4.218-219).[37] There can be some debate as to whether the partial reframing of this cliché is in fact naïve in the same way the "wilderness" at the end of the essay is or not. Certainly he uses the cliché as part of a set up for a rather good joke, one that plays on the word "driven." But even acknowledging the objection that this cliché does some rhetorical work for Thoreau, it is worth remarking that the reader does not make it five pages into the essay before she hits upon another, and this time there can be no doubt about whether or not it is used ironically or in a rhetorically self-aware fashion.

Only a few pages later Thoreau writes, "We paused a moment to see a fish hawk dive for a fish straight down as an arrow, from a great height, but he missed his prey this time" (7). Right away, note that this cliché appears not in an editorial passage, as does the first, and as does the mention of the "howling wilderness" later in the essay, but in the midst of some fairly standard descriptive writing. As with many of Thoreau's "excursions," "Ktaadn" wavers back and forth between the two modes. That wavering largely works here, and by the time of *Walden* Thoreau will have mastered it.[38] Thoreau's use of cliché in the editorial or philosophical passages is often, as we see in both the driven snow and howling wilderness examples rhetorically aware if not always fully reflexive or critical. In those two cases, the respective clichés serves as set-up for a more advanced rhetorical move. The phrase "howling wilderness" stresses the deep separation of the almost industrialized Bangor with the ostensibly pristine wilderness just "up the river." In doing so, it hearkens back to the Puritan ancestors and ironizes Bangor as place that is far from a city on a hill. With the "white as the driven snow" example, Thoreau accomplishes two things. First he gets in an allusion to Shakespeare. Such allusions to canonical literature of the past make

[37] Interestingly, the name Autolycus means something like "lone wolf." Wolves factor deeply into Thoreau's Maine writings.

[38] *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, on the other hand, is commonly considered less successful in its integration of disparate parts.

up a consistent thread in Thoreau's work, one that is on full display in *Walden*. The driven snow example is both part and parcel of Thoreau's philological approach to writing and thinking, one that draws heavily on his Harvard education, as well as a crucial thematic device of his that seeks to recover a "heroic" past in the present, a mode he draws from his deep engagement with Carlyle.[39] The third rhetorical value of "pure as the driven" is, as we have seen, its ability to mount the pun necessary to make a joke.

But the use of "straight as an arrow" is different. A look at the context of the cliché the will show just how different:

> We landed in Milford, and rode along on the east side of the Penobscot, having a more or less constant view of the river, and the Indian islands in it, for they retain all the islands as far up as Nickatow, at the mouth of the East Branch. They are generally well-timbered, and are said to be better soil than the neighboring shores. The river seemed shallow and rocky, and interrupted by rapids, rippling and gleaming in the sun. We paused a moment to see a fish-hawk dive for a fish down straight as an arrow, from a great height, but he missed his prey this time. It was the Houlton road on which we were now travelling, over which some troops were marched once towards Mars' Hill, though not to Mars' *field*, as it proved. It is the main, almost the only, road in these parts, as straight and well made, and kept in as good repair, as almost any you will find anywhere. (7)

This passage is not devoid of rhetorical play, as Thoreau puns on the Aroostook "War" of 1838-1839 when he mentions troops marching on Maine's Mars Hill. That "war" was little more than boundary dispute; no battles were fought, thus Mars' field (the battlefield) was never

[39] See Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*, 1841.

"reached."[40] At the same time, it is clear that the occurrence of "straight as arrow" is non-reflexive here. The cliché is nothing more than a cliché and as such, it indicates something important.

The revision of the "howling wilderness" trope in "The Allegash" shows that Thoreau is both a reviser of idiomatic expressions and at the same time well-aware of the danger they present to a writing praxis like his own—one that aims precisely at disabusing readers from their inherited views. In that naïve earlier use, though, the cliché does serve a purpose in that, as a well-worn trope, it helps to illustrate Thoreau's point about Maine and, we should add, about the North American continent at the dawning of the Industrial age. The "driven snow" cliché is similarly used as a rhetorical tool in order to accomplish, as we saw, certain goals. But something different happens with "straight as an arrow." This cliché has no wider rhetorical purpose; it is a "pure" cliché and Thoreau uses it in what can only be called a completely clichéd manner. Bereft then of rhetorical value, as pure cliché this example indicates the disruptive power of cliché itself. "Straight as an arrow" is little more than a placeholder in this context. As a simile it doubly fails, as we have seen. And unlike the other examples examined so far, it results in no reversal, no pun, nothing. It also fails simply because it is cliché, a dead trope. But as is always the case with clichés, death has not had had an annihilating effect. Indeed, clichés do nothing if not persist, albeit emptily. They linger, without content; they do no conceptual or linguistic work. They are, in a way, specters. As textually present examples of trope absent meaning and attenuated of even the possibility of *poeisis*, they are something like the living dead of trope. And just as the living dead are for all of us, the cliché is a persistent source of anxiety to the poet.

[40] There is also an allusion to the Roman Empire in this pun, no doubt one that plays on the so-called "war" of Aroostook.

The appearance of these clichés in "Ktaadn" is not simply a youthful misstep then. In fact Thoreau's return to and revision of "howling wilderness" years later indicates that the unexamined or uncritically invoked clichés found in "Ktaadn" are a matter of deep concern for him. This is because in cliché the form or matter of poïetic trope is retained while its content and effect are absent. So for example "howling wilderness" is still personification despite the fact that the personification is not only no longer poïetically disclosive but instead completely clichéd. "White as the driven snow" and "straight as an arrow" too are still similes. But they do no poïetic work; they have no *poiesis*. No transfiguration occurs and nothing is disclosed in them. Only banality, the very opposite of the heroic for which Thoreau strives, results from the use of non-reflexively used cliché. It is for this reason of course that those who seek to be good writers, as well as teachers of writing, are so conscious of cliché. Cliché points out that meaning or content must be presupposed in order to produce *poiesis* or disclosure. *Poïetic*, i.e. aesthetic, disclosure, does not "naturally" inhere in the form or grammar of trope any more than meaning naturally inheres in words. And just as the undead cause us a deep anxiety, cliché through its un-"natural" mockery of proper or successful *poiesis* does the same. In the Contact passage "Ktaadn" powerfully enacts the drama of cliché as Thoreau struggles and fails to bridge mind and matter.

Paradise Lost: Allusion as Poïetic Prophylaxis

The clichés we have seen are not slip-ups then but manifestations of what amounts to a logic of cliché in the piece. I want to suggest to that Thoreau is fully aware of the problematicity of this logic and that this fact causes him tremendous writerly anxiety, an anxiety that appears in both the clichés above and in Thoreau's hypertrophic use of allusion throughout "Ktaadn" and especially in the Contact passage.

Thoreau repeatedly includes excerpts from three poems in "Ktaadn," two of which are epics and the other an elegy. These are Thomas Campbell's "Gertrude of Wyoming," Milton's "Paradise Lost," and Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." The less said of Campbell's poem the better. Suffice to say that Thoreau clearly drew inspiration from that poem's mythic take on Revolutionary history. Gray's poem too serves as an inspiration, in more ways than one. "Country Churchyard" of course romanticizes the deceased members of an English hamlet, putting them in terms of Milton and Cromwell. No doubt this appealed to the Thoreau's conception of Carlylian heroism. Often contrasted to Milton's elegy "Lycidas," Gray's "Elegy" eschews the former's reliance on classical allusions and techniques in favor of a simpler, more "English" style. As such, Thoreau may well have found the "Elegy" a template for his own lifelong project, a project that seeks to heroicize the contemporary everyday experience of life without relying on the past to do so. But more interesting than these two sustained patterns of allusion is the third, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. That sustained allusion first appears in the build-up to the Contact passage, serving the important function of setting the stage for what should be, but is not, a powerfully disclosive moment.

The Contact passage itself occurs when Thoreau summits Mount Katahdin, but the way in which it is foreshadowed is crucial to understanding both how it is itself a cliché and how Thoreau is powerfully aware of this fact. So let us begin with Thoreau's first view of the mountain. On September 7th 1846, just a week into the trip, Thoreau and his party first see the summit of Mount Katahdin from a distance (59). As they proceed up what Thoreau takes to be Murch Brook, but was in fact Abol Stream[41], the party is faced with "the worst kind of travelling" through a dense undergrowth of "scrub-oak," most likely *Quercus ilicifolia*, interspersed with patches of berry bushes that were of great relief to the trekkers (59). After an

[41] Cf. page 52 *The Maine Woods: A Fully Annotated Edition*, edited by Jeffery Cramer.

arduous hike, the party decided to camp on the side of the stream. But while the rest of "the weary party" was understandably done for the day, the energetic and adventurous Thoreau was not. He left camp and began to "improve[..] the little daylight that was left in climbing the mountain alone" (60). The very next sentence indicates how different this passage shall be from the ones that have preceded it, an appropriate difference it might be said as Thoreau has moved from recounting woodland to a description of the rocky alpine terrain near the mountain's tallest peak, Baxter peak. Thoreau writes

> We were in a deep and narrow ravine, sloping up to the clouds at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, and hemmed in by walls of rock, which were at first covered with low trees, then with impenetrable thickets of scraggy birches and spruce-trees, and with moss, but at last bare of all vegetation but lichens, and almost continually draped in clouds. (60)

Note how vivid the description here is and that this description is bereft of the typical linguistic playfulness or inventive turns of phrase found in Thoreau. This stress on description over—shall we say—rhetoric is indicative of Thoreau's focus on the rugged terrain itself rather than on a meditation on that terrain. Soon though, the style changes. Thoreau stresses the difficulty of the hike with a less than graceful, sentence interruption set off in em dashes.[42] Just a bit later we encounter the beginning of the extended allusion to *Paradise Lost*. "Leaving" the streambed "at last," Thoreau writes, "I began to work my way, scarcely less arduous than Satan's anciently through Chaos, up the nearest, though not the highest peak" (ibid). As we will see, this allusion gets much more elaborate later on. For now, it is sufficient to note that Thoreau seems to be primarily dramatizing, or mythologizing if you like, his hike.

[42] "Following up the course of the torrent which occupied this, — and I mean to lay some emphasis on this word up, — pulling myself up by the side of perpendicular falls of twenty or thirty feet, by the roots of firs and birches, and then, perhaps, walking a level rod or two in the thin stream, for it took up the whole road, ascending by huge steps, as it were, a giant's stairway, down which a river flowed, I had soon cleared the trees, and paused on the successive shelves, to look back over the country" (ibid).

As he continues to recount his initial trip up Katahdin, Thoreau describes the ever-worsening terrain. He scrambles "on all fours" over "ancient black spruce-trees (*Abies nigra*), old as the flood" then walks "some good rods erect upon the tops of these trees" toward the summit wherein "the principle of vegetation was hard put to it" and dens occupied by hibernating bears pock the land (60-61). "This was the sort of garden I made my way *over*," writes Thoreau, and it was "certainly the most treacherous and porous country I ever travelled" (61). To illustrate the treachery of the county, he returns to *Paradise Lost* by quoting a few lines again from Book II: "—nigh founder'd, on he fares,/Treading the crude consistence, half on foot,/Half flying" (II:920-942 61 in *Maine Woods*). The "he" of these lines is Satan. As Ronald Wesley Hoag notes in "The Mark on the Wilderness: Thoreau's Contact with Ktaadn," Thoreau casts himself as Milton's romantic Satan here very specifically, and the implication is that as Thoreau scales Katahdin, he like Satan works his way into heaven (37).[43] Emerson's view of aesthetic Reason is that it takes "Intuition" and makes it "symbolic," which is to say that it produces revelations about, and what else can we call it, the metaphysical through the aesthetic appreciation of nature. It is this aesthetic Reason as the faculty of comprehension that universalizes or "symbolizes" our Intuition of nature, while Understanding is mere calculation. If our Satanic Thoreau is on his way

[43] For Hoag, we are to see this diabolical self-figuration as an answer to what might be considered the central question of "Ktaadn," a question that has been the object of much scholarly comment on the essay. That question is the question of "true evil," and it stems from a passage early in "Ktaadn." Describing reaching the end of the road outside of the township of Mattawamkeag, Thoreau writes "This is what you might call a bran new country; the only roads were of nature's making, and the few houses were camps…. Here, then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil" (16). Hoag argues against earlier commenters that humans are to be seen as this true source of evil, an argument with which Jeffery Cramer, the annotator of Yale University Press's annotated version of *The Maine Woods*, agrees. Both cite a poem of Thoreau's that appears very early in his journal of 1853: "Man, man is the devil,/The source of all evil" as clear evidence that settles the matter (qtd. in Hoag 25). We cannot suppose, though, that Thoreau, who was familiar with the works of Shelley, Coleridge, Byron and Carlyle did not see the "romantic," or shall we say heroic, side of Satan in *Paradise Lost*—very much the Satan of Book II. It is not so clear, then, that Hoag's interpretation is convincing. For although humanity might be the true source of evil in the later poem, in "Ktaadn" Thoreau seems to be casting himself as a heroic Satan who braves the hardships of Chaos. Also, as we have seen Thoreau holds onto the nature raw material for a trope and a symbol, both of which are ripe with the potential of epiphantic *poeisis*. It is difficult indeed to see how someone who cleaves so closely to Emerson would view humanity as true source of evil precisely because this instrumental use of nature is, as I showed above, predicated on mind and Reason, and thus on the human.

to the realm of the divine as he ascends, in this textual moment can be found an allegory of the movement from the "raw material" of the physical world, that is nature, to ethereal spiritual heights. The trip up the mountain is not simply a hike then. It signifies "the rise to a higher and more ethereal," as he puts it in *Walden*, viewpoint, the symbolic viewpoint of poïetic Emersonian aesthetic Reason as opposed to the gross calculation of Reason (84). Even at the beginning of the ascent, then, Thoreau inscribes the expectation of an epiphantic reveal, one in which nature will show itself as symbolic and Matter will show itself as Mind as he summits. Or at least this, the reader thinks, is the plan.

Interestingly Thoreau turns back at this point, writing "Having slumped, scrambled, rolled, bounced, and walked by turns over this scraggy country, I arrived on a side hill, or rather a side mountain where rocks, gray, silent rocks, were the flocks and herds that pastured, chewing a rocky cud as sunset…. This brought me to the skirt of a cloud, and bounded my walk that night" (61-62). He heads back to the camp, chastened by the rigor his trip perhaps, but not (yet) shall we say spiritualized. The reader, of course, cannot help but be a bit disappointed. She is ready for the disclosive poïetic moment of summiting in which aesthetic Reason will disclose the truth of nature as trope, of matter as mind. But this false start, albeit one that actually occurred as far as we know, is more than simply a tension-building narrative device. In fact, it is something like a stutter in the logic of *poiesis*. As in the case of cliché, this moment of pulling back, of poïetic failure as it were, presents the reader with another example of form without content, without *poeisis*. And this indicates—again—that Thoreau is aware that poïetic disclosure does not, and cannot, result from form alone.

In addition to form, that is, proper *poeisis* requires what he calls "sight." It requires mind and not just matter, we might say. And since we know that Thoreau has very intentionally figured his

ascent though *Paradise Lost*, since we know that his ascent symbolizes the journey from gross earth, from raw material, to a higher realm, we are warranted in noting that "sight" here—the ability to see the view from Katahdin in the light of day and unobscured by clouds—is not to be understood only literally. That is, "sight" signifies the capacity or activity of aesthetic Reason. It is aesthetic Reason after all that enables the moment of disclosure, which is nothing other than the ability to perceive and interpret trope. Thus, it cannot be claimed that meaning or content resides in trope as pure form. It is not the turn that means or matters, but the possibility of interpreting that turn. But interpretability as such is predicated on undecidability, on the way in which trope suspends the referential function of language. And what this means is that trope cannot be relied upon to produce disclosure, which in turn would imply that far from producing something like a revelation of truth, the "logic" of *poeisis* results, in a term Milton coined, "pandemonium." This point indicates an immanent threat to Thoreau's transcendentalist project in that that the condition for the possibility of aesthetic Reason turns out not to be the unity of matter and mind, but rather its radical separation. It is form then, matter we might even say, that stubbornly resists the "sight" of the poet. Now of course, Thoreau really did turn back after a first attempt to summit. In that important respect, he is merely narrating an event here. But the way in which he does so, the way in which he tropes that event and the way in which the reader responds to it allow us to see that in some sense Thoreau the writer is almost pathologically concerned with what is to come, namely the moment of sublimity in which form/matter will radically disrupt *poeisis*.

The morning after the first summit attempt, Thoreau, like the reader, is anxious to try again. In his enthusiasm to get going, Thoreau quickly distances himself from his companions and proceeds alone. He is struck by the rockiness of the terrain again, writing "[t]he mountain itself

seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if sometime it had rained rocks" (63). After some fairly straight description, Thoreau enters his more "poïetic" or celestial mode: the rocks are "the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of would anon work up…. This was an undone extremity of the globe; as in lignite we see coal in the process of formation" (ibid). As he stands alone near the summit, buffeted by cold winds and the makings of "a cloud-factory," trying to obtain a glance of what surrounds him, he is in full epic mode:

> It reminded me of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. (64)

Our imagined reader is likely happy to come across this passage. Finally poïetic disclosure is on the horizon, so to speak.[44]

Indeed as the passage continues, Thoreau says as much:

> Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him, than in plains where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you…. I cannot pity

[44] It might be objected that in this excerpt Thoreau gives a non-Emersonian view of nature. That is, nature here is depicted as separate from the human ("vast, Titanic… and such as man never inhabits"). But crucially that work is done in and through an economy of trope that analogizes the nonhuman with human productions: "the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets." We are not yet at the sublime then; we remain comfortably poïetic. This is a moment of near sublimity. What is missing, of course, is the trauma of the sublime experience. The scenery is intimidating, yes, but it remains comprehensible to Thoreau in terms of human artifice.

> or fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I *am* kind…. Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear. (ibid)

By this time, the reader is fully primed to expect her aesthetic, poïetic payoff. Our romantic Satan has ascended from the depths to behold, and perhaps to threaten, spiritual heights. Thoreau the transcendentalist, able here to "see" aesthetically in the way that he could not on the first attempt, will engage his aesthetic Reason and the raw materials that serves as the object of his vision will be poïetically be transfigured into what they truly are, tropes for mind. Matter will finally be shown to be Mind, much to her relief. When the passage is read closely though, we find that instead of a triumphant aesthetic Reason, Thoreau and the reader is subject to the defacing power of sheer Matter—"Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature." That Matter causes Reason to become "dispersed and shadowy," and not solid but "thin and subtile like the air." This is not aesthetic *poiesis* that uses nature as a trope in order to show that, in Emerson's words, "nature is the symbol of spirit," a spirit which is nothing other than aesthetic Reason itself then. Instead, aesthetic Reason has been dispersed, even silenced, by Matter. Matter, which in the cliché is identical to pure form, blocks aesthetic Reason. Despite having the "sight" that he did not have on the prior attempt, Thoreau is figuratively blinded here by the sheer inhumanity of what he beholds. This is a crucial moment, and one that will be replayed very soon. It powerfully demonstrates the disruptive power sublimity has on aesthetic Reason and thus on the, shall we say, the machinery of *poeisis*—just as the cliché does for the trope or figure. Matter or form then is a limit case for *poeisis* in as far as it confronts us phenomenologically with its infinite and abyssal alterity, an alterity that does not and cannot provide alethic disclosure. On one argument, what he encounters here would be the apotheosis of Thoreau as a "natural philosopher" and as

such would also be a place to begin a critique of the instrumentality of Emersonian transcendentalism. While I am sympathetic to that notion, I do not find it possible in this case for reasons that the role played by *Paradise Lost* indicates.

I have focused on that allusive strategy because unlike the mock mock epic of *Walden*, which poïetically ironizes, and thus in a sense de-ironizes, an already ironic genre, Thoreau's reliance on *Paradise Lost* in and around the moment of sublimity in "Ktaadn" uses Milton's aegis in an attempt to elevate the essentially clichéd depiction of the sublime he offers. This is of course further indication that Thoreau is intensely aware of the problem of cliché in general and the more specific problem of the ways in which the sublime is always already clichéd. The evocation of *Paradise Lost* is yet another manifestation of the anxiety of cliché, of the aesthetic fear of the disruptive prosperities of the nonhuman in its material or formal haecceity. Indeed, only Thoreau's sheer desperation in the face of trying to render the sublime in a poïetic fashion can explain the turn to Milton. Milton, of course, has commonly been considered one of the completely original, and thus powerful poïetic of poets in English. In Harold Bloom's argument, for example, Milton was perhaps the most properly "poetic" of all English poets. As Bloom puts it in *The Anxiety of Influence*, "Milton… was incapable of suffering the anxiety of influence, unlike all of his descendants" (34), or put another way Sanford Budick writes that Milton "imitates no one" (*Kant and Milton* 3). Thoreau's evocation of Milton then is intended to serve as a sort of prophylaxis against cliché. The problem though is that the ghost of Milton's finest work, especially the fact of its sheer originality, shines a very unflattering light indeed on the clichéd sublime of "Ktaadn."

It is no coincidence that as Thoreau gets closer to the moment of sublimity to which "Ktaadn" been building, the allusion to *Paradise Lost* drops away making only two further

appearances, one a full excerpt and another a passing reference. He begins to realize not only the futility of that strategy but the way in which it only exacerbates the problem of cliché. Indeed, the final invocation of Milton's great poem appears right before the anti-climax of the Contact passage. In it Thoreau borrows from Book II yet again, although importantly this time with a redaction:

> Chaos and ancient Night, I come no spy
>
> With purpose to explore or to disturb
>
> The secrets of your realm, but * * * *
>
> * * * * * * as my way
>
> Lies through your spacious empire up to light.[45]

These lines, 970-974, come near the end of Book II of *Paradise Lost*. In them, Satan again speaks, this time addressing the personified Chaos. And again here, Thoreau identifies himself with Satan, this time making note that he is merely passing through this inhuman country rather than seeking to explore it. This is an atypical move for Thoreau. He was nothing if not tirelessly curious, seeking always, as he will say in *Walden* to "live deep and suck out all the marrow out of life" (135). Indeed his restless curiosity about the natural world becomes a *raison d'etre* in his later work, as evidenced not only in multiple episodes of *Walden* but in the appendices to "The Allegash and East Branch," full as they are of the flora and fauna Thoreau noted during his last trip through the Maine woods. What Thoreau as Satan says here, though, is radically different. Instead of delving deep, instead of sounding the pond as it were, he seems satisfied to merely pass through nature as an unwelcome visitor. This nature, as has been more than adequately pointed out in the secondary literature, is not the home-ly nature of *Walden* and that has precisely

[45] The missing lines are "The secrets of your realm, but *by constraint*/*Wandring this darksome Desart*, as my way" (emphasis added).

to do with the fact that it resists the Emersonian move of aesthetic Reason.[46] It would appear, then, that what we find in this passage, both in its style and in its allusive economy, is Thoreau confronting not only an inhuman "primeval Nature" but simultaneously confronting the *a-poiesis* of cliché.

The cliché in question is that of the trope of the sublime.[47] Thoreau's intense anxiety about that cliché, an anxiety driven entirely by his dedication Emersonianism, explains both why he relies on *Paradise Lost* and why that reliance is, in many senses of the word, counter-productive. Why else would he bolster the account with classical allusions and echoes of Biblical language, rhetorical tools that serve the "mature" Thoreau so well, but here fall flat on their faces? To be sure the effect of this is the opposite of the intention. Rather than lifting the passage out of cliché, they produce triteness. And unlike Thoreau's mature writing, writing that could be attributed to no one but Thoreau, this passage is fundamentally stylistically indistinct. It could have, and Thoreau seems to be is entirely aware of this, been written by anyone. It is crucial to remember here that it is not the experience of the sublime that is clichéd, only its presentation or representation in the realm of the aesthetic. Put another way, with the allusion to *Paradise Lost*, Thoreau struggles to make a grand poïetic statement, to in a sense perform the Kantian operation at the end of the dynamic sublime through prose. In Kant, of course, the shattering power of the sublime experience is recouped by the mind, and it turns out that the sublime only strengthens the claim of reason. In like manner, Thoreau tries to recoup the clichéd literary representation of the sublime, the trope of the sublime if you will. Rather than recuperating the cliché though, rather than disclosing the underlying experiential truth of the experience of the sublime, he only draws the reader's attention more closely to how very cliché it is.

[46] Frederick Garber's *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing*, for example, discusses the issue of "our at-homeness in the world" in Thoreau in some detail (3).
[47] See Appendix I for an explanation of the trope of the sublime.

Indeed in the Contact passage all of this comes to a head. It will be necessary to quote that passage in its entirety:

> Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untamable Nature, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain. We were passing over "Burnt Lands," burnt by lightning, perchance, though they showed no recent marks of fire, hardly so much as a charred stump, but looked rather like a natural pasture for the moose and deer, exceedingly wild and desolate, with occasional strips of timber crossing them, and low poplars springing up, and patches of blueberries here and there. I found myself traversing them familiarly, like some pasture run to waste, or partially reclaimed by man; but when I reflected what man, what brother or sister or kinsman of our race made it and claimed it, I expected the proprietor to rise up and dispute my passage. It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandselled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever, -- to be the dwelling of man, we say, -- so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific, -- not his Mother Earth that we

> have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in, -- no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there, -- the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites, -- to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste. Perchance where our wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor, in Concord, there were once reapers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, -- that my body might, -- but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! -- Think of our life in nature, -- daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, -- rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? (70-71)

This passage is fascinating for any number of reasons, but for the moment let us note that while it ends on two unanswered questions, it in fact answers another, one that is only implied. This question, what are we?, and its answer are absolutely crucial for understanding what is happening here. What are according to Thoreau here? In a chiasmic reversal of the Emersonian claim that "Matter" very much is mind, that the nonhuman is a metaphor for the human, in the Contact passage it turns out that "we" humans are ourselves but Matter. That is, as Thoreau steps

out of himself as it were in a moment of negative ex-stasis, he first confronts the pure materiality of the nonhuman world and then his own materiality as a "body." In the first case, his experience at the top of Katahdin reveals not poïetic unity in nature but rather the gross matter that cannot be sublated by or in *poiesis*. As Thoreau puts it, "It was Matter, vast, terrific, -- not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in, -- no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there, -- the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man." Clearly enough we have the all too familiar ego-death of the sublime. Indeed, we can almost picture a Caspar Freidrich painting like *Wanderer Above the Sea and Fog* as we read. Thematically speaking, it is clear that the vista has thrown Thoreau's relation to nature and himself into question. But rather than focusing on the tenor of that experience for now, let us pay attention instead to its literary qualities. If it is Thoreau's intellectual and artistic goal to disclose the unity of Matter and Mind through poïetic practice, we cannot help but think that he has entirely failed at that project in this example. Note how cliché the passage and how banal this depiction of the sublime compared to his best work. That best work is so appealing in large part because of its intense rhetorical self-reflexivity, its irony and its incessant critique of inherited, conventional thought and language.

But here, Thoreau simply reiterates the trope of the sublime, a trope that was already a cliché by the time of Thoreau's first excursion to Maine 1846: the trip and journal entries that served as the inspiration for "Ktaadn" in its published form.[48]

What Thoreau experiences on the mountaintop, I wish to insist, *is* the sublime, which is to say that the experience has sublime content even if the depiction does not. There, Thoreau had a sensory experience that resulted in what we might call an anti-epiphany. Recall that the experience of the sublime is, at the very least in its first stage prior to the Kantain recoup, by

[48] See Appendix I.

definition *a-poïetic*. It is, as Thoreau writes, the moment in which we are separated from our "divinity," nothing else than our aesthetic Reason. The power of aesthetic Reason to decipher symbols and tropes "poetically" is "disarmed" as Thoreau will write in his journal by the experience of the sublime (qtd. in Moldenhauer *Early Essays and Miscellanies* 99). The problem occurs when Thoreau tries to render this experience, an experience that is anti-epiphantic, in aesthetic, that is poetic or poïetic, language. That problem stems not from the failure of the experience to be genuine or because that experience is somehow itself cliché. To borrow a term from Heidegger, the experience of sublimity is part of Thoreau's (and our) horizon, whether the origin of that horizon is historico-ideological or primordial. In fact, it doesn't particularly matter whether we understand it to be one or the other, or some variation or combination of the two. It is precisely because of the philosophical and aesthetic weight of that experience in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and romanticism, though, that Thoreau cannot represent it adequately and thus defaults instead to cliché, cliché he tries to rescue with allusion to Milton and with a certain tonal breathlessness.

The reason for this becomes legible in a long entry in Thoreau's journal of March 31st 1837, some nine years before his trip to Katahdin. There, Thoreau critiques on the Burkean sublime because he understands it to be too corporeal, which is to say too formal, and thus without content. The problem for Thoreau is that in Burke's sublime "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more or openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (58). This presents an issue for Thoreau because to the degree that Burke's terror is what Thoreau calls "an abject fear of death," it is a distinctly mortal concern (*Early Essays and Miscellanies* 94). Indeed if it is the case that in death content and form are entirely divorced, that death in sense voids content leaving only corporeal form, Burke's terror (of death) seems to found the sublime on that

voiding. To the transcendentalist Thoreau, this is unacceptable. He writes against Burke that "[w]e would fain believe that the immortals, who know no fear, nor ever taste of death, can sympathize with us poor worldings in our reverence for the sublime" (ibid).

And who other than Milton would Thoreau cite to bolster this claim? "The sublimity of the conflict on the plains of Heaven, between the rebel angels and the Almighty's loyal bands, as described by Milton, was not lost upon the *spirits* engaged in it" (ibid). The point for Thoreau is that the ability to experience sublimity is a faculty of the soul and is therefore aligned with the celestial and immortal and not with the body and the mortal. "Shall he who is acknowledged," Thoreau writes in the same entry, "while on earth to have a *soul* for the sublime and beautiful in nature, hereafter, when he shall be all soul, lose this divine privilege? Shall we be indebted to the body for emotions which would adorn heaven?" (95). So for the Thoreau of 1839, the sublime is not based in terror but in "pleasure" and ultimately in "reverence": "To fear is mortal, angels may reverence…. The Deity would be reverenced, not feared (95, 96)." Here of course, Thoreau is Christianizing the sublime. In fact, he could not be clearer on the matter when he writes: "Shall we derive this sublimity from death? Nay, further, can anything be conceived more sublime than the second birth, the resurrection? It is a subject that we approach with a kind of reverential awe. It has inspired the sublimest efforts of the poet and the painter. The trump which shall awake the dead is the creation of poetry" (95, emphasis added).

Although it may appear that in this sublime, one that we should note is more or less incoherent, Thoreau has avoided the problem of death and thus of the duality of form and content with the invocation of *poeisis*, in fact it has only hidden them. If we look a bit closer we see that poetry immortalizes in the manner of resurrection. But of course for resurrection to occur, death must precede it. For example, and without getting deep into Christological matters, the stakes of

the suffering and death of Jesus rest entirely on their reality. Jesus must have really suffered and really died in order that we be redeemed. In similar fashion, the life that comes through poetry here is figured as an afterlife, a life after death. This formulation expresses what we have noted about the unsettling tendency of figuration to annul the figuring term. But, and this is where things get strange, it also seems to be a mirroring of the cliché. If in the successful figure the figured takes precedence over that which figured in order to produce disclosive meaning, in the cliché the annulment of disclosivity brings precedence to figure as pure form, or pure matter if you like.

Thus these mediations on the sublime demonstrate Thoreau's warring aspects of the transcendentalist and natural scientist quite well. In order to produce the *poeisis* that will show the unity of Matter and Mind, of literal and figural, of body and soul, he must sacrifice something crucial about the first term in each of these pairs thereby revealing not unity but the fundamental difference between the instrumental value of the first in contrast to the truth value of the second in each set. To the extent that Thoreau is invested in the natural world though, he cannot abide this sacrifice to *poeisis* for what are we might say ethical reasons. To use the material of the world as way to reach spiritual heights is, for what I am referring to as the natural philosopher, to act in bad faith. We have seen this *aporia* before but what becomes especially evident here is the way in which materiality—in both the nonhuman world and in the purely formal aspect of figuration—present Thoreau's *poeisis* with an immanent and radical threat.

Perhaps no section of the Contact passage is more indicative of these issues than its conclusion, in which Thoreau seems to experience a kind of trauma in the face of worldly matter. He writes

> I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, -- that my body might, -- but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. …. Talk of mysteries! -- Think of our life in nature, -- daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, -- rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! (ibid)

Nature here is not a poïetic symbol that discloses meaning but brute matter that powerfully disrupts aesthetic Reason. It makes perfect sense then that Thoreau declares that he does not fear spirits and ghosts, for these are figures for aesthetic Reason. It is nonhuman matter that terrifies because its pure materiality resists the grasp of aesthetic Reason; it not subject to *poeisis* and it calls into question the human project of meaning-making as such. The result amounts to a kind of assault on aesthetic Reason, an attack of material on the poïetic or spiritual. The table is being turned, we might say and what this indicates is that the very materiality that Thoreau relies upon radically threatens his project. This is perhaps obvious enough, but what must be noted is that what I call material here is not simply the materiality of the natural world *per se* but the material of literary poeisis, which is nothing other than the rhetorical dimension of language.

When I speak of pure materiality or brute matter as form without content, we should be reminded of the foregoing discussion of cliché. Indeed, when he speaks of bodies here Thoreau might just as well be talking about cliché. Cliché is the pure form of trope—linguistic matter, as it were, without content, form without meaning, body without soul. Thoreau's trauma here then results at least in part from the (re)inscription of the very impossibility of depicting the sublime experience poïetically, an impossibility that inescapably leads him to cliché. But the result of all this is not simply that a great writer is reduced to cliché by his subject matter. Indeed, the stakes are a great deal higher.

Thoreau's fear in the Contact passage is not just the fear of the nonhuman world in its material aspect then but also of the material aspect of *poeisis*, which is to say the formal component of trope as such. The view from the top of Katahdin indicates the power of earthly matter to suspend the faculties of aesthetic Reason, which in turns produces in the viewer a disarticulation of her own body and "soul." What Thoreau, or perhaps the text, seems to realize is that in more or less analogous circumstances, contact with cliché does precisely the same thing. Cliché, that is, forces the reader to face the strangeness and alterity of figuration, its disfiguring power if you will, and thereby the human relation to language and meaning comes into question. The point is not that there is no meaning, or that meaning is impossible or that language is completely arbitrary. The point instead is that in the material that is required to produce meaning, whether world or language, inheres something that itself resists that meaning in a central way. To come into contact with this is to experience a moment of sublimity. And what this means then is that to the extent that cliché engenders this type of contact, it is itself sublime.

And indeed the conclusion of the Contact passage bears this point out. Here, as Thoreau says, there is "no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to [nature's] ear"—only pure negation of aesthetic Reason, of *poiesis*, and thus of meaning and the human. He is not (only) speaking of his experience on the mountain. He is speaking then not only of the experience of the sublime but also of the effect of cliché. Cliché pulls out of our aesthetic mode and confronted with the mocking persistence of cliché as pure tropic form without and against content and interpretation. The effect of cliché on aesthetic Reason, the very same aesthetic Reason we use when we read, then is the same as the effect of the materiality of nonhuman on aesthetic comprehension. It is for this reason that cliché is so threatening to poets and thinkers of *poiesis*. Those thinkers

understand that meaning is fundamentally human and *poeisis* is thus essentially humanizing. Indeed for them the very ground state of the human as such is the ability to disclose meaning more or less poïetically, and therefore that which resists this process is deeply troubling. It is easy enough then to see why Thoreau would turn away from the experience of the sublime in his work, that he would embrace a project of what Bennett calls microvisioning in the face of the disarticulation of the sublime experience.

While the reading I offer of the Contact passage argues that it is a meditation on the sublimity of cliché and the defacement of *poeisis*, I hope it is clear that this claim stems from the passage itself. That is, and as we have seen, the Contact passage is itself thoroughly and utterly clichéd. When we read it, we almost can't believe what we are reading; we can't believe that Thoreau would stumble so very badly into cliché. We might even feel betrayed at encountering the banality of his depiction in this crucial moment. As we read "Ktaadn" and come across the its logic of cliché, a logic that climaxes in the Contact passage, our own poïetic reading praxis is interrupted, even suspended. And this is precisely because the cliché tolerates no interpretation and thus no *poeisis*. We cannot, that is, interpret the Contact passage in any disclosive way; we must simply submit to its unequivocal meaning. This act of submission, which indicates nothing other than the authority of stable meaning necessary for the notion of *poeisis* to exist at all is precisely that which we wish to avoid in the aesthetic mode. To the degree, as Kant and Schiller would have it, that in the aesthetic mode our faculties are allowed something like play, the authority of semantic stability blows the whistle on that play, so to speak. Put another way, if in post-romantic aesthetics the goal of poïetic figuration, of the rhetoric of *poiesis*, is to more or less reliably produce disclosive epiphany not as determinate content but as process, then it would seem that the successful *poeisis* is ironically at least partially modeled on the semantic stability

of determinate content in cliché. This in turn would mean that cliché is not the detritus of *poiesis*, but in fact its essential logic. And it is this fact, a fact revealed by reading—or more properly by the undecidability inherent to close reading—that transforms the text of "Ktaadn" itself into terrifyingly sublime Matter, text devoid of *poeisis* of reassuring symbolic or figural meaning. Ironically then, the cliché of the sublime in "Ktaadn" then actually reproduces the experience of the material sublime that the aestheticized text seems unable render.

The demise of aesthetic Reason in the face of the nonhuman, however, is not coequal to the death of critique. As I have been at pains to argue, it is the necessary ground of a critique of aesthetic Reason itself. And it is the sublime, both the "natural" sublime and the sublimity of the cliché that enables such a critique. What we call the sublime is an experiential response to the radically nonhuman. If it is the case that the suspension of aesthetic Reason that results from a cliché is similar to that of the sublime, we must then accept that there is something nonhuman at the heart of the reading of cliché. That is not to say that the cliché itself is nonhuman, but that the way that the cliché suspends aesthetic practice and puts the possibility of disclosive *poeisis* into doubt illustrates something deeply discomfiting about the very project of *poeisis*—namely that the possibility of disclosure through figure is predicated on form without meaning. Just as Thoreau's ability to symbolize or metaphorize abandons him in the face of the nonhuman, our ability to read disclosively abandons us in the cliché. Rather than transfiguring or disclosing Matter as Mind, Mind here becomes Matter, or better matter. The divine is rendered gross, the human becomes animal (nonhuman) and, that which comes into relief in Kant's sublime resurrection, aesthetic Reason fades instead out of view.

The implications of all of this far exceed a single essay of Thoreau's. That essay dramatizes the issues, but they are at the heart of aesthetic practice. Cliché brings to the fore a

universal anxiety about *poiesis* and thus about the post-Kantian aesthetic. Both cliché and *poeisis* are predicated on a reading praxis that suppresses what de Man calls in "the autonomous potential of language" to mean on its own, to mean without us (*The Resistance to Theory*10). That suppression forecloses problematic, excessive, and aberrant meanings by reading figures as they are "meant" to be read: figuratively.[49] Ironically then, by suspending our figurative readings, by silencing our *poeisis* with the ball-gag of banality, cliché forces us to read figures literally instead, to read them against themselves. And to read a figure literally, to note for example how a figure functions grammatically by intentionally bracketing its figurative capacity, or by paying rigorous attention to how it operates on the level of language, is to close-read that figure. Close reading then, which is by definition estranging, allows us to see that text can be wild, meaningless, and even dangerous. As Hillis Miller puts it in *The Ethics of Reading*, "A book is a dangerous object, and perhaps all books should have warning labels. Strange things happen when someone reads a book" (*The J. Hillis Miller Reader* 43). And this realization, which indicates that *poeisis* does not work the way Emerson, Thoreau, Heidegger and so many others hope it does, explains what we might call the universal anxiety of cliché—read closely, cliché throws our encounter with text, language, meaning and their relationship to each other as well as to "the human" into confusion.

This manner of close reading, the wild reading, enables contact with the problem of linguistic figuration through the formal, grammatical, material remainder of *poeisis*—a remainder that is the very foundation of *poeisis.* And it is here, where form and meaning seem essentially at odds, that the text paradoxically opens up by closing down. We are able to see past its *poeisis* as it were, to stare into the abyss of its sheer materiality. To do this, even momentarily, is to confront the sublime otherness of the text as such. In this moment, language ceases to be the

[49] I address this matter at length in the subsequent chapter.

standing reserve of poïetic disclosure and is shown to exceed the human capacity to mean. In this way, language truly does speak us. Language is our indeed horizon, but that horizon is nothing other than a wilderness.

Chapter 2

Too Close for Comfort: A Post-Allegorical Reading of *The Call of the Wild*

Introduction

Jack London wrote a number of stories that focus on animals but there is no doubt that *The Call of the Wild* and, to a somewhat lesser extent, its companion piece *White Fang* are certainly the most read both historically and in the present. Indeed, *The Call of the Wild* has remained more or less consistently popular since its initial publication in *Collier's Magazine* in 1903 when it established London's fame and fortune. While the excellent short story "To Build a Fire" is most popular with literary critics and scholars, in the popular imagination London has been and continues to be most strongly identified with *The Call of the Wild*. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely as I will argue, despite this popularity *The Call of the Wild* has received fairly little in the way of critical attention. This is particularly striking due to the fact that in the past few years, there has been an increased scholarly interest in nonhumans in literature.

In roughly the past decade, the formerly relatively minor group of humanities subfields we can group under the rubric of critical environmental studies have become increasingly mainstreamed. In the case of literary studies, this has manifested itself in the developing importance of, very broadly speaking, ecocritical approaches. It is no surprise that as the effects of global climate change are becoming clearer and clearer to us on a regular basis there should be increased interest in environmental matters. What might be a bit more surprising is that at least within the humanities the rise of ecocritical concerns has largely manifested itself by actively dissociating from the concerns of second wave environmentalism as well as from cultural objects that are specifically focused on "nature." I address the why of these matters in my introduction

and in the following chapter, so I will not rehearse that analysis here. Instead, I want to point out that one aspect of ecocritical approaches to literature has involved the embrace of critical animal studies. CAS is not a single methodological approach, rather it is more of a marker of a certain kind of engagement with issues of animality and their relation to "the human." One does not want to overstate the case, but there is some truth to saying that Jacques Derrida's posthumously published *The Animal That I Therefore Am* is the foundational text of critical animal studies. Certainly, that book and its title essay have served as something of a fulcrum for CAS.

In this moment of increased interest in and sensitivity to ecocritical approaches like those of CAS, one might wonder why *The of the Wild* remains largely undiscussed in critical circles. By way of example, both *PMLA* (2009 124.2) and *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* (2014 60.3) have in fact devoted issues to the subject matter of CAS recently, yet neither has an essay on London's major work. In fact, when one browses the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*, one is hard-pressed to find much discussion of *The Call of the Wild* at all in the past fifteen years, and there is even less to be found that addresses the novella in broadly ecocritical terms. Again for example there is only one essay on *The Call of the Wild* to be found in the most prominent journal of ecocriticism, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and the Environment*. That article, John Bruni's "Furry Logic: Biological Kinship and Empire in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*" (2007 14.1) is the only essay on any of London's works to be found in *ISLE.*

The Call of the Wild and *White Fang* fare a bit better in the so-called big journals, but only a bit. Michael Lundblad's short essay "From Animal to Animality Studies" in the *PMLA* issue on animals and animality makes brief recourse to them, but only to dismiss both as examples of bad animal writing that traffics in crude anthropomorphization. London and his

fictional dog/wolf Buck, however, do not even merit mention in similarly themed issue of *MFS* entitled "Animal Worlds in Modern Fiction." While certainly a given special issue is under no obligation to include essays on any particular text, it does seem at least a little odd that *The Call of the Wild* does not come under examination here. We might think that London's book is not sufficiently modern, but in an amusing coincidence one essay that is included, namely Benjamin Bateman's "Species Performance, or, Henry James's Beastly Sense," takes as its subject James' *The Beast in the Jungle* a novella published in 1903, the same year as *The Call of the Wild*.

Dates of publication aside, Bateman's decision to focus on nonhuman matters in James is—one wants to say—a relatively provocative one. After all, James' fiction is so important and impressive for the ways in which it renders human lives and consciousness. Bateman's provocation is not unique and in fact is itself one of species; we might call that species *ecocriticisus perverti*. The distinguishing feature of *ecocriticisus perverti* is that it takes what is typically seen as a limitation of "pre-critical" ecocriticism—a reliance on nature writing and nature writers—and entirely disregards it by turning the ecocritical lens upon centrally humanistic, psychological texts. As is his wont, Timothy Morton can be said to have been at the vanguard of this movement, first with his attention to kitsch cultural objects like snow globes and more recently with his object-oriented ontology influenced notions of "hyperobjects." Other so-called new materialisms, be they "thing theory" or Jane Bennett's assemblage thought, are members of this species as well, and as such they follow suit by focusing to a greater or lesser degree on things that must be understood in part in as far as they are related to human culture. Margot Norris' essay in the same issue of *MFS* is another, if perhaps less strenuous, example of *ecocriticisus perverti* although neither her essay nor Bateman's should be aligned with Mortonian speculative realism or new materialisms. I mention Norris' essay, blissfully clearly

entitled “The Animals of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*,” because it takes the work of arguably the only writer in English after Henry James with an analogous literary critical reputation and looks at his work somewhat provocatively through an ecocritical lens.

I discuss the reasons for the genesis of what I am calling here *ecocriticisus perverti*, as well the salutary aspects of that species, elsewhere in this monograph. In this context I want to say that while I admire both essays, it is worth noting that the editors of the special issue chose to include these articles. That choice is suggestive of an aspect of the recent mainstreaming of ecocritical thought that is if not worrying, at least worthy of analysis. Why is it that such mainstreaming seems to justify itself as legitimate by turning away from “nature writing” and instead to major authors that would typically be seen as more or less uninterested in the nonhuman? Why James and Joyce and not London? There are many possible answers, including very practical ones. Very possibly, the editorial boards did not receive any papers on London! The point then is not to pick on the manifold decisions made in putting together a special issue but instead to note that there is a way in which the mainstreaming of ecocritical work corresponds with a shift toward “great” or “important” or “canonical” authors. There are of course more than a few canonical texts of nature writing, most obviously Thoreau’s *Walden*. At the same time, the ecocritical turn away from more or less marginalized works that center on “nature” and toward canonical works that evoke the nonhuman as an aspect of setting indicates something important regarding literary study and matters of “taste.”

Matters of Taste: American Literary Naturalism and the Problem of Allegory

If not the first to defend the writings and writers of what Charles Child Walcutt dubbed American literary naturalism, Donald Pizer has been their primary evangelist for some forty plus years. Much of Pizer’s early work on American literary naturalism can be more accurately called

offensive than defensive in the sense that he seeks to proactively make a case for naturalist texts in the face of critical hostility. I do not have the time or space to summarize Pizer's work in depth, so it will have to suffice to say that much of his analysis centers on the critical dismissal of naturalist texts due to the many apparent literary flaws of those texts.

The present essay cannot work through the various cases for and against generic classification *en toto*, or for American literary naturalism in particular. As useful as such debates are, it is an uncontroversial position that certain texts and authors can be usefully grouped around similar concerns, periods, contents, and styles. Let us say for now that by general scholarly consensus the major figures of American literary naturalism are Stephen Crane, Theodor Dreiser, Frank Norris, Edith Wharton, Richard Wright, and Sherwood Anderson. Most of these authors wrote their major works between the 1890s and the 1910s, although there are exceptions such as Wright and D'Arcy McNickle. There are other major naturalist authors too, and as Pizer and others have shown, the influence of literary naturalism in American fiction far outlasted the movement itself manifesting itself in the work of Hemingway, Mailer, Steinbeck, and at least according to Pizer, most of the other important American novelists of the post-war era. The point being that while to some degree such generic labeling is bound to be arbitrary to the degree that it is considered to have clear boundaries, there is something there—so to speak—with literary naturalism in America.

What marks a work of literary naturalism? First, at least in the United States naturalism is generally thought to have developed in the wake of the realist fiction of the later nineteenth century and to have peaked in the early twentieth century. Naturalist texts are typically of a deterministic caste, which often results in relatively "flat" characterizations. Finally, naturalist texts are often interested in what has often been considered sensationalistic material—violence,

frank sexuality, the lives of the poor, urban decay. We must keep in mind however that this sensationalism as well as its grimly mechanistic worldview(s), enthrallment with atavism, and its deterministic metaphysics are not included merely included for shock value or titillation. Indeed, they can be said to be in service of what Pizer suggests is the figural core of literary naturalism—allegory.

That is, much American naturalism is heavily influenced by nineteenth century scientific and political developments such as Darwinism, the rise of positivistic social science, and Marxism. Whatever their differences, all of these mark a shift in thinking from what the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft*, which sees human life in terms of its community and familial contexts, to *Gesellschaft*, which thinks of the lifeworld as constituted and constricted by formal, systemic structures. Physical, social science, even philosophy from the mid-nineteenth century could be said to be constellated around the rationalist vision of *Gesellschaft*, which in its more vulgar iterations implied and sometimes flat-out posited a more or less strict kind of determinism as something like the central metaphysical principle of existence. The most obvious and repugnant iterations of these vulgar iterations would be so-called scientific racism and eugenics. No matter what we think of the social, political, and even ontological implications of such deterministic thinking now, it was at least for a time the paradigm of Western thought, the same that we now refer to pejoratively as scientism. And it is this paradigm that at least in part animates the concerns of many naturalist authors. Add to this the excesses and repercussions of predatory laissez-faire capitalism in what Mark Twain called the Gilded Age from roughly the 1870s to the turn of the century, and the increasingly populated and industrialized urban environment and it is no surprise that a darkly deterministic worldview hangs over so much literary naturalism. How could one not feel like little more than a cog in the

machine of evolution, society, the economy, the city, nature and so on in these times? These themes are crucial to what might be said to be the heart of American literary naturalism, its more or less explicit connection to a deterministic metaphysical picture. That picture, although compelling to many post-War American novelists in one way or another, often has the unsurprising effect of giving the naturalist novel a metaphysical caste that, as we shall see, alienates some readers.

Despite her fascination with grotesquerie, magnitude and metaphysics, though, the typical naturalist author is far from un-invested in the everyday. Naturalism, although it may in some sense be said to be a return of the romance that nineteenth century realism is thought to have been a reaction against, is far from unrealistic in its concern with lived life. Indeed the primary theoretician of literary naturalism, Emile Zola, is perhaps most recognized for the intensity of his prose depicting life in Paris. But naturalist fiction tends to use details of the everyday, as Frank Norris does with his depictions of San Francisco in *McTeague* or London does in the Klondike writings, not as a way of depicting, in what Henry James calls in "The Art of Fiction" "life *without* rearrangement" that allows us to "feel that we are touching the truth" but as portentous and symbolic even allegorical microcosms that illustrate macrocosmic principles (*The Art of Criticism* 177).

In fact, American literary naturalism is largely allegorical genre, which is to say that naturalist writers often intend allegorical meaning. As Pizer puts it in his seminal *Twentieth-century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*:

> In the America of the 1890s the need was above all for a device that would permit the full recording of new ranges of American experience and reveal as well the underlying nature of this experience. The need, in short, was the need for the symbolic and allegorical to

> reemerge as major forms of expression…. In American naturalism this tendency [toward symbolic expression] flowered into a powerful and all-pervasive tool which frequently pushes the American naturalistic novel into allegory. (8)

As such, American naturalism often lacks the ostensible sensitivity, subtlety, and tastefulness of its forebear realism, which in turn tends to make it less appealing to experienced or sophisticated readers of fiction. This perspective on naturalist fiction is the dominant one in American literary critical thought in the middle of the twentieth century—around the time of the New Criticism—and in fact it remains alive and well in the present in the work of the non-academic literary critic James Wood.[50] Because it is sometimes vulgar, because its characters are often "flat," because it uses realist tendencies to render the seamy in metaphysical terms, because it is pessimistic and violent American literary naturalism has struggled on Pizer's argument to attract thoughtful literary criticism. Now, this changes from at least the 1980s—June Howard's *Form and History in Literary Naturalism* (1985) and Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) and are both major studies—on and there has been a steady stream of interesting and thoughtful work on American naturalist texts since that time. Most of them, to some degree or another, follow Pizer at least in the sense that they feel the need to justify the study of naturalist works in the face of scholarly resistance.

It is perhaps no surprise that as American society becomes more permissive about depictions of violence and sexuality due in no small part to the availability of mass visual media that the squeamishness that many of its contemporary critics and New Critical readers felt about naturalism should seem a bit old-fashioned. And yet, while naturalist texts have now been seen as worthy of serious critical attention for at least thirty years, they are still relatively

[50] See Wood's *How Fiction Works* (2008, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux) and Daniel Green's critical discussion of it in "'The Thoughts of Other People': James Wood and the Realism of 'Mind'" in issue 30 of the web-based literary journal *The Quarterly Conversation*.

underrepresented in the scholarship. True, naturalism is very close indeed to realism and it had a relatively brief ascendency. At the same time, I want to insist that there is something crucial about the continuing relative disinterest in naturalist texts implied by their absence in ecocritical discourse. When above I alluded to the issue of taste, then, I did not primarily mean moral squeamishness but something rather more complex—the qualities of fiction that provide pleasure and enjoyment to experienced readers: hobbyists, writers, or literary scholars. If I evoke Norris and Bateman's essays in order to suggest that there is a way in which the price of mainstreaming and legitimating of critical environmental studies can be said to be a return to the canon, it remains to ask why Henry James and James Joyce? Once we have acknowledged the provocation in such moves, we must ask what is it about these two authors that makes them canonical as well as the related question of why their work merits continued and repeated attention.

I think we can say without major controversy that Henry James and James Joyce are two of the most important, and most influential prose writers in the English language. And although the works that Norris and Bateman address from these authors in the essays from *MFS* may not be conventionally understood to be the most important, nevertheless one would struggle to find two more universally respected novelists. I cannot attend to the many, many reasons that they are considered so but I do want to stress something that James and Joyce have in common—a central, even overriding, concern with psychological realism produced through sophisticated narrative techniques. James is the undisputed master of American realist fiction, while Joyce is the most important modernist novelist. Despite their many differences in terms of content, theme, and style both pay scrupulous attention to what we might call the inner workings of the minds of their characters and how those workings are transmitted to the reader. Indeed, perhaps the way in which James and Joyce can be said to be most similar is in the scrupulousness, in their attention

to psychological and narrative detail that gives their work, by design, much of its incredible texture. In short, both are masters and innovators of detail work (among other things) of the particularities of their characters. And at least by some metrics, the unique strength of the novel as form is that it is able to provide precisely these details and textures about the consciousnesses of its subjects. Realist fiction of the Jamesian school, for example, famously focuses on depicting, or perhaps better evoking, human consciousness through narrative. Indeed this is very much its hallmark. If as James famously writes of realism in "The Art of Fiction," "that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of the novel," it must be said that his realism is not that of Zola or Norris, a kind of materialist, descriptive realism, but is rather a deeply psychological realism (*The Art of Criticism* 173).

For James at least, arguably the most important theorist of the novel, it can be said that the essence of the novel as such is that it trades on what Ian Watt calls, in his now classic *The Rise of the Novel*, formal realism.[51] And perhaps the most important aspect of Watt's formal realism is that it depicts the consciousnesses or inner lives of its characters. In fact, Watt argues that the novel as we know it develops out of a long eighteenth century European culture that places great importance on individuality, perception, and inner life. James' command to himself in composing *The Portrait of a Lady* to "[p]lace the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness" and his success in doing so then can be and has been seen as a kind of apex of the novel insofar as the novel is inherently tied to the capacity for fictive psychological realism (*The Art of the Novel* 51).[52] So one of the reasons that realism, and specifically

[51] "The narrative method whereby the novel embodies [a] circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism; formal because the term realism does not here refer to any specific literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself" (*The Rise of the Novel* 32).

[52] Whether or not this assertion is true or not, and as early as 1961 Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* it was argued persuasively that it isn't, is not of primary importance here. It seems clear, as Booth points out, that during the nineteenth century as the novel became the most important literary genre in English, its major writers

psychological realism, is seen as a high watermark of the novel is that it allows for the portrayal of inner life in a particularly convincing way that other literary genres do not, a theme that is deeply resonant to our modern identities. On this understanding, the organizing principle of the paradigmatic novel can be said to be its capacity for formal, psychological realism and particularity that results in characters of supreme depth, almost the same depth as we will tend to perceive in our own minds.

Although it existed long before he wrote, one of Joyce's major contributions to the novel is what has been called the stream of consciousness style. Indeed for some critics, that style is one of the important markers of the modernist novel. Again, I do not want to get into a morass of literary history and generic classification here. Let us say for now only that regardless of where we or contemporary scholars stand on "modernism" and the usefulness of that term, it is generally acknowledged that one of the central hallmarks of modernist fiction is the development of stream of consciousness narrative, which is of course a technique for rendering consciousness.[53] As Dorrit Cohn among many others since have noted, Jamesian psychological realism can be understood—both explicitly and implicitly—as a kind of necessary precursor to high modernist stream of consciousness techniques. This means in turn that despite the aggressive strangeness so prevalent in stream of consciousness narrative, those techniques are best understood in terms of the project of psychological realism. So while critical opinions may vary on whether the "realist" or the "modernist" manner of depicting consciousness is more

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self-consciously adopted certain of what Booth calls "General Rules." Those rules—Booth identifies them as: I, "true novels must be realistic;" II, "all authors should be objective;" III, "true art ignores the audience;" and IV, rules to do with "emotions, beliefs, and the reader's objectivity," although we need not agree with the number or names—do not necessarily represent concerted program and in fact it is probably better to think of them as more or less ad hoc. Nevertheless, the evolution of the novel in the past two centuries can be said to be a series of articulations concerning what Watt calls formal realism, the genre's suitability to it and subsequent reactions to those articulations.

[53] Two of the greatest novelists, and modernists, of the twentieth century—James Joyce and William Faulkner—are defined by their experience in stream of consciousness techniques

aesthetically and intellectually compelling, both psychological realism and stream of consciousness modernism figure so importantly in contemporary literary criticism because they are seen as essential to what we understand the novel to be.[54]

It is in this light that we might see the re-inscription of the familiar aesthetic and literary dichotomy between the "high" literature of realism and modernism and its others, among them nature writing and naturalism to name only a few. Put differently, and more directly, one important aspect of the way in which read novels seems to have to do with the way they are uniquely capable of representing human consciousness. Texts that do this well, be they more or less conventional or *avant-garde*, will tend to be seen important or great examples of long form fiction. Indeed I would go so far as to say that at least a few of the novels widely considered to be exemplary do little else than successfully present human consciousness.[55] Things we often imagine to be important in the novel—lyrical prose, descriptive language, plot, a compelling narrative—are perhaps of less importance to readers and critics than we imagine. They are not entirely immaterial, but it would seem that at least in some cases we don't necessarily need them. What we do need in a novel is depth of character, specifically psychological depth.

If naturalist novels and stories are often populated by flat characters occupying settings that are more tableau than solid specification, it makes sense that to the extent that readers are looking for Watt's formal realism they are likely to be disappointed by naturalism. But, and this is the important part one that Lee Clark Mitchell makes so well in his *Determined Fictions*, the supposed literary sins of the American naturalists are not arbitrary or accidental. Instead, they follow entirely the metaphysical logic of more or less strict determinism in which those texts are so heavily invested. What we have then in many naturalist novels, and Frank Norris' *McTeague*

[54] In this, as in much, I follow Dorrit Cohn.
[55] I am thinking primarily of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* here.

is an example of this *par excellence*, is a formal realism that is more formal than realist. That is, it manifests itself in distinct particularity of setting, e.g. the Geary Street of *McTeague*, and in character, but that particularity is not in service of realist depth. Instead, it is in service of the macrocosmic, the metaphysical, the way things really are under the surface of the particular. This is of course a long way of saying that whatever formal realism naturalism shows is allegorical in nature rather than "truly" particular. It should come as no surprise then that advocates of formal, psychological realism are generally not fans of allegory in fiction. In an essay on the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, our paradigmatic realist, Henry James makes clear the case against allegory:

> [A]llegory, to my sense, is quite one of the lighter exercises of the imagination. Many excellent judges, I know, have a great stomach for it; they delight in symbols and correspondences, in seeing a story told as if it were another and a very different story. I frankly confess that I have as a general thing but little enjoyment of it and that it has never seemed to me to be, as it were, a first-rate literary form…. [I]t is apt to spoil two good things--a story and a moral, a meaning and a form; and the taste for it is responsible for a large part of the forcible feeble writing that has been inflicted upon the world. (*Theory of Fiction* 105, emphasis added)

I have emphasized James' primary objection to allegory, which its Janus-faced nature. Allegory that is tells one story, what Paul de Man calls the proper meaning or allegoreme in "Reading (Proust)," as if it were another story, which is the literal story or allegoresis. The details of a naturalist allegory's literal story then are often like the figural objects in a *trompe-l'œil* painting: scrupulously rendered but in and of themselves meaningless. Christophe den Tandt notes this tendency in Norris' *McTeague*, writing "The emotional impact of… *McTeague* consists in an

ability to reveal abysses of primitive violence below the surface of urban everyday life. Surprisingly perhaps, [it] devotes a lot of energy to establishing a realistic representation of neighborhood life" (133). Like the *trompe-l'œil* picture then, the detail is at least in some sense illusory. *Trompe-l'œil* paintings are meant to fool us into confusing them, at least briefly, with real things. Similarly, details in naturalist allegories are provided to fool us into thinking, however briefly, that the events in the story have meaning on their own, that the literal story is the real literary object. Without that sleight of pen, of course, James would be correct about allegorical spoilage. The game for the naturalist allegorist then is to provide just enough concretion of physical detail and human interest to make the "literal" story passably interesting on its own merits while at the same time preserving the rhetorical function of that story, which is to point to the so-called proper meaning or allegoreme. It would follow that if we are invested in stories for their own sake, so to speak, for their specifics, for the ways in which they illustrate or invoke matters that resonate with our psychological and/or life experiences and that present the world to us in a recognizable form, we will tend to find allegorical narratives unsatisfying.

Probably the most important version of this argument is given by the Hungarian literary critic and theorist György Lukács in his well-known essay "Narrate or Describe?" While it does not address allegory per se, the essay is something of a broadside against continental literary naturalism. For Lukács, the naturalist novel describes rather than narrates because it lacks an ideological commitment grounded in the material world and lived life:

> When a writer is isolated from the vital struggles of life and from varied experiences generally, all ideological questions in his work become abstractions, no matter whether abstractions of pseudo-scientism, 'mysticism or of an indifference to vital issues; such

> abstraction results in the loss of the creative productiveness provided by questions of ideology in the earlier literature. (143)

Lukács writes of Flaubert here, but the diagnosis is of the naturalist tendency to describe rather than narrate, to see the world not in its particularity but rather fundamentally abstractly and metaphysically. This is of course to work allegorically rather than realistically. For Lukács the narrative approach is not simply a matter of taste; it is a political one.[56] That is, he is invested in the realist model of narration because it articulates what he calls the humanist revolt "against alienation in capitalism" precisely through its attention to psychological realism (145). At the same time we ought to note that his essential project is to unite aesthetics and politics. So while Lukács is not concerned with James in this essay, and has some less than kind words for Joyce's "subjectivism," it can be argued that his aesthetic, i.e. his taste, is entirely bound up in his political and philosophical program. If that taste is very similar indeed to that articulated by James and Watt, tremendous theorists of the novel that all three are, in the ways in which it rests on formal and psychological realism, we should not be surprised.

In a strange way and although it is not at all concerned with novels, the first chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, "Odysseus' Scar," plays these matters of taste out as well by pointing to what we perceive as "successful" narrative. When Auerbach writes "the modern reader" is likely to misinterpret the digression explaining the scar on Odysseus' leg as a device to heighten tension when—at least on Auerbach's reading—it is there simply to explain the scar's origin, he implicitly relies on a view of modern reading derived from the these premises of formal realism. For what is Auerbach's interpretation of *The Odyssey* in contrast to the story Abraham and Isaac

[56] Lukács is a clear inspiration for Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, for example. Despite Jameson's intellectual acumen, it is difficult for me at the end of the day to see his project as anything other than one of using his enviable gifts to justify his political commitments. Eagleton's work is less demanding than Jameson's, and even in a certain way more intellectually generous, but suffers from a tendency to center around the knocking down of straw men. I tend to think that Raymond Williams is the subtlest of those most obviously influenced by Lukács.

in the Torah but a valorization of narration over description, in Lukács' terms? Auerbach's modern reader treats *The Odyssey* as if it were animated by the same concerns that serve as the basis for the novel and thus disappointed. When Auerbach's she encounters Homer's epic in terms of the paradigm of formal realism, she can't help but be unsatisfied by its failure to move beyond a "documentary" approach in which detail is substituted for depth. Again, these are very much the same aesthetic objections that are traditionally raised about naturalist texts: their documentarianism, their weak characters, their lack of psychological depth and ambiguity and their relatively straightforward meanings that do not engender exegesis are said to make them bad novels. To the extent then that literary critics and the reading public can be said to be broadly on the same page regarding what makes for a satisfying novel, which is at heart a question of taste, it would seem that the hallmarks of formal realism—psychological realism and the resultant depth of character—is to be preferred to "mere" description, flat characters, and blunt meanings.

I certainly cannot claim with any kind of certainty that these matters of taste and allegory play a role in the present ecocritical and critical animal studies disinterest in *The Call of the Wild*. However, to the degree that humanities scholars tend to work on subjects that they enjoy, if naturalist novels are not particularly compelling to many readers that fact may well be a partial explanation. One thing that I can claim with certainly is that for important ecocritic Lawrence Buell these matters are central. In his magisterial study *The Environmental Imagination*, he makes a brief mention of London's novella:

> [R]eaders traditionally imagined stories about animals as being stories about people. As Harriet Ritvo shows in her study of Victorian discourse on animals, Darwin tended to reinforce more than to interrupt this association. A Darwinian "innovation" like

> the literary-naturalist convention of likening social to biological struggle was in a sense a new permutation of a much older structure of thinking. It is no coincidence that Jack London retold the plot of his social Darwinist animal story *The Call of the Wild* (1903), about a dog who ultimately becomes a wolf, in a novel about a tenderfoot seaman who musters enough brute will to defeat his wolfish captain (*The Sea Wolf* [1904]). Both tales concern the recovery of the "dominant primordial beast" within oneself. Portions of the early story of the dog Buck read like an analysis of class struggle in code, be the subject dog versus master or dog versus dog. The animalistic combat motif is of a course a staple leadoff device in naturalist fiction generally…. [and they] announce the social Darwinism of the human narrative to follow. (197)

For Buell, depictions of the nonhuman in the London stories are little more allegorical window dressing and the story of *The Call of the Wild* is little more than a code. This is true as far as it goes, of course, as the retelling of the novella's plot in *The Sea Wolf* indicates.[57] But, and this suggests the real problem for Buell, the code is not simply or merely a code. It is a story, and at least at times a finely rendered one that does strong ecomimetic work. London of course spent a good deal of time in the Yukon, and whatever his writerly flaws description was not among them. Verisimilitude is not at issue in Buell's comments. Instead it is that despite its verisimilitude, as an allegory *The Call of the Wild* is always already in service of something else. Like the depictions of urban life found in naturalists from Zola to Dreiser, London's naturalist vision of nature is simply too allegorical for Buell.

We can see well what Buell means in *The Call of the Wild*'s formulation of what London calls "the law of club and fang." Away from the niceties of civilized life in the "sun-kissed Santa

[57] It is worth remembering that London's motives were pecuniary as well as socio-philosophical and that as such he was appropriately prolific. Since *The Call of the Wild* was his commercial breakthrough, it is perhaps not so surprising that he chose to repeat its plot and to return to it in 1906's *White Fang*.

Clara Valley" (1) and "flung into the heart of things primordial" (10), Buck the dog discovers not chaos but order: "the reign of primitive law" (8, emphasis added). In the passage in which this somewhat troubling phrase appears, it must be noted, Buck has just been beaten by a dog-breaker. But the law mentioned here is not a human law; it is not a law of civilization, what London calls "law of love and fellowship" (17).[58] In fact, the relationship is exactly the opposite; it is precisely what the laws of civilization try to cover up, the way things really are, that Buck learns at the hands of his brutal captor.[59] "Nature," a word the novella uses far more often to mean inner qualities than the natural world, as typified by Buck's retrogression or de-evolution to what could be called his natural or primal state, simply signifies the metaphysical structure of the world: a structure that is lawful even if that lawfulness is violent and mechanistic. The law of civilization, the law of love and fellowship, is for London only the Apollonian veil that barely obscures the actual workings of the world, the natural law of club and fang and it is the primordial, or primitive, or wild that displays this natural law.[60] Understood this way, London's depictions of the nonhuman in *The Call of the Wild* can be seen as almost synonymous with the urbanism of Zola, Norris, and Dreiser in the sense that they are all meant at least in part to point to a deterministic metaphysical picture. It is not particularly surprising then that to a critic of Buell's ecological sensitivity London's writings are of little interest. If a reductive version of *The Environmental Imagination*'s thesis tells us that for Buell positive environmental change can be

[58] As I have noted above, despite a reliance on metaphysical determinism texts of American literary naturalism are not considered to present an entirely determined or fatalistic *Weltanschauung*. Indeed many naturalist novels depict a world in which atavistic violence or lust results from accident or from a failure to repress and not from a determined universe. We are not ruled by the laws of nature, and in fact we have the ability to formulated alternate, more humane, laws.

[59] No doubt London's overarching ambivalence about what is preferable, the law of club and fang or the law of love and fellowship, accounts for the discomfort that many adult readers experience when reading him.

[60] As is well established, London drew heavily from Nietzsche in not uncomplicated ways. I do not have the space or time to draw out this relationship, but Cassuto and Reeseman in their introduction to the volume *Rereading Jack London* do a good job of acknowledging London's debt to Nietzsche while proposing that London's "unsystematic, often self-contradictory worldview, buttressed by his by his eccentric vision of 'individualistic socialism' may be better described by Emersonian representativeness than by Nietzschean greatness and its accompanying discontents" (4).

fostered by the effect of reading well-crafted literature that offers rich depictions of the nonhuman world, what *The Call of the Wild* lacks is precisely this richness. This is because its literal story is merely the allegoretic or literal aspect of an implied and very much intended proper or allegorical meaning. And that meaning concerns not animal life or animality or nonhuman worlds but rather social Darwinism and class struggle in the light of a deterministic metaphysics. Buell's implied critique of *The Call of the Wild* implicitly echoes James' complaint about Hawthorne's allegories—that they are somehow disingenuous.

In Buell's case, the complaint is couched in a capacious ecocritical theory, while in James it is founded in something like the credo of realism. In Lukács, the endorsement of realism in fiction and resulting resistance to allegory are political. Essentially though, on the matter of realism and allegory James, Lukács, Watt, and Buell are in broad agreement. The important question here has to be why it is that we find allegory in fiction so bothersome. It seems to me that in the accounts we have glimpsed thus far there are a few differing, but all unsatisfactory, reasons on offer. For James, the reasoning is very much of the "Why not just tell the story you want to tell?" variety. But why does the notion of two stories and two meanings bother him? For Lukács, there are the political valences but it is difficult and perhaps impossible to tell whether the political commitments shape the aesthetics or vice versa. Watt's formalism is perhaps the strongest of the three, if only because it is tautological. If the novel's unique strength is its capacity for formal realism, no wonder readers tend to prefer novels that exhibit that capacity. Finally at least in the case of *The Call of the Wild*, Buell's objection is closest to James'—the book is not actually about animals (nature) but in fact entirely about the human. As such, it does not merit ecocritical attention. To some degree or another all of these accounts of the resistance to allegory in fiction take for granted a similar model of taste, and while they do not leave that

model entirely untheorized, one gets the feeling that in these cases there is at least something of the tail wagging the dog, of the aesthetic commitment informing the theory more than the other way around. Here then we want to account for what might inform these similar aesthetic commitments or tastes if you prefer.

"Close" Reading and the Resistance to Allegory

The critical resistance to explicit allegory in fiction comes down to, I think, the issue of "close reading." The reason that a popular audience is less inclined to show that resistance is because that audience is less invested in close reading than are literary scholars, critics, and theoreticians. The latter readers, which I will call sophisticated or experienced readers, are in a sense defined by the attention they pay to matters of language, form, genre, history, theory, and/or context that informs a given literary text. It is untrue to say that the popular audience is ignorant or uninterested in these matters, of course. At the same time the sophisticated, critical close reader, which is often if not always identical to the professional reader, can fairly be said to specialize in them. So let us look, if briefly, at the occupation of professional reading so to speak in order to begin to say what it means to read "closely."

There are two predominant methodologies of literary study that presently hold sway in the academy and while they are distinct they are not in any way fundamentally opposed. Those methodologies are historicism and close reading. The strongest literary critics, e.g. the perhaps paradigmatic Fredric Jameson, persuasively combine the two methods typically reading closely in order to sustain historical analysis. Now as a methodology historicism does not seem to have any problem accounting for naturalism or for allegory as its central tenet. As I did admittedly roughly above, it is not at all difficult to place the naturalist tendency in a specific intellectual, political, and economic context with more or less enlightening results. To read a naturalist text as

symptomatic of those constellated forces is in at least one sense precisely correct. At the same time, such work is essentially self-limiting in the way that once the connections are established the only points of disagreement come down to the specific ways in which the text is or is not symptomatic and the rubric of the critic's model of historical analysis. There is always in the historicist urge too the temptation to fall into analytic vulgarity in which the contours of the text as a text are sublimated to their symptomaticity.

Close reading, the other predominant methodology in literary studies, avoids the problem of reductionism found in vulgar historicism by demanding a stringent attention to the text itself. Although we can trace something like close reading back at least as far as the development of Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, as a specifically literary methodology it is typically said to have been codified in the early mid-twentieth century by I. A. Richards' Cambridge School in Britain and by the so-called New Criticism in United States. The term "close reading" is typically identified most strongly with American New Criticism and the so-called Cambridge School, and especially with the legacy of British literary critic I.A. Richards. What is meant by close reading? J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* perhaps oddly doesn't have much to say about the topic: "Detailed, balanced and rigorous critical examination of a text to discover its meanings and assess its effects" (142). In his 2007 *New Handbook of Literary Terms* David Mikics is a little more effusive. He writes that close reading is "[t]he discipline of careful, intricate study of a text," and that "[t]o read closely is to investigate the specific strength of a literary work in as many of its details as possible…. As such, close reading is the necessary form of serious literary study" (61) In what would seem to be in part a rejoinder to Knapp and Michaels, Mikics adds that "[a]ny reader who wishes to avoid turning a poem or novel into a mere piece of evidence concerning society, history, or intellectual

tradition, and instead wants to grasp the work's argument in its own terms, must read closely" (ibid). In his now-classic *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton is a little less sanguine about close reading:

> Like 'practical criticism' [close reading] meant a more detailed analytic interpretation, providing a valuable antidote to aestheticist chit-chat: but it also seemed to imply that every previous school of criticism had only read an average of three words per line. To call for close reading, in fact, is to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather than to something else: to 'the words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them…. [I]t encourage[s] the illusion that any piece of language, 'literary' or not, can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation. It was the beginnings of a 'reification' of the literary work, the treatment of it as an object in itself (38).

One can see theoretical battle lines being drawn in Eagleton's account. Already in the early 1980s when *Literary Theory: An Introduction* was published, the uses and abuses of literary theory were a disciplinary concern. Despite Eagleton's suspicion of close reading, however, there was little or no argument about its centrality to the discipline at this time. This would change around the turn of the millennium, as I shall discuss below. For now, though, we need only note that at least one crucial factor in defining close reading is that it requires an attention to the formal aspects of a text in addition to that text's perhaps self-evident meaning. Another defining factor of close reading, and perhaps of the same genus as attention to form, is attention to the language of a text. We could call such attention to how a text means what it means an attention to its rhetoric or its rhetorical aspects. In paying such attention, paradigmatic close readers of the Cambridge School and the New Criticism sought to supplement or reinforce

textual meaning through formal and rhetorical analysis. To oversimplify, one takes the text's relatively obvious meaning and rigorously examines how it produces that meaning through its form and its rhetorical aspects. To do so is, as Eagleton notes in the above excerpt, to perform a certain isolation of the text from its historical contexts in that it seems to assume that meaning is somehow independent of history: material, ideological, and linguistic.[61] Nevertheless, without close reading it is hard to imagine what literary studies as a discipline would be or do. If the methodological assumptions of close reading rest on the notion that excess, supplemental, or even occult meaning inheres in a given text in the ways in which its form and language constitute and complexify its obvious or surface meaning, we might begin to see roots of the resistance to allegory in fiction.

In the 2009 essay "Surface Reading: An Introduction," literary scholars Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue against what they broadly construe to be "symptomatic readings" of literary works, in which it is assumed that "the most significant truths [about or in the work] are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible" (4). It should be noted that this notion of the symptomatic reading implicates both historicist and close reading practice in addition to their admixture. One might quarrel with the notion that close reading is a form of symptomatic reading, but the point for Best and Marcus is that the ways in which Walter Benjamin's "basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content" tends to exclude obvious meanings and authorial intent, and, as a result, to favor more hermetic texts ("Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" 297). Best and Marcus consider these matters to be constricting and, for lack of a better term, classist. We may or may not agree with them on either point, but

[61] Eagleton does not have many kind words for the work of Michel Foucault, but in this way he can be said to concur with one of Foucault's central notions, one that is—as Eagleton is at pains to point out—of course derived from Marxism.

what is instructive about the essay is that it acknowledges that the practice of close reading seems to be predicated upon a certain understanding of and approach to "properly" literary works. Benjamin too articulates this notion when he writes that "the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their material content" (ibid). We can read Benjamin as saying that the properly literary work is one in which truth content is most hidden in the material content of plot, story, details, affective capacity, etc. It would stand to reason then that it is the properly literary work that is in most in need of critical work, of the professional or at least experienced reader to decode it. But that decoding, and this is the case for all close readers be they Rabbis, Biblical hermenauts, New Critics, or deconstructionists rests on what Benjamin calls, after Kant, the particularity of the work itself.[62] In short, the proper literary work is the one that calls for critique in the sense that its "material content" or surface has the effect of "hiding" other meanings.[63]

On the most basic understanding, the kind of allegory central to much literary naturalism and to *The Call of the Wild* would seem to present not problem for the close reader for the simple reason that by definition the allegory has another, more or less hidden, meaning beyond—as it were—its literal or surface meaning. As we have seen however, there is in much literary criticism a distinct resistance to allegory, which in turn implies that there is some way in which allegory in fiction and close reading present problems for each other. I want to argue that this resistance then comes down to two, related, factors. The first of these is the problem of particularity of the work while the second is an issue of interpretability.

[62] See Fred Rush's "Jena Romanticism and Benjamin's Critical Epistemology" in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed., A. Benjamin. London: Continuum, 2003 for more on this.
[63] Keep in mind these hidden meanings need not be objectively, universally, ahistorically true meaning that understood with any sophistication at all the practice of close reading is not about finding one true meaning but about opening up the field of meaning beyond the surface meaning.

In the first case, we can simply refer back to James and Buell. That is, there is a sense in which the allegory—at least to the degree that the reader perceives it—announces what amounts to the unimportance of the text's particularity. In the allegorical text the literal story, the story on the page, is "illegitimate" in as far as it exists solely to convey the "real" story, that of the allegory. As a result the text's particularity, the things that make it unique and specific, are in some sense not only irrelevant but actually a distraction from the proper meaning. To close read an allegory in its specificity is to attempt to solve a problem that simply does not exit because he "hidden" meaning is not hidden and the text's particularity is at best ancillary to that meaning. At worst, too much attention to textual particularity might cause the reader to miss the allegorical meaning, making her look foolish. We can see then at least one reason that the deterministic "description" favored by naturalist authors might irritate critics as it proliferates detail not for its own sake so to speak but rather primarily to point away from that very particularity. The other problem allegory in fiction presents to close reading is that the allegorical code is typically all too easy to decipher. We might even say that the very mark of allegory is that it is—or at least should be—more or less immediately decipherable. By way of example, one of the greatest literary allegories in English, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, can be said to succeed precisely to the degree that it does not obscure its proper and allegorical meaning. The problems allegory seems to present to close readers, at least in narrative fiction, point to something crucial about that figure. Allegory is unique in that it is a figure that requires minimal interpretation. As such, it would seem to hold a place somewhere between the propositional language of reference that is subject to claims of truth and falsity and the language of figure, which is precisely not subject to such claims. The allegory looks like a metaphor, it is a figure after all, but in a sense its veracity

is built into it meaning that it is largely not subject to interpretation or close reading but instead to verification.

The context of a given linguistic formation, it would seem then, is crucial to its close read-ability. For example if someone asks me to tell her what color the sky is and I say, "The sky is chartreuse," any examination of the statement turns on its veracity and not upon an examination of its linguistic formation. In this way, to close reading a simple declarative or indicative statement is an exercise in futility. If, however, my friend and I are on the surface of Mars where the color of the sky is not blue and she for some reason asks me whether it is in fact blue (let's say she is temporarily blinded) and I respond by saying sarcastically "Yes, the sky is blue," a close reading or an interpretation of that statement is warranted because of the way means something other than what it says on its surface, namely the opposite. In the case of the textual allegory, the moment we recognize the allegory is the moment that our reading turns from the work of interpretation, of critique, to the work of verification. The clearer it is that the literal story is a code for something else, then, the less interpretive potential that work has. In short, the better at being an allegory a text is the worse it is at being literary.

The movement that established, if not instilled, the importance of interpretation and particularity in aesthetics is of course that of romanticism. It is no coincidence that it is during the romantic periods in Britain and Germany that symbolism becomes the paradigm of artwork, critic, and interpretation and that allegory suffers the ignoble fate of becoming little more than a critical scapegoat. There have been though, in the many years since the romantic period, notable attempts to rescue the critical potential of allegory. Walter Benjamin's first book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, argues for the importance of the allegorical aspect specific to baroque tragic drama as well as for a critical model of allegory in contradistinction to the romantic

ideology of the symbol. Put all too briefly, for Benjamin the problem with romantic criticism is twofold. First, when it stresses symbolism it necessarily stresses a certain kind of unity of what he calls the material content of the work of art and its truth content. Crucial for Benjamin is the disarticulation, even violence, of the critical approach. As opposed to the unity of romantic symbolism, according to Benjamin the allegory enables the critic to perceive what he will call the ruins of the artwork. Rather than appearing as *sui generis* the allegorical artwork problematizes its own status as a figure in a unique way. Second, as Benjamin notes in "The Concept of Criticism" and the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origin*, the critical model of the romantics is problematic for him in the way that in it meaning is constantly and ever becoming (the term in mine, not Benjamin's) through interpretation. As such, any truth content produced through interpretation would be contingent in addition to being subject to endless accretion and revision. While it is not the case that Benjamin seeks to develop definitive or universally applicable interpretations, especially in his early writings he is profoundly concerned with (an admittedly very complex version of) universal and "pure" truths.[64] Allegory then provides him with a form that is self-reflexive in way that enables criticism while at the same time carries with it the authority of revealed truth that so crucial to what Benjamin's friend Theodor Adorno would call the former's pre-dialectical phase.

Two other thinkers of allegory as critical concept lean heavily on Benjamin, although of the two—Craig Owens and Paul de Man—the debt to Benjamin is far clearer in Owens. The art critic Owens' 1980 essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," originally published in two parts in the journal *October*, understands what he calls the postmodern aesthetic as centrally allegorical. While drawing deeply from Benjamin, Owens'

[64] Without going further into Benjamin's thought, I note only that this concern is likely essentially related to his theological and historical concerns.

take on allegorical is unilateral where Benjamin's can be said to bilateral. Benjamin is interested in allegory both as a theoretical paradigm for critique and as a literary form. For Owens, the import of allegory is more or less entirely in terms of its theoretical use.

While not concerned with literary study or close reading per se, Owens' work on allegory both describes a contemporary aesthetic practice and theorizes that practice. He does so by discussing what he calls the allegorical structure: "[i]n allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest" (69). "Conceived in this way," then Owens argues that "allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning" (ibid). Crucial here is the word "rewriting" here rather than, say, interpreting. Owen wants to insist that the allegorist "does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics" (ibid). According to Owen, the allegorist "adds another meaning" (ibid). Owen's understanding of hermeneutics as revealing rather than as constituting truth is, it must be admitted, somewhat naïve. Nevertheless his account of the structure of postmodern allegory and its importance to aesthetic theory stands. Owen understands that what he calls critique is fundamentally allegorical in structure, that critique in essence makes a given text allegorical by reading it through and against other texts and itself, by seeing something that was not previously there. In this respect he would appear to agree, at least in principle, with the other thinker of allegory we will explore—Paul de Man.

De Man's essay "Semiology and Rhetoric," which begins the collection *Allegories of Reading*, contains a rare example of the mandarin literary critic engaging with contemporary popular culture. Consisting of a brief reading of the rhetorical question "What's the difference?"

that de Man Takes from *All in the Family*'s Archie Bunker, it is a justly well-known episode. In the context of the essay, the reference to Norman Lear's seminal sitcom serves to illustrate the problem with what de Man calls the "apparent symbiosis between a grammatical and a rhetorical structure… in which the [rhetorical structure] is conveyed directly by means of a syntactical device," problem he understands to be demonstrated in rhetorical questions (9). By way of explanation, de Man tells us that Edith, Archie's wife, asks him whether he would like he bowling shoes laced over or under. Archie responds by saying "What's the difference?" As de Man writes it:

> Being a reader of sublime simplicity, [Edith] replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and under, whatever this may be, but provokes only ire. "What's the difference" did not ask for difference but means instead "I don't give a damn what the difference is." The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning. (9)

The syntactic device of the question, then, is here used rhetorically, which is to say figuratively, to preclude the semantic content of the question. De Man places a great deal of weight on this, as he calls it, trivial example. Indeed, he goes so far as to write that "the very anger [Archie] displays is indicative of more than impatience; it reveals his despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them potentially catastrophic in their consequences" (10). That is, Archie's anger, which we are to assume is <u>our</u> anger as well, is in response to the non-rhetorical (?) question de Man himself asks: "For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn't ask?" (10).

We needn't attempt to tackle de Man's question, a question that could be said to be his one question, in order to take the theoretical point. That point—that written and spoken language seen as an nexus of grammatical, referential, and rhetorical aspects or dimensions produces what de Man calls in the same essay "referential aberrations" that problematize the stability of language as such—tells us that when we use language rhetorically, which is to say figuratively, meaning cannot be said to inhere in language in any stable manner, that the form ("grammar" as de Man often calls it) of language, its rules, do not produce semantic content, i.e. meaning, even as they appear to do so. In order for us to think that it does, in order invest in the "apparent symbiosis" between grammar and rhetoric that de Man and Derrida call its presence, we must look "outside" of language itself and to the world.

Contrary to the prevailing view of de Man's work, to say that we must look "outside" language to establish meaning is not the same thing as saying that there is no outside, or that the outside is irrelevant. It is only to say that if we take, for example, the view of New Criticism that literary form, like grammar, produces meaning in certain rule-based ways, which of course it can do, we must acknowledge at the same time that meaning can entirely exceed those rules and that they are rules, meaning they are contingent, and not laws. To say this is to say along with de Man that order to interpret, there must be an interpreter. Simple enough. But de Man wishes to push a bit, or perhaps more than a bit, harder. He wants to say that these sorts of issues, issues that at first seem only to be perversions of certain kinds of literary study, point to a fundamental problem at the heart of language. It is banal, but true, to say that we need context and interpretation to decode language. What is important to de Man is that there is no way to "authoritatively" settle the matter of meaning in figurative, i.e. literary, language. This means in turn, and this is the key to all that follows in de Man and in the present essay, that for all intents

and purposes when a given linguistic formulation is bracketed from context, it can be said to have multiple meanings simultaneously. Not different interpretations, but different meanings, meanings that cannot be winnowed down by any amount of intralinguistic analysis. As de Man puts it regarding Archie's "What's the difference,"

> It is not so [in this case] that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation…. The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. (10, emphasis added)

These are theoretical matters of course, not practical ones, and we might go so far as to say that de Man's theory of literary language as such is essentially allegorical. Practically speaking the matter of deciding between meanings could not be simpler. We simply need to look outside the linguistic utterance or artifact for our context and from there we adjudicate between reasonable meanings. This is the act of linguistic interpretation, an act we perform countless times every day. And yet when it comes to what I must rather unfortunately call literary matters, that is when it comes to reading literary artifacts for the purposes of interpretation, things are not at all so simple. In fact, a good way of understanding what de Man is up to in "Semiology and Rhetoric" (and elsewhere) is to see it as the application of the vicissitudes of literary study to the philosophic issue of language writ large.

Throughout these essays, I attempt to work through some of these larger issues. In this chapter, though, I would like to turn away from the big picture for the moment and instead to

mount a more targeted intervention. To do this I will stay with de Man for a bit more, and indeed with "Semiology and Rhetoric." For although the Archie Bunker sketch outlined above receives the most attention, I want to look at its subsequent companion piece, de Man's brief reading of another rhetorical question, this time one found in the final stanza of Yeats' "Among School Children." De Man's discussion turns on the notion that the final line of the poem, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?," should be understood as a rhetorical question, that is as a figure. He argues that this reading of the final line has produced a number of internally consistent readings, readings that allow the interpreters to understand other, earlier moments of the poem in its light. But we know from the discussion of "What's the difference?" that de Man will throw this interpretation of the poem's final line into question, and of course he does:

> A… reading [of "Among School Children" that assumes] that the final line is to be read as a rhetorical question… reveals that the thematic and rhetorical grammar of the poem yields a consistent reading that extends from the first line to the last and that can account for all the details in the text. It is equally possible, however, *to read the last line literally rather than figuratively*, as asking with some urgency the question we asked earlier[:]… how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified? (11, emphasis added)

But while there are key similarities between de Man's discussions of "What's the difference?" and the line from Yeats, there are also crucial differences. Of his proposal that the Yeats line could be read literally, de Man notes that unlike the example from *All in the Family*, here "it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one… here, the figural reading, which assumes the question to be rhetorical, is perhaps naïve, whereas the literal reading leads to greater complication" (11). It is not necessary to go into a detailed account of the

thumbnail reading that de Man produces from this so-called literal reading. Instead what interests me is the simultaneity of the two readings, figurative and literal, and the implied—if not directly stated—notion that when we read literarily, if you will, we tend to preclude literal readings something which is even more true in the case allegory.

In a certain way, de Man's proposal to read literally but not naively—surely a willful perversion—is the epitome of close reading as a practice. Close reading must be understood as a fundamentally allegorical practice to the degree that it takes what is uncontroversially present in the text, its meaning, and puts it into question or at least suspension. It is precisely that which makes close reading possible, i.e. the figurative dimension of language, that warrants a suspension or bracketing of the ostensibly clear semantic content of a literary text. This is of course why the matter of authorial intent tends to be problematic for those branches of literary study oriented around close reading and conversely why literary scholars that want to highlight authorial intent tend to discount close reading to greater or lesser degrees.[65] The point for the present analysis is that while it can be said—following in different ways Benjamin, Owens, and de Man—that the theoretical paradigm of close reading is that of allegory, the presence of actual allegory in narrative fiction resists close reading such that the more allegorical a piece of fiction is, the less interesting it is to the close reader and the more its authorially intended meaning is taken as univocal. De Man's take, which figurally speaking of course, proposes to give an allegorical reading of allegory gives us just what we need to push beyond the resistance to allegory and to enable a reading that allegorizes the allegory, or put another way, that reads the allegory in *The Call of the Wild* post-allegorically.

[65] See examples in Knapp and Michaels' two "Against Theory" essays (*Critical Inquiry* 1982 and 1987 respectively) and Best and Marcus' "Surface Reading: An Introduction."

Unbreaking the Code: A Reading of Narrative in The Call of the Wild

If in "Semiology and Rhetoric" de Man is perverse when he asks us to read the last line of Yeats' poem literally, at first blush the suggestion that we read *The Call of the Wild* in some way literally hardly strikes us as aberrant for the simple reason that the audience with which the book finds favor does this almost without exception. Although there are other reasons for its sustained popularity, the fact that *The Call of the Wild* is an "animal book" is clearly at the heart of its popularity with the young adult audience. One does not wish to assume too much, but it seems safe to say that a great many of the enthusiastic younger readers of the book do not face the same issues that Buell expresses. While there may be some sense in which those readers intuit that another level to the novella's narrative exists, surely that intuition does not blot out the literal story in the same way it does for the more experienced reader. This ostensibly naïve reading understands, and/or perhaps misreads, *The Call of the Wild* not as essentially a code to be cracked, and a simplistic one at that, but instead as a story about a dog. Whatever the benefits of this "naïve" reading, and enjoyment can hardly be said to be the least of them, it has a central problem—it is little more than a reversal of the "sophisticated" reading. In the latter, the allegorical meaning blots out the literal meaning. In the former, the allegorical meaning is more or less evacuated when the literal one attains prominence. Our task here then will be not simply to read literally but to read the literal story post-allegorically. I hope that doing so will indicate that the constellation of issues I have invoked thus far has interesting and powerful implications.

Children tend to be powerfully drawn to animals and animal stories, a fact I am already observing in my nineteen-month-old son. But simply being an animal story cannot account for *The Call of the Wild*'s continuing popularity. Indeed, there is no lack of animal stories in the history of Western literature; we might think immediately of the fables attributed to the fifth

century BCE Greek fabulist Aesop. Why might *The Call of the Wild* have achieved signal status within the genre of animal stories in English? Certainly it is packed with adventure, violence, and striking imagery rendered in impactful yet simple prose. I suspect though that a great deal of the popularity of the book has to do with the very same thing that professional reader might see as its most egregious literary flaw: narrative strategy. If one of the central problems of allegory in fiction has to do with the ways that the particularities of the literal story are secondary and the allegorical meaning is not sufficiently obtuse, the ways in which these factors are broadcast to the reader will be the primary source(s) of dissatisfaction to the close reader. In the case of *The Call of the Wild* it is in the novella's narrative, not incidentally the aspect of the novel as such that lends the for formal realism, that these problems are most clearly manifest.

As arguably the strangest aspect of London's text, the narrative of *The Call of the Wild* is worth special attention the way it relates to the allegoricity of the book. Although it does a great deal more, narrative voice is crucially the medium of consciousness in prose fiction. In particular, it is the third person narrative voice that enables the novelist to render, represent, or depict the thought processes, emotions, and impressions of her characters. One does not want to go too far, but if the primary formal innovation of the novel is the centrality and depth of the narrative voice, it could be said that it is precisely that innovation that makes Watt's formal realism possible in the first place. It is likely no coincidence that much of Henry James' fame and influence rests on his rigorous work with narrative voice. What is interesting if not unique about the narrative voice in *The Call of the Wild* is the way in which the narrative voice struggles to render its nonhuman main character, Buck. Ultimately we will see that *The Call of the Wild* oscillates between two different types of what is typically called free indirect style as it attempts to balance the competing mandates of novelistic formal realism and allegorical abstraction. That

balance is impossible; at least on the rubrics we have seen so far. But rather than balance or dichotomy, I am interested in the post-allegorical issue of simultaneity and its implications. London avowedly wants to be as non-anthropocentric as possible in his depiction of Buck.[66] At the same time, he wants to give the reader some sense of Buck's inner life. And as we have seen perhaps the best way to do so would be to use such novelistic narrative techniques that would help to render a certain degree of psychological realism. But in order to accomplish both London has to go to extreme stylistic lengths, lengths that will almost immediately throw off the experienced reader. So while some of this book's narrative problematicity stems from the inherent epistemological problem of attempting to render animal consciousness in fiction,[67] this epistemological problem is not the primary one.[68] In fact, the real problem with *The Call of the Wild*, the one that prevents it from receiving serious critical attention is a literary one. What is crucial to remember though is that these two, epistemology and the literary, are vitally connected in London's text.

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[66] London is explicit about the former desire in a long essay that appeared in the September 5th 1908 edition of *Collier's: The National Weekly* called "The Other Animals" written in response to accusations of London's two "animal stories," *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, being examples of what was called "nature fakery." (This was a serious accusation at the time, as among others the naturalist and writer John Burroughs and then President of the United States Theodore Roosevelt accused a number of so-called nature writers as sentimentalists that misrepresented nature. A useful overview of what is now called the nature fakers controversy can be found in Ralph Lutts' *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science, and Sentiment*. In a well-known passage in "The Other Animals," London writes against what he calls "Homocentrism (!):"

> The writing of these two stories, on my part, was in truth a protest against the "humanizing" of animals, of which it seemed to me several "animal writers" had been profoundly guilty. Time and again, and many times, in my narratives, I wrote, speaking of my dog-heroes: "He did not think these things; he merely did them," etc. And I did this repeatedly, to the clogging of my narrative and in violation of my artistic canons; and I did it in order to hammer into the average human understanding that these dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning. Also, I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution; I hewed them to the mark set by scientific research, and awoke, one day, to find myself bundled neck and crop into the camp of the nature-fakers. (*Revolution and Other Essays* 237)

[68]London was certainly not the first to attempt to give something like an animal's eye view in narrative fiction, nor was he the last, but as noted above it seems clear that *The Call of the Wild* remains the most well known example of this attempt.

London writes *The Call of the Wild* in what we can call, without being too technical, non-diegetic third person limited perspective. That is, the narrator exists outside of the story and speaks as an onlooker. S/he has knowledge that exceeds perceptual knowledge, though, as evidenced both by awareness of broader temporal circumstances than the characters are capable of having and more importantly the ability to narrate some aspects of the inner life of the story's main character, the dog Buck. Of course non-diegetic third person narrative is in and of itself nothing particularly notable. Indeed, while such a narrative strategy is certainly not the only method of developing the kind of formal realism Watt understands to characterize the novel, it can be and has been seen as one of the most effective for a number of reasons. For example, in contrast to first person, third person allows the author to present significantly less circumscribed depictions of the world and as well as narrative context that serves to thicken, on Clifford Geertz's term, a story's depictions of the lived world.

Third person, and particularly non-diegetic third person, also makes the often-loose temporality of the novel much less jarring by through an external voice that can tell aspects of the story in retrospection. Finally, and most importantly for my purposes, non-diegetic third person limited allows the narrator to focus on a select number of characters and to render the inner lives of those characters in a way that exceeds their own capacity for self-awareness. That is, unlike a first person narrative, the third person non-diegetic point of view gives the author the ability to describe, depict, and reflect on a character's inner life in a way that the character herself would be unable to do. In these cases, the narrator and by association the reader play the part of the analyst to the character's analysand, developing a relatively coherent narrative of the character's personality and thought process, something that she herself is prevented from doing by the nature of consciousness itself. This is perhaps common sense about how narrative fiction,

and particularly novels, "work," as James Wood might say. And it is precisely for these reasons that novels excel at formal realism, an excellence that has helped shape what we expect from a novel as we have seen.

The Call of the Wild of course takes for its center of consciousness a nonhuman consciousness using the same narrative technique that is particularly well-suited to portraying the very deepest of a character's psychological depths—non-diegetic, limited third person—to do so. The result is that the reader "gets to know" Buck in a similar way that she gets to know, say, *The Portrait of a Lady*'s Isabel Archer. And it is this rapport between character and reader that helps to explain the popularity of *The Call of the Wild* with young readers. But interestingly, it is the very same technique that draws in ostensibly naïve readers that alienates the experienced ones, including perhaps those interested in ecocriticism especially those aligned with critical animal studies and its variants: zoopoetics, biosemiotics, zooontology among others.

The reason for this alienation is simple but twofold. First, the character-reader rapport fails for our experienced reader precisely because London uses a narrative strategy that forces him into anthropomorphizing his subject against his will. He cannot help this if he is to attempt to render Buck's inner life, but when he does the sophisticated reader will balk. This point may seem trivial at first, but is in fact of tremendous import for understanding the relative lack of critical interest in *The Call of the Wild*. Second, and nested within the first, the novella's anthropomorphization of dog consciousness would seem to do injustice to the canine character and more broadly to all dogs on the level of verisimilitude, and perhaps that of ethics as well. Indeed it is these issues that bring the problem of allegory to the fore in *The Call of the Wild*. That is, by inaccurately representing dog consciousness as more or less "human," *The Call of the Wild* all too easily reveals its allegorical hand so to speak, which in turn alienates the reader as

she loses interest in the story being told (the literal story). So perhaps paradoxically the same thing that causes the "sophisticated" reader to turn away from the text is exactly that which draws the less "sophisticated" reader to it: London's attempts to render Buck's inner life through third person narrative.

Let us look at this in action, and where better to start than with the very first paragraph of *The Call of the Wild*:

> Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tidewater dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, and the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them from the frost (1).

One has to admit that the opening sentence is strikingly effective. It immediately piques reader curiosity. But at another level it inscribes the characteristic roughness, even sloppiness, of London's craftsmanship. To the attentive reader, shall we say the close reader, the same sentence can appear absurd. What could it mean to say something like "Buck did not read the newspapers?" In what world is it possible for a dog, which Buck clearly is as the opening sentence establishes in the restrictive clause "not alone for himself, but for every tidewater dog," to read, and of course, comprehend a newspaper? The answer of course is none that we know of, rendering the statement, at least the first phrase of the opening sentence that is, very literally meaningless. As such, it must be understood as a "rhetorical" sentence in the negative sense; like a rhetorical question, it exists only to position, to move things along, and thus has no semantic

content and little or no aesthetic value. Keep in mind that this is the very first sentence of the book, the opening salvo as it were, upon all that follows is to, and must, rest. Yet the more closely the initial portion of that sentence is read, the more scrutiny it is put under, the emptier and perhaps more abyssal it appears—a kind of narrative ouroboros that always already produces and swallows that which will come.

But if the phrase in question has no content per se, it can be said to have a function--intended or otherwise. We can think of its function as primary "phatic" in the linguist and literary critic Roman Jakobson's terms from "Linguistics and Poetics" (68, 71). The phatic function is that which seeks to establish, check, and "clear the channel" of communication between narrator (not author!) to reader, or we could say in this context draw the reader into relation with the narrative voice. It also seems to serve what Jakobson calls the "conative" function. The conative function of language serves to address what we might call the recipient of the linguistic act, here the reader. In doing so of course, it strengthens the establishment of a distinct third person narrative voice that will provide the reader with her primary lens on the story, so to speak. Despite being essentially unnecessary, even empty, even absurd, then this clause about newspapers engages and even engenders or interpellates the reader because no matter how she takes it, this strangeness cannot be ignored. So this first sentence of *The Call of the Wild* has brought the reader into the fold and has established a non-diegetic narrative voice. At the same time it sets up a dramatic irony that further draws the distinction between narrator, author, reader, and character while cleverly drawing the reader in to the story further by hinting at the possibility that the narrative voice may be able to "speak" Buck's inner voice. We can see this a bit more clearly by restating the sentence a bit:

<u>If Buck had read the newspapers, he would have known trouble was brewing etc.</u>

What we have here are not Buck's thoughts per se but rather the absence of his thoughts. But as cagey as London is in this case about anthropomorphism, there is a distinct implication that the narrator can "see" or "hear" something of Buck's consciousness in these words. While the effect and perhaps intent here are clear enough—London wants to build reader rapport with Buck's consciousness while at the same time avoiding anthropomorphism—when one attempts to figure what is actually going on she is likely to feel a certain frustration. The closer one reads, that is, the more irritated with this sentence she is likely to be. What could it possibly mean?

The reason for this irritation is on the one hand simple—what London has written does not make sense on some levels, even as it works literarily. Epistemic intelligibility is sacrificed for effect; or put another way, the phatic and conative literary effects function in spite of the meaninglessness (or banality) of the phrase, a fact that on its own points to the deep connection of literary and epistemological matters. In a certain way then, this opening sentence can be seen as an allegory for the issues of narrative voice that occur throughout the first half of the novella. Those issues pit narrative techniques for the linguistic rendering of consciousness against London's ethical commitment to avoiding attributing reason and language to Buck. We have already begun to see that it is these narrative techniques that precisely establish connections between reader and character and that thus make narration aesthetically viable. And this is why London cannot avoid them altogether even as he struggles not to anthropomorphize. We might ask then if it is the case that ontological matters too are implicated in the complex matrix I am examining throughout this monograph. To what extent can it be said the literary urge is at base an ontological one, that literary works are not copies of a world but a reflection of and working through of the ways in which humans constitute their worlds? If it turns out that this is the case, perhaps literary investigation is not ancillary to philosophical matters, and if in turn the human

orientation to the world and its consequences for nonhuman beings are indeed of philosophical examination, perhaps the literary can be of use. If the ways in which London accomplishes his literary work have epistemological and even ontological implications, then it is vital to note that London is walking a knife-edge already in the first sentence of *The Call of the Wild*, a knife-edge that illustrates what we can call, with Paul Ricoeur, the conflict of interpretations. That first sentence is not only mildly effective for the "naïve" reader but strikingly successful. At the same time though it puts the "experienced" or close reader on high alert in the ways that it plays fast and loose with narrative voice.

On the aesthetic model, the novella's first words telegraph to the close reader that upon examination she will find that the text unravels itself as it attempts to linguistically represent that which cannot be narrated, Buck's consciousness. I said above that this is a literary problem, although as I have suggested that literary problem is indicative of broader issues. What I mean when I say that *The Call of the Wild* has a literary problem is that what London and his close reader come up against in the text is the limit case of narrative voice: nonlinguistic consciousness. But this is not simply a strategic error. This would be to imply along with Henry James and Lukács only that novelistic techniques ought to be reserved for certain kinds of subjects and not for others. To say the latter though is not, as it may first appear, to state a fact. Instead it is a normative claim. More specifically it is a judgment of taste, which is to say a judgment of appropriateness or adherence to standards.[69] And while in aesthetic matters judgments of taste are not only warranted but necessary, the judgment of taste that obscures its own status as a judgment is, simply put, a reification which is to say, in Louis Althusser and Paul

[69] Kant: "Thus if we say, .e.g., That is a beautiful woman, we do in fact think nothing other than that nature offers us in the woman's figure a beautiful presentation of the purposes [inherent] in the female build. For in order to think the object in this way, through a logically conditioned aesthetic judgment, we have to look beyond the mere form and toward a concept" (*Critique of Judgment* 180).

de Man's terms, a product of ideology. What all this means is that we should not simply take the side of the close reader, which will be dismissal, about allegory, naturalism, and *The Call of the Wild*. To do so without further examination of what we mean when we talk about narrative and its limit cases is to perpetrate a theoretically naïve reading in that we would rely on taste, on aesthetic standards, in a more or less unreflective manner.

In order to avoid such theoretical naiveté we will need to move beyond the rather basic account of narrative sketched so far and we can do so with the help of narratologist Dorrit Cohn. I have found Cohn's take on narratology most useful in this case because it devotes itself to a nuanced analysis of the literary convention of formal psychological realism in terms of how the novelist produces it through narrative voice. In her well-known 1978 study of narrative *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* Cohn proposes that the free indirect discourse found in fiction, i.e. the third person point of view that depicts and even speaks in the voice of a character, can be understood as utilizing one or a combination of three "basic techniques:" what she calls psycho-narration, quoted monologue, and narrated monologue. Of these three, I am concerned here only with the first and the last: psycho-narration and narrated monologue.[70] Very basically, psycho-narration puts the narrator in the role of an explainer that relays information about the character's inner life—conscious and/or verbal as well as unconscious and/or sub-verbal—to the reader while at the same time not mimetically reproducing that life. An equivalent might be when we say about some poor decision in the past something like "I know what I was thinking/feeling, but boy was I wrong!" In such a case, we are narrating a thought process but not necessary reproducing the exact mental language of that thought process.

[70] As is clear from the name, the technique Cohn calls quoted monologue consists of the narrator "exactly" reproducing the thoughts of a character either within or without quotes. Since this technique has no place in *The Call of the Wild*, I will not have reason to discuss it further.

Psycho-narration has a few interesting qualities that distinguish it. First, as Cohn argues it psycho-narration is simultaneously "the most indirect and most traditional of the available methods" of presenting consciousness in third person narrative and the method that is best suited for portraying what she calls "the least conscious strata of psychic life," the depiction of which can be understood to be one of the hallmarks of psychological realism (56).[71] Unlike quoted and narrated monologues, which in different ways seek to reproduce mental language psycho-narration is able to narrate the more or less unconscious aspects of experience, as well as depicting pre- or sub-conscious sensory experience. As Cohn puts it, "one of the important advantages of psycho-narration… lies in its verbal independence from self-articulation. Not only can it order and explain a character's conscious thoughts better than the character himself [sic], it can also effectively articulate a psychic life that remains unverbalized, penumbral, obscure" (46). Taking these notions into account, we can see clearly why psycho-narration would generally be the most effective narrative technique for a text like *The Call of the Wild*. To the extent that a character's consciousness is non-verbal, access to that conscience through language proves problematic. If however the narrator narrates that consciousness in language, she seems to be on more or less stable ground. She is not attributing verbal capacity to that character's inner life, but simply that life into words as a form of approximation. It is of course always going to be awkward to attempt to represent non-verbal thought in words, but if it is the human narrator doing so in the name of the nonhuman character, the very separation between the two might allow for enough suspension of disbelief to make this method at least functional.

But psycho-narration has literary downsides in addition to its benefits. Perhaps the most important of these downsides is one that London understands quite well. At the same time that

[71] Psycho-narration is traditional because it preserves the separate narrative voice, the ostentatious narrator we might call it, and distance between narrator and character of the early novel as opposed to more modernistic to the more chameleonic narrators of psychological realism.

psycho-narration distances the narrator from the figural consciousness, thereby crucially limiting the narrator's purview to that of an observer of mental processes rather than an eavesdropper upon mental "language," psycho-narration also distances reader from the character in important ways. Even if it cannot be said to bar or block reader investment or intimacy, psycho-narration gives an outside(r) perspective on a given character's consciousness rather than letting her inner voice speak for itself as it were. If in more or less traditional narrative fiction the authorial goal is reader identification and/or affective or psychological closeness with a given character, psycho-narration is at best limited. As a result, an author who wishes achieve this kind of reader intimacy while maintaining a third person narrative voice, then, is likely to make some use of the other two forms of represented consciousness that Cohn notes, quoted monologue and narrated monologue.[7273]

Narrated monologue works quite differently from psycho-narration according to Cohn. It "may be most succinctly defined as the technique for rendering a character's thought in his [sic] own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration" (100). In other words, narrated monologue is "a transformation of figural thought-language into the narrative language of third-person fiction" (ibid). The important difference between psycho-narration and narrated monologue then comes down to the matter of language, specifically how it is positioned in the context of author, narrator, character, and reader. Psycho-narration does not presuppose linguistic capacity, mental or vocal, while narrated monologue does.

[72] Perhaps obviously, the easiest way to build rapport between reader and character is probably through first person narration.

[73] Quoted monologue, which I will not address here, is simply when a narrator gives a character's thoughts in the same way she would in narrated spoken dialogue. Among many examples Cohn uses the following excerpt from the beginning of Book the Second of Dickens' *Little Dorrit* in which the reader is privy to Amy (a.k.a. "Little") Dorrit's thought: "The lady had fallen into a slumber, and the whisper was too low to awake her. Her visitor [Amy/Little Dorrit], standing quite still, looked at her attentively. 'She is very pretty,' she said to herself. 'I never saw so beautiful a face. O how unlike me!'" (436).

In the opening sentences of *The Call of the Wild* then, the strange negative knowledge about Buck's consciousness London provides can be understood as a careful priming of readers such that they will accept psych-narration when it does appear. London establishes a certain narrative distance from Buck by giving the reader something like a god's eye third person view and this in turn cements the extra-diegetic status of the narrator. At the same time, through the clever decision to approximate Buck's inner life through negation rather than attribution, the text suggests psychological proximity or intimacy with him that pure psycho-narration cannot provide. Attractive and repulsive, intimate yet distanced, knowing about not knowing: this opening sentence begins with what we might call at the same time the best of opening clauses and the worst of opening clauses. For the experienced or close reader it is the worst in that it puts her immediately on the defensive due to its patent absurdity. For the "naïve" reader, though, this same clause sets the stage for the immersion into Buck's character that animates the book, the same immersion that likely accounts for a great deal of its popularity with young adults.

The question then is whether *The Call of the Wild* follows up on the implication of psycho-narration in these sentences by telling us not what is absent in Buck's consciousness but rather what is present there. Put another way, the question for our close reader and for us as close readers of close reading is whether London is able to continue to avoid psycho-narration quite so aptly as he does early on. As my reader will no doubt intuit, he cannot. At the same time though, we must give London credit when it is due. Take for example the following passage:

> But Buck was neither house dog nor kennel dog. The whole realm was his. He plunged into the swimming tank or went hunting with the Judge's sons; he escorted Mollie and Alice, the Judge's daughters, on long twilight or early morning rambles; on wintry nights he lay at the Judge's feet before the roaring library fire; he carried the Judge's grandsons

> on his back, or rolled them in the grass, and guarded their footsteps through wild adventures down to the fountain in the stable yard, and even beyond, where the paddocks were, and the berry patches. Among the terriers he stalked imperiously, and Toots and Ysabel he utterly ignored, for he was king--king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included. (2)

Here London scrupulously avoids attributing anything like a linguistic or verbal consciousness to Buck. Instead, London again gives us the extra-diegetic third person narrator, an ironic presence that passes judgment on Buck. In this example, the reader too remains at an ironic distance from Buck to a degree that smacks of the attenuation of character so often attributed to the naturalist novel, and to the allegory. So despite the fact that the distance of what we might call pure narration (pure in the sense that it represents only the voice of the narrator) here and the consequent flatness is the most inconspicuous and least disruptive narrative strategy for "accurately" depicting a nonverbal consciousness, it does not and cannot last for the very simple reason that no one would want to read the book if it did!

The implied psycho-narration of the opening sentences of *The Call of the Wild* soon becomes explicit. By way of context, in the following excerpt Buck is abducted by the assistant gardener Manuel who "had one besetting sin" which is that he "loved to play Chinese lottery," thereby putting him in debt and causing him to steal and sell Buck (3). It is this crucial plot point that forces London into a narrative corner. In order to make the story work, he needs to get Buck off of Miller's ranch and into the Arctic. But how would this kingly canine be brought anywhere against his will? The dictates of realism, or at least of good storytelling, tell us the machinations of plot must be at least reasonably plausible. In the case of Buck's abduction, it is crucial that the reader is able to believe that Buck would go along with Manuel willingly. The dilemma then is

that only way London can find to accomplish this is to give us Buck's perspective on the abduction, his rationale so to speak, and it is here that the novella's first shift into psycho-narration occurs:

> Buck had accepted [Manuel's] rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unwonted performance but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for a wisdom that outreached his own. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, he growled menacingly. He had merely intimated his displeasure, in his pride believing that to intimate was to command. But to his surprise the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath. In a quick rage he sprang at the man, who met him halfway, grappled him close by the throat, and with a deft twist threw him over on his back. Then the rope tightened mercilessly, while Buck struggled in a fury, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting futilely. Never in all his life had he been so vilely treated, and never in all his life had he been so angry. (3, emphasis added)

I have emphasized the two sentences I consider most telling, in both of which London appears to be giving us Buck's thoughts through narrative interpretation. There is no need to attribute language to Buck's consciousness in these cases; the work of the narrative is to describe the emotions of a nonhuman animal in human language—a perfectly epistemologically and stylistically sound task. Therefore, it must be the case that this is psycho-narration and not narrated monologue. What is vital about this shift is that we have stepped into Buck's mind in a way we have not heretofore. Instead of telling us what Buck does not know or feel, here the text explicitly depicts concrete mental/emotional content. This kind of psycho-narration occurs throughout the rest of the novella, although its presence becomes less intense in its second half. It is worth noting too that London is often at pains to make sure the reader does not confuse the

narrator's words and thoughts for those of Buck. Take for example ones of the key passages in chapter two in which we find the following account of the meaning of Buck's initial foray into food theft:

> This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death. It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. It was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship, to respect private property and personal feeling; but in the Northland, under the law of club and fang, whoso took such things into account was a fool, and in so far as he observed them he would fail to prosper. (17)

This is a clear example of psycho-narration, but even as such it seems to trouble London. The very next sentence explicitly disavows attributing "reason" to Buck: "Not that Buck reasoned it out. He was fit, that was all, and unconsciously he accommodated himself to the new mode of life" (ibid, emphasis added). Again, the words of the narrative are unequivocally distanced from Buck's mind or consciousness and if there is some awkwardness as a result, just as there was regarding Buck and the newspapers, it would seem to stem from a commitment on London's part to a certain formal realism in which to render Buck as having a linguistic and/or reasoning consciousness would be draw attention a certain artificiality in the narrative.

What then to make of the moments when this commitment flags, and which not coincidentally might be said to be some of the text's most effective passages, at least in terms of how they build the reader-character relation? Let us look at an example, again from the first page. Here the narrator sets the stage for Buck's kidnapping by explaining its genesis in the

Alaskan gold rush. There, London writes "Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland" (1). For the experienced reader, this phrasing likely has a very similar effect to that of the opening sentence. She is bound to ask why London refers to "yellow metal" instead of simply using the word "gold?" Why the almost childish diction of "the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them" that follows it? And we must note of course that this strange, almost childlike language is not unique to the opening of the novel. Indeed, it permeates the book, and accounts for another reason that the book has been consigned to the young adult audience. But if we acknowledge that *The Call of the Wild* was not necessarily written with the young adult reader in mind, we must ask what can be happening here.[74]

Recall that psycho-narration is particularly well-suited to giving readers access to non-verbal or pre-verbal consciousness while narrated monologue, because it invokes the character's own mental language, is not. In the former case, the liabilities of psycho-narration—its distancing, its implication of narrative omniscience—become assets. But its flaws remain, and despite the situated usefulness of psycho-narration for depicting a non-verbal consciousness, it can be seen as the equivalent of what is in creative writing programs called "telling" as opposed to "showing." Usefully, this terminology recalls Lukács on narration and description, a statement both of aesthetics as politics and a, for the time, fairly uncontroversial statement of fact regarding the qualities of putative success in narrative fiction. As telling, as description, psycho-narration is inherently limited at least in as far as it can depict consciousness. It can only "directly" present

[74] Although London likely had no illusions that *The Call of the Wild* would be considered so-called high literature at the time, it was first published as a serial in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. *The Post*—perhaps most famous today for its Norman Rockwell covers—can be fairly safely referred to as a "middle-brow" literary outlet of the time, as opposed to say *The Century* or *The Atlantic* or *Harper's*. Nevertheless, the readership of *The Post* was certainly not young adults!

the voice and thus consciousness of the narrator, never that of the character, thereby putting the reader at a remove not found in the case of narrated monologue. "Showing," on the other hand—narrated monologue as a species of what Lukács calls narration—allows for psychological depth and realism and thus for richer reader engagement. So the notion of good fiction, the one that Lukács and James rely on, that of formal realism, calls out for narrated monologue. The animal story on the other hand, for reasons we have already seen is best suited to psycho-narration.

It is clear enough that the sentence in which "yellow metal" appears is an example of third person narrative. But, our experienced reader might ask, doesn't the phrase "yellow metal" show what Buck is ostensibly thinking, or at least how he would think if he knew, rather than tell us? Isn't it, that is, an example of narrated monologue and not the psycho-narration we have seen so far? If so, isn't London sneaking implying that Buck's consciousness is in fact verbal? At first glance, "yellow metal" seems to be a mirror image of psycho-narration in which we are told, again, what Buck does not know (that there is a gold rush on and by implication the meaning of the word "gold") rather than what he thinks. But just as clearly the text smuggles in the impression of the linguistically constituted inner life that London works so hard to avoid elsewhere. It matters then a great deal whether the words "yellow metal," and these words are symptomatic of a much larger pattern in the text, are those of Buck's inner voice or a narrative approximation of what Buck feels.

We know that London sidling up, as it were, to Buck's consciousness through the free indirect style here, through—that is—psycho-narration. Unlike the first line and the other cases I have noted, "yellow metal" and the childlike style do not separate the narrator from Buck's consciousness. Rather this sidling up seems to be nothing other than an attempt to represent something like the "voice" of Buck's consciousness. But if this is true, we have a problem. It

seems clear that "yellow metal" stands in for "gold" because as a dog, Buck would not know the meaning of the latter. But to the extent that this is so, it becomes clear with the barest reflection, the kind that would come almost immediately to the experienced reader, that neither would Buck know the meaning of "yellow" nor the "metal!"

Here then for the first time, and on remember this on page one, the narrative positively attributes a linguistic or verbal consciousness to Buck in a way that London is careful to avoid at other times. Surely Buck would not know any of these words, and as a result any claim to formal realism is, if not dissolved, threatened already here. Without going into the large body of literature on animal intelligence and language, let us simply say that domestic animals dogs do typically have some kind of relation to human language, and that the same thing cannot be said for even the most intelligent wild animal. Dogs, and cats to a much lesser degree, are capable at the very least of recognizing certain words such as names and commands. Even so, it will seem incorrect to most people to say that dogs understand human language in any meaningful sense. We know for example that dogs are incapable of speaking human language, and it appears that that limitation is not only a factor of differing vocal apparatuses. In addition it seems uncontroversial to say that dogs are probably unable to understand complex linguistic formulations such as, for example, this sentence. To attribute a verbal capacity, mental or vocal, to a dog then will tend to raise the hackles of the careful reader, likely causing her to reflect rather disapprovingly on the story. At almost the same moment the close reader feels identification as his "voice" is presented narratively then, she realizes that this depiction is at best disingenuous and at worst entirely absurd.

It is clear with the "yellow metal" that London is quickly approaching narrated monologue. No doubt this is to maximize reader empathy, but at the same time doing so

jeopardizes his narrative at least as far as the experienced reader goes.[75] And while the "yellow metal" is a single example and one that hints at narrated monologue rather than explicitly participating in it, there are many more examples that are far more obvious. E.g. the closing sentence of the first chapter in which Buck is experiencing snow for the first time: "The onlookers laughed uproariously, and he felt ashamed, he knew not why, for it was his first snow" (10). Or again as Buck appears to reflect on Curly's violent death at the hands of the pack of dogs: "So that was the way. No fair play. Once down that was the end of you. Well, he would see to it that he never went down" (11). Then we have the rhetorical questions in the second chapter. A sampling: "Were [the men] in the tent? .... Then where could they possibly be?"; "Another lesson. So that was the way they did it, eh?" (14). The close reader, ostensibly at least unlike the naïve or young adult reader, must ask whose "voice" we hear in these examples. This is not ventriloquism in which the narrator speaks for Buck's inner voice. At the diegetic level at least, its opposite. The narrator is channeling something like Buck's own words, but doing so without ever fully falling into narrative monologue. We can see this as something like a half measure on London's part to bridge the conflicting demands of formal realism and audience engagement in the genre of the animal story. I would prefer though to think of London's vacillation between the less than readerly epistemological stability of psycho-narration and the more engaging yet problematic flashes of psycho-narration as what Cohn calls, following the Austrian literary critic Leo Spitzer, stylistic contagion.

[75] There is no literary law, written or otherwise, that says that a sentence must be consistent in its narrative mode and no doubt it would not take us particularly long to come up with some notable examples. It is not an uncommon practice for authors to shift from narrated monologue to quoted monologue and/or to psycho-narration and back again within given sentences. This may cause some literary awkwardness, of course, but the point is that there is no reason that simply because it occurs within a sentence that is definitively voiced by the narrator the phrase "yellow metal" must also be in that voice, or more properly speaking that the narrative voice does not or cannot take on the voice of the character more or less willy-nilly.

As Cohen has it, stylistic contagion is the switching from psycho-narration to moments of narrated monologue and as such it "mark[s] a kind of mid-point between the two techniques where a reporting syntax is maintained, but where the idiom is strongly affected (or infected) with the mental idiom of the mind it renders" (33). Thinking of this narrative effect as stylistic contagion appeals not simply because Cohn's description matches the case in *The Call of the Wild* but in the implications of its phrasing. For Cohn, in fact, stylistic contagion might not be the best term because for her this "contagion" appears to be a symptom rather than a pathogen. Cohn, that is, is interested that narrative move in the way that it serves as a mediating force between the two other distinct narrative styles we have examined so far. She does not pay notable attention to the its implications other than to say, for example, that "[p]assages of psycho-narration involving stylistic contagion rarely continue for long stretches without lapsing into sentences of pure narrated monologue" (33).

Now in the case of *The Call of the Wild* we do have stylistic contagion, but we do not have a great deal of narrated monologue to follow it. In fact, there are none of Cohn's full sentences of pure narrated monologue on display. What this suggests is that in this case, stylistic contagion is very much pathogenic rather than symptomatic. Indeed for the close reader, the reader of taste, the narrative ambiguity caused by the "infected" passages in London's novella creates an immediate dissonance or even sepsis that to judge by the critical disinterest noted earlier may in fact be literarily fatal. Such dissonance is the inevitable collateral effect of the flashes of narrated monologue precisely because it is not clear whether the words on the page are those of the narrator or the character, existing as they do in a liminal space somewhere between the two. In the context of the typical novel, shifts between psycho-narration and internal monologue are not particularly problematic because needn't worry about whether the character

whose consciousness is depicted is capable of language; we know she is. As a result most often narrative monologue is not only acceptable in the novel but also in fact highly useful in the ways mentioned above. In *The Call of the Wild*, however, and indeed any piece of fiction that takes an animal as its center of consciousness, things are not so clear.

These shifts from the stability of third person and psycho-narration to Buck's ostensible inner linguistic idiom in the moments of narrated monologue, comprise a critical literary "error" to the experienced reader, if that is we take the "literary" to be a way of referring to texts that aesthetically rewards the close reader by revealing by, shall we say, thickening its literariness. We might even go so far as to say that deployed "properly" Cohn's stylistic contagion can very much engender this very thickening. The problem with it in London's text, of course, is that non- or extra-diegetically speaking, once the text has been lethally infected by moments of narrative monologue the experienced reader is nearly forced into a non-diegetic space, one in which she realizes that the author is very much ventriloquizing by attributing a voice, here London both speaking for Buck and attributing verbal capacity to him. This in turn means that the close reader is surprised by the suspension of London's fiction and the consequent and unwelcome return of repressed, and likely quotidian, reality. London himself gets very close to admitting the problem in chapter six.

There, in a suggestive and it must be admitted over-read passage John Thornton, Buck's final owner and the object of Buck's "[l]ove, genuine passionate love" (54), says of and to Buck "God! you can all but speak!"—precisely the thoughts of the experienced reader responding to the presence of the stylistic contagion and the thoughts that are likely to issue a less than positive judgment of the book (55).[76] And that judgment, lest we forget Lawrence Buell's complaint, is

[76] The chapter in which the both of these quotes appear is called "For the Love of a Man," a chapter that describes Buck's feelings in what appear to be homoerotic terms, a fact that has been commented on fairly widely. See Scott

that it is too allegorical, that Buck is just one more man in fur and that at the moment this is realized, the reader loses any investment she may have in the narrative. It should not be forgotten though that what for the close reader might be a fatal infection is for the naïve reader, something like what is called in the biological sciences a commensal relationship between species: "a relation between individuals of two species where one species obtains benefits from the other without harming or benefitting the latter" (Dobrindt, et al. v). That is, the appearance of the stylistic contagion in *The Call of the Wild* is for the less-close reader likely beneficial in that it helps build and strengthen the relationship between Buck and the reader, the very relationship that is a primary factor in making the text compelling to those readers.

The point of the foregoing is not simply that the same technique causes different affects in different kinds of readers, although that is of course true. Instead it is that *The Call of the Wild* seems to resist close reading because it is less than stringent in its narrative coherence, an issue that is only an error in this context in that it brings up epistemological issues about the minds of nonhuman animals and their relation to narrative and thus to language. It is not accurate then to say that *The Call of the Wild* cannot be close read. Instead we must say that it when it is at least on the usual model of close reading, the text forces the hand of the close reader. When that happens, the reader finds instead of the fictive or literary thickness she craves, she finds what Hillis Miller has called the allergen of text, a unconscious reaction of the literary immune system that in effect shuts down critique.[77]

But we err if we stop our analysis at this point because it is precisely the nature of this allergen, and the fact that the naïve reader seems more or less inured to it, that is at stake. What I

Derrick's "Making a Heterosexual Man: Gender, Sexuality, and Narrative in Jack London's Fiction," Jonathan Auerbach's cleverly titled *Male Call: Becoming Jack London*, Alex Kershaw's *Jack London: A Life* among others.

[77] See Miller's "Paul de Man as Allergen" in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (U of Minnesota Press, 2001).

have sketched out is the way in which as a piece of "literature" *The Call of the Wild* has certain shortcomings that are likely to bother the close reader. The discussion of narrative technique in that light has twofold relevance. First, I wanted to discuss the ways in which our assumptions about the strengths of the novel, what Watt calls formal realism, play a crucial part in the ways in which we read long form fiction that takes as its subject nonhuman and non-verbal consciousnesses. The takeaway is that formal realism is precisely not reality or an imitation of it but rather a generic formalism, even a trope. In some ways it is remarkable that so many sensitive critics fall prey to a criticism takes this trope as a criterion of judgment, even as they are aware of its theoretical limitations. The ways in which experienced readers read fiction are so ingrained that they almost cannot help but dismiss any fictive enterprise that turns away, at whatever level, from human consciousness. This fact indicates how close readers and close reading are apparently inexorably tied to models and perceptions of human consciousness. What I have been calling naïve readers, whether they be young adults or not and whether they are naïve by way of fate or decision, do not suffer from the same kind of literary and cognitive dissonance that the close reader does when reading London's text. We can verify this with clear empirical evidence—the ongoing popularity and fame of *The Call of the Wild*, and although I do not have the space to go into detail about why it is so, it should at least point out to us that there is a certain naiveté implied and even necessary to literary reading as such. It just depends what manner of naiveté, apparently.

Conclusions: Post-Allegory and the Reading of Reading

The effect of the kind of close reading I have engaged in here is that of alienating the reader from the work in a crucial way. It is that alienation, which of course can and does come about for the close reader through any number of stylistic matters, that makes the realization of

the allegorical aspect of the text possible. To read *The Call of the Wild* allegorically, the reader must not think that the literal story—that of Buck the dog's atavistic reversion to a wild state—is the real story, and in order to think this she must be able to abstract allegorical meaning from the text. Any literary faux pas that might contribute to that abstraction, very much including the clash of formal realism and flashes of narrated monologue, serve as ways into allegorical meaning. But since as we have seen allegory will tend to be seen as inappropriate to narrative fiction, and since London's allegory is politically troubling, the moment that the reader confronts the story's allegorical valence she is likely to turn away. The moment she sees the true meaning of *The Call of the Wild* is the moment she dismisses it.

If there is a way in which this conclusion seems unsatisfying, it may have to do with the model of reading upon which it relies. The allegory, remember, is anathematic to close reading because in it reading is programmatic. The reading of the allegory is simply the cracking of a more or less simple code, and the simpler the code the less rewarding the cracking. This model of reading rests entirely on the notion that there is a correct reading, here the reading that tells the reader that the literal story is little more than a directional signal that indicates the "real" meaning, is the allegorical meaning. Interpretation or the openness to interpretation would be foreclosed in such model, and the issue of meaning becomes something of a propositional statement and is there subject to truth claims. In short, on such a model there is a right way to read the allegory and a wrong one. If we note a similarity to the "against theory" thesis of Knapp and Michaels here, we are not deceived. What they embrace is precisely the ostensible transparency of allegory, a transparency that tasks the literary critic not with the onus of interpretation and its implicit open-endedness but instead with what amounts to the working though of a mathematical proof. Despite the allure of this position, it is one that likely strikes us

as not only unsatisfactory but also as empirically untrue. It is simply not how experienced readers approach literature; it not how the study of literature is practiced in the university, and even the book club presupposes a certain instability of the act of interpretation. In the case of London's novella, in fact, empirical reality points not to the kind of propositional logic of true (allegorical meaning) and false (literal meaning) but to the simultaneity of the two, and it is here that the true critical work begins.

It is here with the notion of simultaneity that we can return to, and perhaps reach beyond, the literary problem of allegory. Recall that de Man's theory of allegory, which is identical to his theory of reading, turns on the simultaneity of interpretative possibilities modeled by Archie Bunker's "What's the difference?" For de Man, of course, the issue is less that there is an unlimited free play inherent to reading but that when rigorously practiced, reading—close reading that is—reveals not that a literal meaning is true or false, or that an allegorical meaning is true or false, or that a synthesis of the two in a symbol is true but that all of them are present at the same time. Put more concisely, the condition of the possibility of interpretation of the literary as such is the impossibility of deciding between simultaneous meanings.

Why is the figure of allegory so important to de Man's strange modulation of literary theory? As we saw with Walter Benjamin, allegory is unique in that it is a figure that essentially problematizes its own figurality. Because allegorical meaning is typically obvious, because an allegorical fiction looks more like a code in which the cipher itself has no semantic content and merely points to a hidden real meaning than it does the neo-Platonic or Trinitarian hypostasis of the romantic symbol, allegory begs the Jamesian question: Why bother with allegory at all? Why not simply tell the straight story, as it were? The particularity of the literal story is little more than distracting, even dangerous to the degree that it can distract from the allegorical meaning,

filigree. Thus the general resistance to allegorical texts in literary criticism, Benjamin on the *Trauerspiel* excluded of course. In short, allegory suggests its own futility. At the same time, an allegory cannot be an allegory without its two radically divided component parts. The literal meaning cannot simply be dispensed with. To do so would be erase any allegoricity. And it is here that de Man's sense of simultaneity of meanings is so instructive. Just as it must have two parts, it must therefore have two meanings. To read an allegory literally is in error because another, higher, meaning is in play. But an allegory that is impossible to misread as literal is simply not an allegory.

An analogous situation might be one in which a cipher was created that reversed capital and lower case letters. There is no code in this example in the sense that there is no legible difference in meaning between, for example, the text of the words "Allegory" and "aLLEGORY." A cipher that doesn't encrypt anything is not a part of a code just an allegory that doesn't in some small way belie its "real" meaning is not an allegory. This then is why Benjamin and de Man are attracted to the figure of the allegory—it provides a kind of material trace in literal meaning (not to mention the text) that is epistemologically at odds with real meaning. What is instructive about *The Call of the Wild* as allegory is not just that the literal story is particularly effective at times, or that its popularity with readers can be in large part accounted for by allegations of misreading and reader naiveté. Both of these imputations are true as far as they go, of course. But if it the case that there are two independent meanings in every allegory, it would seem necessary for the serious reader to take account of both, and this is precisely what the close reader or literary critic so often struggles to do (e.g. Buell's dismissal and the tendency to write about other more "literary" works in the wake of critical environmental studies). The usual objection to allegory then is that it is too easy to decipher, that it is insufficiently dialectical

we might say. But to say this is to fail to take allegory, really the reading of allegory, seriously. In other words, the literal meaning is not part of the problem for literary criticism when it comes to allegory; it is the problem. We should not forget that the problem appears in some of the very earliest Western writing that can be called literary theory, Plato's *Republic*. In Book II of *The Republic*, Plato writes of the proposed kallipolis that it

> won't admit stories into our city–whether allegorical or not–about Hera being chained by her son, nor about Hephaestus being hurled from Heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten, nor about the battle of the gods in Homer. The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. (Book II 378c-d)

If we imagine Plato reading *The Call of the Wild*, we suspect he would prefer that it simply tell its tale of social Darwinism without the troubling literal meaning that fools so many of the "young." Henry James on the other hand, and possibly Buell, would likely prefer it if London had simply told the story of a dog, forgoing the social Darwinist allegory.

The error the close reader makes, an error that is inscribed in close reading in as far as it is an aesthetic activity, is that she assumes that allegorical meaning and the literal reading foreclose the other. For the experienced reader, allegorical meaning eclipses and even negates the literal meaning. On the other hand the literal meaning, the story on the page as it were, is only possible if the allegorical meaning is bracketed, intentionally or otherwise. One way to understand this effect of mutual negation might be on the lines of Hegelian dialectical negation. There are discrete two meanings in *The Call of the Wild*, the dog story and the social Darwinist story for which the first is as Buell puts it, a code. What happens both when the close reader closes off the literal meaning and when the naïve reader "misreads" the story as literal is that the

inherent contradiction of the allegorical structure comes to the fore, and subsequently one meaning negates its other.

But this vulgar version of the dialectic, in which allegoricity simultaneity is suppressed, is not the only understanding of the dialectic available. In the influential 1962 essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation," Louis Althusser makes an important step in what must be understood as his life's work, the dissimulation of Marxist analysis from Hegelian Idealism.[78] In that essay, Althusser argues that Hegel's notion of contradiction is precisely the vulgar one. According to Althusser, Hegel thinks that the social and material conditions of humanity are manifestations of the Hegelian Idea. That is, the Hegelian dialectic is ideological first and foremost because it is predicated on an, even The, Idea. This means that for Althusser all formulations of Hegel's dialectic are invariably "contaminated by Hegelian ideology" (*On Marx* 91).[79] But since the post-"anthropological" Marx extricates the dialectic from Hegelian ideology, we cannot understand Marx's dialectic as a mere "inversion" of Hegel's but rather, as something entirely different. Marx's dialectic works from an overdetermined that is in Althusser's terms "Theoretical" (sic) and "scientific." Marx's model of contradiction does work with determining forces of contradiction, but stresses the ways in which those forces can produce knowledge about their own "conditions of existence" in a way that Hegel's simple contradiction cannot.[80] The point for the present analysis is that the terms of the

[78] Two of Althusser's other key contributions, the notion of an "epistemological break" in Marx's thought and the resulting claim that Marxism constitutes a "science" are both part of this ongoing work.

[79] This contamination of analytical tools by ideology is central to Althusser's argument that Marxism is scientific. Because Marxism can account for the production of ideology, whereas what he calls "humanism" for example cannot because it is itself a product of ideology, he argues that Marxism is a science.

[80] Althusser writes in the same essay "But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the ***pure phenomena*** of the contradiction. The 'circumstances' and 'currents' which achieve it are more than its phenomena pure and simple. They derive from the relations of production, which are, of course, one of the ***terms*** of the contradiction, but at the same time its ***conditions of existence***; from the superstructures, instances which derive from it, but have their own consistency and effectivity from the international conjunctivity itself, which intervenes as a determination with a specific role to play. This means that if the 'differences' that constitute each of the instances in play (manifested in the 'accumulation' discussed by Lenin) '***merge***' into a real unity, they

overdetermined contradiction are not set by an ideological, and thus necessarily external, force. Rather for Althusser's Marx, "the past was no shade, not even an 'objective' shade – it is a terribly positive and active structured reality, just as cold, hunger and the night are for his poor worker" rather than an ideological account of the past (116). We do not need to go as far as the ideology of allegory, but we can note that in a certain way Althusser's analysis is a rhetorical, even allegorical, one. We could say, that is, that in the case of a given allegory distinct allegorical meaning cannot—by definition—be produced without literal meaning, which is to say in Althusser's suggestive terms that in allegory, literal meaning is not a specter or ghost or shade but rather itself the concrete reality or material of the allegorical meaning. This in turn would mean that the conflict between the allegorical and literal meanings is not the simple contradiction of James and Buell, but a deeply overdetermined one in which only assumed transparency is the "shade."

Althusser's use, or his translator's use, of the word "contaminated" allows for an associative link to my final point. From the point of view of the present analysis, the issue of narrative voice as, let us say, simultaneously literal and allegorical—a simultaneous and contradictory presence of psycho-narration and narrated monologue affected in and by a stylistic contagion—all too often leads the close reader into the simple, vulgar model of contradiction that makes her think of allegory as too simple, too thin, to merit critical work. I want to acknowledge clearly that there are any number of other ways that a reader can be put off a text and this issue of narrative voice is only one. Nevertheless, it the matter of narrative voice is important in *The*

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are not '***dissipated***' as pure ***phenomena*** in the internal unity of a ***simple*** contradiction. The ***unity*** they *constitute* in this 'fusion' into a revolutionary rupture, *is constituted by their own essence and effectivity*, by what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action. In *constituting* this *unity,* they *reconstitute* and complete their basic animating unity, but at the same time they also bring out its *nature*: the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various ***levels*** and ***instances*** of the social formation it animates; it might be called ***over-determined in its principle***" (100-101 author's emphasis).

Call of the Wild precisely because it illustrates the assumptions we often make about prose fiction and its relation to human consciousness. I have said that it seems logically incorrect to say that an allegorical story like *The Call of the Wild* can be entirely reduced to allegorical meaning, and it is an uncontroversial claim to say that to read the story as purely literal is to miss something important about it. The problem with both the naïve, literal reading and the sophisticated allegorical reading is that each operates not on a logic of contagion or contamination or overdetermination, but rather on the logic of simple contradiction in which each precludes the other.

The overdetermined logic of contamination or contagion, a logic I want to insist is applicable not only to the structure of *The Call of the Wild*'s narrative voice but to the allegorical structure per se, is by contrast one of simultaneity. There can be no infection without there being two simultaneous organisms, the infected host and that which infects it. In the case of contamination, the structure is identical: it requires the superaddition of harmful elements into a previously uncontaminated space. Whether or not we wish to say that the infection creates a third organism, namely the infected host, what we must acknowledge is that neither the host nor the infecting organism immediately or logically contradict the other. Instead, the infected host is both itself and the infection. By analogy then the allegory is both the literal and allegorical meaning at the same time and it cannot be reduced to either without fundamentally altering its figural structure. This is true as well for London's text. *The Call of the Wild* is neither simply an animal story nor is it merely an allegory for social Darwinism, it is both.

I have already established that at least in the case of London's book, actual readers may not recognize the allegory. This would seem to indicate that even if we grant that the text is not about a dog at all on the allegorical level (a point that I grant only heuristically) and that it is

solely about a social Darwinist account of class struggle, and that both of these facts are in turn legible because it uses the nonhuman rhetorically to shed light on human social formations that we cannot, as it were, relate to, there is no reason to think that this too does not thematize some aspect of our relation to an imagined nature. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The very transparency of the allegory in *The Call of the Wild*, the way in which the "code," as Buell calls it, seems so clearly to point to a meaning actually hides the fact that the two are as de Man puts it again in "Semiology and Rhetoric" "essentially different elements, sign and meaning, [that] are so intricately intertwined" and that this fact in turn makes it difficult and perhaps impossible to "make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified" (11). This knowledge of course is the very real contagion of trope and figuration in language.

What I have tried to show then is that when we read post-allegorically, when we acknowledge the inherent overdetermination of the allegorical structure that is particularly evident when it is "nature" that is allegorized, we find that just as Cohn's contagion "infects" *The Call of the Wild*, just as literal meaning infects the allegorical and vice versa, just as the ruin infects the present with the irresistible decay of history, a certain wildness or even animality infects the allegorical structure of *The Call of the Wild*. When we push our reading past the simple negation of literal meaning by allegorical meaning, we discover that the text's depiction of nonhuman "nature" very much including Buck is not and cannot be purely allegorical. The literal story, the story that exists on the page and persists in a great many reader imaginations, is no transparent code, no negated "shade" that becomes in a phrase Althusser takes from Marx's *Capital* a mere "kernel" of the allegorical meaning. And all of this results from the fact that there is always a fundamental and essential difference of meaning in figural language, whether we

know it or not. We cannot control for misreadings or misunderstandings when we figure linguistically, and indeed we invite and even force them when we do. In this respect, in this tropological or even if I might be so bold literary respect, then, we must see that even as we figure language, language disfigures us through its autonomy, its wildness.

Ultimately, this is why critical dismissal or disinterest in allegorical texts like *The Call of the Wild* is problematic. In ignoring or passing over the literal meaning of the allegory in frustration, the critic commits an interpretive sin far more egregious than that of the naïve reader who misses the allegorical meaning; the former that is more or less intentionally disregards the very qualities that defines allegory—its simultaneity and duality. To the degree in doing so that she is aware of the presence of allegory at all, which we must assume is fully, she must be said to be essentially failing to truly read the allegory. To truly read an allegory, that is, one cannot avoid the literal or non-allegorical story no matter how disingenuous one think it. In fact reading an allegorical piece of fiction well, even ethically, requires that the reader/critic must spend at least as much time on the literal meaning as she does on the allegorical one. To do this, though, is not however to "surface read" or "distance read" as the present parlance and theoretical models, like those of Best and Marcus as well as in a different way Franco Moretti, would have it. In those accounts, ironically, to read the "surface" of a text, i.e. what it "really" means or what its author intended it to mean, would be—in the case of allegory—precisely to skip over literal meanings in favor of allegorical ones. Allegory, then, both as a literary form and as a paradigm of reading demonstrates the theoretical blindness of accounts such as these that seek to reduce literary texts to unequivocal units of unproblematic semantic content. When in "Semiology and Rhetoric" de Man writes that he "would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself," what he means is that without the possibility of multiple

meanings, or interpretations if you prefer, there is no such thing as the literary (10).[81] In the case of allegory, the ethical close reader then must dwell on the duality and simultaneity of that figure. To do this is embrace an allegory's essential simultaneity and thus to push beyond not only allegorical and literal meanings as such, but also beyond that dichotomy while not losing sight of the particularities of each pole. When it comes to *The Call of the Wild* that is, any strong reading would be one that does not allow the literal or allegorical meaning a priority that forecloses the other. This is a post-allegorical reading in the sense that it does not disregard the allegorical meaning but also does not stop with it or assume that it is the only meaning. The point then is not simply that we ought to read London's novella literally, as do "naïve" readers. Instead, we must read it allegorically and literally at the same time while maintaining the total separation of the two.

What the post-allegorical reading of *The Call of the Wild* shows us that allegory as such, at least when it is produced literarily, which is to say tropologically, which is in turn to say rhetorically, has a much greater degree of indeterminateness than the paradigmatic close reader might initially notice. And in fact, it is nothing other the allegorical nature of, or the nature of allegory in, *The Call of the Wild* that is at stake in both the "sophisticated" and "inexperienced"

[81] Although I do not have the space to address it here, a perfect example of this problem is presented by the juxtaposition of Walter Benn Michaels' readings of Norris' *McTeague* in *The Gold Standard* and his and Knapp's "Against Theory" essays. In the latter essays, Knapp Michaels argue that the meaning of a literary text is identical to what its author intended it to mean. But in the title essay of *The Gold Standard*, Michaels writes that that he doesn't "want to be misread, then, as arguing for the recovery of a social allegorical dimension of Norris's writing," instead he "argu[es] instead for the recovery of something like its literal meaning—but a meaning that has been, one might say, *read through*, as if it were transparent" (176). One has to wonder what "something like" a literal meaning would be in this, or any other case, of course. More importantly, it seems clear that at least one aspect of Norris' intent in writing *McTeague* was allegorical in nature. And in fact Michaels cannot resist the attraction of allegory in *The Gold Standard*'s other essay on *McTeague* "The Phenomenology of Contact" in which Michaels writes [i]t may finally be that the best way to understand [the character McTeague] is as an allegory of the self when it is owning, and that the best way to understand [McTeague's wife Trina's] gold is as an allegory of the self when it is being owned" (136). Surely what Michaels claims here is the product of an "allegorical" reading, an interpretation, and cannot be attributed to any intent of Norris'. Why does Michaels, nothing if not a rigorous thinker, get caught up in these contradictions? The answer is simple. Michaels is first and foremost a close reader. As a result, whether he likes it or not, he is both a literary theoretician and an allegorist. What this means is that he cannot get his readings off the ground, so to speak, without relying on the essential allegoricity of literary texts.

readings. The essential dissymmetry of the allegorical structure, the aspect that causes Buell and James to dismiss it as unsophisticated, is the same quality that demands that we take its literal aspect seriously. That is, a given allegory must have a literal meaning distinct from its allegorical meaning, for otherwise the allegorical meaning would simply be the meaning. But that literal meaning is neither a remainder of the allegorical one nor is it sufficient or necessary for the allegorical meaning itself. The two meanings or aspects are nothing less than entirely separate registers that exist independently of each other. In an important sense then there are two stories or meanings for every allegory, something we cannot say in the case of the symbol at least as it is understood in the present sense. And if there are two independent meanings, it would seem necessary for the serious reader to take account of both. The usual objection to allegory then is that it is too easy to decipher, that it is insufficiently dialectical we might say. But to say this is to fail to take allegory, really the reading of allegory, seriously. To argue that allegorical meaning overshadows literal in such a way as to obscure the latter is to ignore one of the stories being told, a story for which the evidence is right there on the page.

In closing, if it is the case that two of the contemporary critical issues with *The Call of the Wild* that contribute to the engendering of its status as *libellus non grata* even in the era of animality studies are its literary weaknesses, which I am using its narrative voice as an example of, and the gross anthropomorphism of its allegory, of London's portrayal of Buck as one of Seltzer's "men in furs," then perhaps something in the foregoing analysis suggests other ways of reading London's classic. A post-allegorical reading would perhaps allows us to see that, paradoxically, it may not be the most vulgarly anthropomorphic and anthropocentric of fictions that in their grossness fail to do justice to the nonhuman, but the more "literarily" sophisticated others that do. To the extent that the critical power of allegory rests in its essential self-

problematizing, which is to say its overdetermined simultaneity, it indicates to the post-allegorical reader that she ought to be wary indeed of those literary texts that are more effective than London's at hiding and thus reifying the fundamental anthropocentricity of the literary as such. There is a wildness to allegory that lurks in its apparent simplicity and is indicated by the way in which critique so often passes it by. We would do well to dwell on that wildness in all its complexity in order that we might begin to perceive the critical potential of allegory, of the literary, to help humanity to begin to recognize its own endlessly overdetermined allegorical structure.

Chapter 3

"But if it appears innocent and pure, beware": Ecomimesis, Language and Trope in *Desert Solitaire*

Introduction: "Nature," the "Human," and the Problem of Value

The importance of Edward Abbey's 1968 *Desert Solitaire* to what has become known as second wave environmentalism cannot be understated. Although not the first of Abbey's books, and arguably not the most popular, *Desert Solitaire* introduced the carefully cultivated persona of what James Bishop, Jr. calls a "desert anarchist" that would remain with Abbey through his life and after.[8283] It was also perhaps the most radical mainstream environmental text of the 1960s and early 1970s in that it explicitly rejected the appeal to husbandry so prominent in the environmental discourse of the time. Unlike Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or the 1970 inauguration of Earth Day in the United States, in which a massive 20 million people are said to have participated (Lewis "The Birth of the EPA"), *Desert Solitaire* based its environmental vision on the radical, even abyssal, separation of human and nature. Abbey's book celebrates the wild aspect of nature, which is to say that it celebrates the irreducible alterity of the nonhuman, in a special and radical way. The power of Abbey's vision is that it rests, at least partially, on a crucially different model of value than does the notion of husbandry or stewardship.

In what follows, I will look at this implied theory of value and its difficulties and attempt to show that it is not in spite of the difficulties but because of them that *Desert Solitaire* is important. That is, through the text's highly self-conscious interrogation of the problems of

[82] It was preceded by three novels that had for the most part only minimal success. Abbey's second novel *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), although it did not sell particularly well, was made into a film of the same name starring Kirk Douglas called *Lonely Are the Brave* in 1962.
[83] The 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* would be the only other candidate.

language, value, and the nonhuman we come to see that read a certain way, wildness inheres within language. And this realization, one that erodes the notion of the human upon which it is predicated, can tell us (albeit only through silence) something important about value, about ourselves, and about conservation as an example of what Giorgio Agamben after Jean-Luc Nancy has called "the inoperative."

At its best then, *Desert Solitaire* tries to make a case for conservation that does not rest on the value of nature for human beings, a very difficult project indeed. Keeping in mind the radicality of this position, we should not be surprised that Abbey was a central figure both as inspiration and as figurehead for the radical environmental activist group Earth First! As James Cahalan writes in his 2001 biography of Abbey, *Edward Abbey: A Life*, "Having read *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* with escalating admiration for Abbey and anger against business as usual, by 1980 [Dave] Foreman would resign his Wilderness Society job and begin Earth First!, a radical action group inspired by Abbey's books" (151). It is important to note that Earth First!'s ideological makeup has changed dramatically since its founding, and with his obsession with population issues (and thus immigration, following all too closely Abbey's lead) Foreman has become *persona non grata*. Nevertheless, Abbey's work, and in particular *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, served as direct inspiration for Earth First! precisely because it rejected the husbandry model so common in mainstream second wave environmentalism. That is to say that Abbey and Earth First! based their activism upon the notion that nature had value in and of itself.

Upon first glance, attributing value to nature may not seem particularly problematic. Upon reflection though it becomes clear that any attempt to isolate a non-anthropocentric model

of value is inherently difficult, and perhaps even impossible.[84] But before I discuss the problem of nonhuman value, I will turn to what I have called husbandry or stewardship. The husbandry approach essentially opposes the attempt to articulate nonhuman value. In the former, we ought to preserve nature because it provides some sort of value to us. The iterations of these values vary. They can be as stark as survival of the human species, literal or spiritual, or as arguably trivial as that of aesthetic pleasure. In husbandry arguments, the value of nature is at base instrumental: we are to protect it in order that it provides something for us.[85] Such arguments are of course compelling enough on their own, and have been in many cases notably successful in doing the work of conservation. At the same time, they suffer from what appears to be a fatal conceptual flaw. They are based, as we have seen, on the value of nature to the human. But establishing that value in some universal way is close to impossible.

With the possible exception of the issue of species survival for *homo sapiens sapiens*, there is and perhaps can be no consensus regarding the value of nature. For it is simply not the case that everyone has a spiritual or aesthetic response to nature, any more than it is that everyone has such a response to a given work of art. And of course there are countless examples of nature being far from beautiful. Should we preserve only alpine vistas but fill in swamps? And

[84] This problematic, which I will discuss at some length, remains entirely true for various speculative realisms and object-oriented ontologies. Although I discuss some of Timothy Morton's work below, I attend to OOO only implicitly here when I attend to the importance of maintaining a "human"/nonhuman divide. I do explore some of the issues with OOO in my second chapter in the context of my reading of Thoreau's "Ktaadn." For a more thoroughgoing critique of some of OOO's foundational moves, a reader could do far worse than Andrew Cole's recent essay in *Artforum International* entitled "Those Obscure Objects of Desire."

[85] There is of course a less instrumental version of the husbandry argument that stems from religious principles. While the notion that humanity ought to protect or care for the nonhuman because it is part of Creation may be quite powerful indeed within religious communities, and within receptive individuals that might come across it, to the extent that religious commitments can rarely if ever be said to be universal enough to be politically efficacious, I am not sure that even if a given religious tradition were to be entirely oriented toward conservation that it would be able to enact that orientation in the face of objections religious and otherwise. To this point it must be added that the role of nature in the major monotheistic religions is at the very least a controversial topic with scholars such as Lynn White, Jr., Carolyn Merchant, Arnold Toynbee among many others arguing that the major monotheistic religions are to a greater or lesser degree responsible for modern environmental degradation. So while Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato si'* is a welcome intervention on environmental matters by a prominent religious leader, its potential real impact outside, and perhaps even inside, the Catholic Church remains to be seen.

as for the survival of the human species, it is clear that such a survival does not rest on the preservation of natural spaces. Humans have reached a point in our technological development at which it is not at all out of the question that what we understand as "nature" has little or no material bearing on our lives, barring the weather perhaps, that we cannot mitigate with further technology or, and this seems less and less farfetched, by eventually abandoning the planet. And of course values themselves are largely historical and cultural as has been clearly demonstrated by the tradition of what Paul Ricoeur famously called the "hermeneutics of suspicion." Awareness of this historical and cultural contingency of values, a vital step toward their critical reevaluation, leads all too easily to the conclusions that "nature" is little more than another contingent and more or less arbitrary concept that ultimately says more about the human than it does about the nonhuman other.

At base then there are two philosophical problems with the husbandry approach. The first is that it views conservation as a means to a very human ends. If these ends can be accomplished with a different means, or the ends in question are not in pressing need of being achieved—and it is increasingly easy to make both of these claims—conservation would be unnecessary. The second problem is that as instrumental, the husbandry approach relies entirely on the value of nature to us. The nonhuman is put into human terms; it is anthropocentrized. This is not news, of course, but it is a central point. The challenge of a non-instrumental environmental thought is precisely the challenge of developing a case for the nonhuman in and of itself, a case that does not put the nonhuman at the mercy of human thought and history. *Desert Solitaire* is important then because it struggles with exactly this problem. As we shall see, it also makes a number of conflicting value assumptions, many of which are deeply anthropocentric. But despite its lapses

and errors, Abbey's text seeks to make a case for the haecceity of the nonhuman, to articulate a value in and of itself of the nonhuman.

To my mind, this attempt to step out of the means/ends instrumentalism of anthropocentric environmentalism is absolutely essential. As we shall see, though, the articulation of a non-anthropocentric vision of the nonhuman has proven very difficult, so much so that in the critical humanities the project has largely been given up.[86] But the challenge that *Desert Solitaire*'s vision of the nonhuman as wild, and of the very notions of wildness and wilderness themselves, poses to us is an essential challenge to the quietism of so much so-called critical environmental thought. It is a challenge to the very notion of value as such and, because of this, is it in itself a challenge to the anthropocentric as such. That challenge is predicated on an understanding of nature as radically other, and as such it is predicated on the human/nature binary. Of course, such predications are deeply problematic. But they are vital to any sort of principled ethical relation to the nonhuman, and such a relation is itself vital to any kind of robust conservationism that seeks to make a case for the nonhuman in its quiddity. Now, we know that topics like nature, wilderness, conservation, and ethical relations are not particularly popular in contemporary critical environmentalism and for good reason. Even the term "environmentalism" itself is problematic to many. Nevertheless, it is our burden to take up this challenge, especially in what some are calling the Anthropocene, rather than to avoid it.

In what follows I will argue that applied to *Desert Solitaire* a specific practice of reading, the wild reading, opens up the question of the anthropocentric, and the question of value, in a new way. The inevitable failure of Abbey's text to do what it so desperately wants to do, which is to render the alterity of the nonhuman through language, puts into place something like an

[86] The OOO/speculative realist approach stresses "objects" over "subjects" but does so through what we might call same-ing, a collapse of difference that renounces the first principle of valuation, the axiological principle.

interference pattern of world, language, and text. That interference pattern will, I argue, provide a window on what is the essentially nonhuman character of language itself. In doing so, and precisely only because the text puts these concerns with mimesis, language, representation, wildness, alterity, and nature into play in a specific way, we will see that far from failing to produce the encounter with wild nature that is so central to *Desert Solitaire*, in fact such an encounter is produced in the reading of the text of the text itself. This reading has the double movement of both relying upon and unmooring the text's assumptions about the human, about language, and nature. Although a text cannot produce a sublime encounter with the otherness of nature per se, such an encounter can occur as a result of the reading of the text itself. I will demonstrate this through what Paul de Man calls a critical-linguistic reading of a key passage in *Desert Solitaire*. That reading, what I am calling the wild reading, produces the encounter with alterity, one that is necessary for a critical evaluation of anthropocentrism. Contra a great deal of critical ecocriticism then, I insist that we must maintain the nature/human binary in all its troubling, paradoxical problematicity. To do so is warranted by both what I consider to be an epistemic fact and by methodological considerations. That is, if Kant has taught us anything it is that humans are categorically limited by the structures of their senses and intellects. When we suppose an Archimedean point outside of those structures, which is to say when we posit a theoretical approach, it turns out that we learn less about the thing itself than we do about the structures themselves. Such approaches are useful of course, but the data they provide is a product of their, and thus our, structural constraints. The epistemic warrant for maintaining the nature/human divide then is simply that we must think this way. Of course, while this divide is factually grounded in the kinds of beings humans are, that does not mean that it is any less theoretical than any other approach. If we take theory to mean a perspectival approach to

knowledge that admits its own essential contingency, the nature/human divide understood as theory offers important insights into the limits of human knowledge.

Paradox, Ontology, and Ecomimesis

In order to make this case, it will be necessary to look closely at *Desert Solitaire* on a number of levels, particularly in its own theory and practice of linguistic representation and trope. I ask what the text's views of language are, I examine its understanding of human and nature, and I discuss how both of these play out in the text itself. And as a way into the examination, I want to argue that all of these matters play out in the text's leitmotif: the rhyming phrase in trochaic trimeter "paradox and bedrock."[87] To the extent that *Desert Solitaire* has an organizing principle, and that extent is limited by the text's inherent complexity, it can be said to be this figure.

The phrase first occurs in *Desert Solitaire*'s initial chapter, "The First Morning." At the end of a passage that will be very important later on, Abbey writes, "I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock" (6). It returns suggestively reversed in the chapter title of the book's last chapter, in which Abbey meditates on his immanent departure from Arches Park where he has been a seasonal ranger. In that chapter, Abbey writes "I am almost prepared to believe that this sweet virginal primitive land will be grateful for my departure and the absence of the tourists, will breathe metaphorically a collective sigh of relief--like a whisper of wind--when we are all and finally gone" (267). Quickly after this reflection, though, Abbey interrupts his elegizing by radically questioning its essential anthropomorphism:

[87] Although I will not attend explicitly to the meter of the phrase, the way in which it evokes the spoken and aural aspect of language foreshadows an important point I will examine later on.

Grateful for our departure? One more expression of human vanity. The finest quality of this stone, these plants and animals, this desert landscape is the indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert. Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelope the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas--the canyons and hills, the springs and rocks will still be here, the sunlight will filter through, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again, this time perhaps to take a different and better course. I have seen the place called Trinity, in New Mexico, where our wise men exploded the first atomic bomb and the heat of the blast fused sand into a greenish glass--already the grass has returned, and the cactus and the mesquite. On this bedrock of animal faith I take my stand, close by the old road that leads eventually out of the valley of paradox (268).

As should be apparent, the version of "paradox and bedrock" in "The First Morning" and the "Bedrock and Paradox" of the final chapter are not identical. The first has to do with a paradoxical attempt to be both at one with nature and at the same time an individual. The second casts paradox as the way of folly of "culture" (as separate for Abbey from "civilization") and bedrock as the abiding power of the nonhuman, truth opposed to human folly as it were.[88] But the pairing of paradox and bedrock has other valences as well, valences that speak to the text's explicit project as well as that which is simultaneously the medium, theme, and immanent threat to that project: language.

In his study on Abbey entitled, appropriately enough, *Bedrock and Paradox: The Literary Landscape of Edward Abbey*, David M. Pozza notes correctly that "[p]aradox finally is

[88] In the late chapter "Episodes and Visions," Abbey formulates the distinction between civilization and culture when he writes that "[c]ivilization is the vital force in human history; culture is that inert mass of institutions and organizations which accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life" (246)

the bedrock of Abbey's aesthetic and philosophy" (9). Put more expansively, we might say that at least in *Desert Solitaire*, paradox is methodology for Abbey on at least three levels: linguistic, rhetorical, and metalinguistic.[89] Take for example the opening two sentences of "The First Morning." Abbey writes, "This is the most beautiful place on earth. There are many such places" (1). The linguistic paradox here can be seen clearly. To use the superlative "most beautiful" is to say in no uncertain terms that this beauty is incomparable, that it is of its own genus we might say. But then of course we learn that "there are many such places," that this beautiful place is only one of any number of such beautiful places. Of course such linguistic play animates the rhetorical use of paradox. As Richard Lanham defines paradox, it is a "seemingly self-contradictory statement, which yet is shown to be (sometimes in a surprising way) true" (107). Like his literary godfather Thoreau, with whom his relationship was very fraught indeed, Abbey uses linguistic paradoxes as a textual strategy of estranging or unseating habits of thought. This is to say that there is a specific rhetorical modality of linguistic paradox in *Desert Solitaire*. Paradox then is not a merely a game for Abbey. The tendency toward paradox can of course be understood as a literary enactment of Abbey's self-professed anarchism (Cf. Alderman and Bishop).

Finally though, Abbey's methodological investment in paradox is more interesting what I want to call its metalinguistic aspect than in its linguistic or rhetorical aspects. As I have said, it is Abbey's non-standard use of language, the formulation of paradox through language, that enables his strategic use of paradox as a rhetorical device. In the case of the "most beautiful place in the world," the subsequent sentence alters the meaning of the word "most." The

[89] Linguistic paradox is the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory terms. By rhetorical paradox, I mean Abbey's rhetorical usage of the device of paradox to unsettle reader assumptions. Metalinguistic paradox would be a kind of dialectical synthesis produced by the ways in which the terms of the linguistic paradox colonize each other thereby problematizing the meanings that precede and undergird the linguistic paradox.

superlative “most” therefore becomes instead of the one, the yet another. The meaning of the first term, “the most beautiful” is transformed or transfigured by way in which the sentence that follows it shifts its meaning. Put more directly, the superlative “most beautiful” is intratextually altered by that which comes after it, “many such.” What happens in this example is what we might call a “re-meaning” in which the initial meaning of “most beautiful” is invoked just to be altered. Crucially though, the original meaning is not lost but remains present, albeit in a manner we would have to call suspended. Such intratextual and intralinguistic revision of meaning is a central strategy for Abbey and the issue of his control of it will be of primary importance to us later. For now, though, I wish only to open the question of paradox.

Textual paradoxes such as that seen above rely on the insertion of ambiguity into a seemingly stable linguistic-conceptual unit. This is the power of language to erode, in a figure that will be important to *Desert Solitaire*, stable and conventional meaning in language. It is also aspect of language that makes poetry possible, as I discuss at length in my first chapter. We might agree then with Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn* that the language of poetry, or more precisely of literariness (including prose), is very much the language of paradox and that this is why what Brooks calls ambiguity is at the heart of the literary as such. This fact is both the promise and danger of the literary in as far as it relates to the project of meaning and it is precisely this Janus-faced aspect of literary language that will be at the epistemological center of *Desert Solitaire.*

For *Desert Solitaire* then, the notion of paradox then is fundamentally linguistic in the sense that juxtaposes contradictory terms, fundamentally rhetorical in the sense that it used self-consciously as a literary device, and finally fundamentally metalinguistic too in that it operates by problematizing seeming self-evident meaning in language. This might all seem very

"postmodern," to use a passé term. In fact one of the early scholarly debates about Abbey, dramatized in the 1998 collection of essays called *Coyote in the Maze: Tracking Abbey in a World of Words*, is whether we can read him as a "postmodernist" in his style and concerns. There editor Peter Quigley as well as contributors SueEllen Campbell, William Chaloupka, Claire Lawrence, and David Copland Morris all make some variation of the claim that Abbey can be understood to be pursuing something similar to a post-structural or postmodern path. Due to its phrasing it may not be a very interesting question these days. At the same time though it points to some matters important to the present argument concerning both the status of language in Abbey's texts and as well as his political positioning during his life and after.

There are important stakes here for those who wish to rescue Abbey's work from the author's problematic politics including but not limited to misanthropy, misogyny, and anti-immigrant (and possibly racist) views. To say that in some sense Abbey's project is postmodern would be to align it, at least for these authors, with what they take to be a radical critique of capitalism, imperialist hegemony, and so-called logocentrism, phallic and otherwise. The problem of course is not simply that Abbey publicly expressed troubling right-libertarian views. That is, what concerns the authors mentioned above and what continues to dog those who find something important in Abbey is the degree to which those unfortunate political views might be imbricated in his thought and his defense of wilderness.

And here we can turn to the other term in *Desert Solitaire*'s leitmotif: "bedrock." For if Abbey's notion of paradox centers on a certain metalinguisticity that can be loosely thematically associated with some aspects of post-structuralism, "bedrock" does precisely the opposite. Above, we saw bedrock figured in two ways. In "The First Morning" we see it identified with the nonhuman world, while in the second bedrock indicates the triumph of life over the

destruction of the world resulting from what he calls "the valley of paradox." Both cases, although they have different emphases, counterpoise the paradox of language to the bedrock of nonhuman reality. And in fact if Pozza is correct to say that "paradox *is* the bedrock" (emphasis added) for Abbey, and he is, something very strange indeed occurs in the long passage quoted above. There Abbey writes "On this bedrock of animal faith I take my stand, close by the old road that leads eventually out of the valley of paradox." Here paradox is no longer a textual method used to unseat reader expectations. Here paradox is not anarchistic linguistic and conceptual play. Instead, it is framed by an imagined nuclear apocalypse as something like the fallen state of humanity, a state that may well result in its own extinction.[90] Paradox is no longer a positive force then. In fact it is the most destructive force in the history of the world, a force "harnessed" by human beings—the capacity to produce nuclear fission. But note that paradox figured as the fallen state of nuclear modernity remains juxtaposed to bedrock here and this brings us back to the question of bedrock. What is bedrock here? The answer is both easy and difficult. Clearly bedrock is a figure for foundation. The way in which it is juxtaposed to paradox in this passage also suggests that this foundation should be understood as ontological and primordial. At the same time, *Desert Solitaire* is set in what was then Arches National Monument, a place of, if nothing else, rock. The rock of the desert is central to Abbey in the way that it points in its very quiddity to a point beyond and prior to the human. Bedrock then is both a figure for ontological stability and importantly literal in the sense that it refers to the stark, meaningless actuality of desert rock.

[90] Not only was *Desert Solitaire* written during the height of the Cold War in the aftermath of World War II, it was composed in the American Southwest, the epicenter of U.S. nuclear testing. Indeed both the Trinity Test Site in New Mexico and the Nevada Test Site in and around Yucca Flat are about five hundred miles from Arches and, of course, both test sites were chosen precisely because they are located within massive deserts.

In *Desert Solitaire* then bedrock is both a figure for what ontologically sound, factual, and self-justifying while at the same time an entirely literal reference to the ineffability of rock as such. Within the text's mirror image of bedrock then, paradox, lies something profoundly disturbing. We saw above that Abbey's paradox is essentially linguistic. But in the blinding light of the apocalyptic vision in the final chapter, the linguistic is identified with entirely anthropogenic annihilation. Rather than simply celebrating the paradoxical potential of language, which is to say poetry, then Abbey powerful damns it. The reason he does so can be seen already in the "Author's Introduction" of *Desert Solitaire* in which he writes,

This is not primarily a book about the desert. In recording my impressions of the natural scene I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact. But the desert is a vast world, an oceanic world[91], as deep in its way and complex and various as the sea. Language makes a mighty loose net with which to go fishing for simple facts, when facts are infinite…. Since you cannot get to the desert in a book anymore than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as a medium than as material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal (xii).

Note the way in which the mediacy and slipperiness of language is opposed to "solid" bedrock. That is to say that what he refers to as the "simple fact" here is the epistemic and aesthetic force of the nonhuman world's ontological presence, an immediate pure presence fundamentally opposed to the mediacy of language. Edward Twining sums up Abbey's investment in ontological matters when writes that Abbey "was a realist, one who obdurately insisted on the unavoidable primary importance of the material world that manifests itself to our (unignorable) senses" (20). This realist, even materialist, Abbey seems at odds with the

[91] There are those paradoxes again.

paradoxical anarchist we saw above. Indeed, Twining writes even more forcefully that it "is in this most basic of senses that Abbey was both a moralist and thorough going materialist… [h]e never deviated from [these] three propositions: *The world is real. We can know the world*. *We are responsible for it*" (24, author's emphasis).

For now I will leave aside moralism and focus instead on the first two of these propositions. The realist, naturalist, materialist Abbey insists that the world is there; it is real. But, as Twining puts it, Abbey also firmly believes that we can "know the world." The question of course is what could it mean to "know the world." We might say that Abbey himself is not quite sure for the simple reason that he problematizes such knowing relentlessly. For example, in an instructive passage that follows Abbey's survey of other writers concerned with the desert country of the southwestern U.S. (among others he mentions Mary Austin, legendary desert wanderer Everett Reuss, Wallace Stegner, and John Wesley Powell), he writes

None of these works I have named attack directly the problem to which I wish to address myself here: what is the peculiar quality of character of the desert that distinguishes it, in spiritual appeal, from other forms of landscape? In trying to isolate this peculiarity, if it exists at all and is not simply an illusion, we must beware of a danger well known to explorers of both the micro- and macrocosmic--that of confusing the thing observed with the mind of the observer, of constructing not a picture of external reality but simple a mirror of the thinker. Can this danger be avoided without falling into an opposite but related error, that of separating too deeply the observer and the thing observed, subject and object, and again falsifying our view of the world? There is no way out of these difficulties. (240)

Here, Abbey clearly acknowledges the epistemological problem he is up against, one that is only compounded by his attempt to re-present the world in language. The bedrock of the world

is not so easily gotten a hold of, he seems to say. But even if it were, what does it mean to say that, as Twining does, the world is real and we can know it? For Abbey, the world is a hard fact; this is its reality. But the real question is how we *know* this hard, immediate fact. The answer, paradoxically perhaps, is only through the mediacy of language. There is a tension here that points to the possibly troubling political ramifications of Abbey's thought. The implied resistance to language that we will see in full flower later is crucially a resistance to mediacy as such. And since it is precisely the space of mediacy that allows for critique in the traditional account of what is called critical theory, it may be the case that Abbey's focus on wildness and ontological factuality is polluted with or even predicated on an anti-critical position.[92] In this light, we can see the stakes of some of the essays in *Coyote in the Desert*. If what has been called postmodernism typically focuses on notions like mediacy, hybridity, and the deconstruction of self-evident categorical distinctions, to cast Abbey as a postmodern thinker and writer would be to rescue him from his more reactionary tendencies, from his "essentialism" if you like. In my view, while Abbey's relation to language and art bears the marks of a deep reflexivity, it does so only within the context of his yearning for an immediate relation to the world.

I have claimed that Abbey is centrally concerned with the factuality of the nonhuman. In a telling moment already quoted from in the "Author's Introduction," though, he identifies factuality with poetry, with language, when he writes "I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact." For Abbey it would appear that, in a Keatsian formula, we know truth through poetry, which would be through beauty. But for him true beauty is nothing other than ontological factuality, the (if this can be said) its-ness, of the nonhuman. And as I have noted, this its-ness is opposed again and again to the paradox of language. Thus Abbey seems to contradict himself by collapsing what he argues throughout the book are

[92] Theodor Adorno's essay "On Subject and Object" discusses the importance of mediacy to critique.

essentially opposed: fact and poetry. In fact, though, this identification is not merely paradoxical or contradictory, but absolutely crucial for understanding what is at stake in *Desert Solitaire,* as I will show below. For now, we need only reiterate that very much unlike language, with which we can play paradoxical games precisely because it does not have the ontological or metaphysical stability of the nonhuman, the bedrock of the ontological is completely solid. Abbey is firmly aware of the text's inherent contradiction then as we can see in the passage on epistemology above. To his credit, this does not stop his writing. But it does present readers with the problem of what Abbey calls "accuracy," specifically the problem of depicting the nonhuman in and through the most human, language.

In 2007's *Ecology without Nature* Timothy Morton terms this problem, the problem of verdicity in nature writing, ecomimesis. *Ecology without Nature* is, to understate the matter, a wide-ranging work that draws to make the case that we must abandon the concept of "nature" as the center point of ecological discourse and activism by, in part, focusing on the mendacity of ecomimesis. Morton correctly notes, although it is perhaps not as radical a move as it appears to be, that "nature" is a human construction. More importantly, the idea of nature has, according to Morton, deeply negative implications that actually prevent a true ecological consciousness. It is not my place here to discuss the entirety of Morton's argument, although in many ways the present essay is directly in response to that argument. Instead, the key and necessary insight of *Ecology without Nature* lies in the following sentence, "For ecological criticism to be properly critical, it must get a purchase on ecomimesis" (33). This is a program statement for both Morton's argument and my own. In a few moments, I shall return to Morton's rather telling choice of adjectives but for now, I will examine Morton's formulation of ecomimesis.

On Morton's analysis, ecomimesis is a series of rhetorical techniques that produce prose or poetry that "wants to go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether… to go beyond art" (31). It is a self-obscuring technique that casts a "spell of language" (30) in order to make a case that the "real" world that the ecomimetic writer seeks to render "(1)… is solid, veridical, and independent (most notably of the writing process itself) and that (2) it would be better for the reader to experience it directly rather than just read about it" (ibid). Morton argues in what is the most thorough chapter in the book that ecomimesis produces what he calls an "ambience" in order to produce the effects above. And in fact, he calls nature writing an "ambient poetics" "which purports to evoke the here and now of writing" (32). It does so through six aspects: rendering, the medial, the timbral, the Aeolian, tone, and the re-mark (34). It is not within my purview to attend to each of the aspects in the present argument. Suffice to say that underneath the admirable taxonomy that Morton produces is an argument about nature writing and the way in which it relies on the ideological apparatus of "nature." What is particularly interesting about this argument is that it is based not only on an analysis of the aesthetic, as the subtitle of the book suggests, but on a rhetorical methodology. At the risk of deeply oversimplifying Morton's argument, the point is that the ambience produced by ecomimesis is very much a "spell" that prioritizes something like what Derrida called the metaphysics of presence, here the presence of a represented "natural" scene, over the radical supplementarity of writing that disrupts totalization. To rephrase, nature writing seeks to totalize by reinscribing and thus reifying a constructed and contingent idea of "nature," an idea that always already relies on the fraught category of the human. With this analysis, Morton proposes to pull back the veil of rhetoric that performs this totalizing sleight of hand one that he argues "make[s] it appear as if, for a fleeting

second, there *is* something in between" the ecomimetic distinction between the "real" it seeks to represent and the text that does the representing (50).

Imbricated here is a prefiguring allegory of Morton's view on the human/nature binary. That is to say, by the end of the book Morton will argue that there is nothing between (or underneath) the distinction between "the human" and "nature" just as there is no distinction between the "inside/outside" distinction of the re-mark. The next move, then, is to abandon that distinction altogether. Morton's thesis then is that an examination of the rhetorical effects that produce ambience, of ecomimesis, will "deconstruct" (not a word Morton uses often but one that I find useful) the central differentiation posed by ecomimesis, the difference between world and the ecomimetic text. The point of Morton's project is do away with "nature" as a concept. His analysis of ecomimesis is a way to begin the deconstruction of "nature" as idea, an idea of which all critical environmental thinkers are rightly skeptical. Morton uses a rhetorical reading of nature writing to do this work, a reading that seeks to undo ideology, as do all critical endeavors. All this is to the good. But in making the case for this rhetorical reading, Morton must assume a certain model of interpretation, one that is broadcast in the claim we saw above that "[f]or ecological criticism to be properly critical, it must get a purchase on ecomimesis."

The key word here is "properly," and it is a strange choice for someone who often invokes Derrida, for whom "the proper," whether it be name, body, or time, is deeply problematic.[93] What enables Morton to activate his critical-rhetorical reading is the assumption of the ability to read ecomimesis "properly" The proper reading, of course, is a critical one that pulls back its veil by reducing it to rhetorical aspects, which are then highlight the constructed nature of "nature" in the text. But of course this method of reading is only one among many. And

[93] Cf. "Ousia and Gramme," "Ends of Man," the first half of *Of Grammatology*, "Des Tours de Babel" to name only a few.

in fact this particular reading has its own fissures, namely the way in which is passes over the undecidability of the tropological aspect of language. On de Man's definition, that is, the rhetorical aspect of language does not refer to merely to rhetorical effects, as it seems to for Morton, but to the fundamentally figural nature of literary language. I argue contra Morton that that ecomimetic texts like *Desert Solitaire* do not necessarily lure a naive reader into an ideological picture of "nature" that rhetorical analysis will deconstruct but that in fact rhetorical analysis of ecomimesis shows instead the disjunctive, disarticulating, erosive aspect of literary language *per se*. It is from this point that I will begin my analysis, and I hope that it will allow us to note some specific things about the text of *Desert Solitaire* that will in turn bear on the critical potential of nature writing.

In her essay "'Getting the Desert Into a Book': Nature Writing and the Problem of Representation in a Postmodern World," Claire Lawrence makes a similar point writing about *Desert Solitaire* that "nature writing, precisely because its project is to describe the real, which cannot be approached, let alone contained in description, brings its writer to a point of crisis with language" (152). I think Lawrence states something important here about ecomimesis, something that Morton represses. In fact, I want to take Lawrence's claim quite a bit further. That claim might be rephrased to say that it is not only the writer who is brought a point of crisis in ecomimesis, but language itself. This may seem like a small difference, but in fact it changes entirely the framing of the point. To move from writer to language is to make a metalinguistic move, which is in turn a theoretical move. The point is that Morton's rhetorical reading strategy, which focuses almost exclusively on the rhetorical effects of ecomimesis understood as ambience, fails to account for the fact that the production of ambience is not, and is never, a guaranteed effect of a given set of rhetorical strategies. Morton assumes otherwise, and in fact

must do in order to able to mount his "properly" critical version of ecocriticism. To do so is to rely on the *deus ex machina* (one might even go so far as to say the "transcendental signifier") of a clear and reliable passage from rhetoric to effect (or affect). In short, Morton appears to commit a version of what Wimsatt and Beardsley called the affective fallacy. This is not to say that Morton's phenomenological analysis is wrong, or that he not warranted in making it. It is merely to say that if we characterize a rhetorical move differently than Morton does, or analyze a rhetorical strategy with a different lens, our results may and will vary.

Paradiegesis or Parecbasis?: On Exemplum and Excursus

Let us look at an example from *Desert Solitaire* paradigmatically bears out one of Morton's key rhetorico-analytic moves. I hope this example will prove instructive for a number of reasons. First, if it is not chosen arbitrarily (I draw from "Water," the chapter on which my reading will focus), it is not a particularly important moment in the text. As such, we can focus on our analysis of the rhetorical move by bracketing larger intratextual or thematic concerns. Second, and more importantly, I hope it will begin to authorize my larger argument in two ways. It will serve to introduce the chapter that I will analyze in more detail. Next, it will show the difficulty inherent in attempts to pin rhetorical strategies down in terms of their effects.

A key outcome of this point will be the demonstration that the rhetoric of trope and the rhetoric of persuasion or effect are not identical. This strategic differentiation is key. At stake is a simple, even, dare I say it?, a normative question. How *should* we read ecomimesis? Or if you like, what is the "proper" way to read ecomimesis? Morton's reading means, as we have seen, to show the central falseness of nature writing. But this is only one way of reading the rhetoricity of ecomimesis. The rhetorical reading of ecomimetic texts needs to be taken a step further if only to avoid Morton's own rhetorical naiveté. Thus, I propose the "wild reading" of *Desert Solitaire*, a

reading which focuses not on the ways in which tropological stratification fools us but rather in the way that its essential quality is in fact that of critique. In the following, I will only hint at the wild reading, but the groundwork (or as it may turn out water-work) will be laid for a more thorough account later.

I want to look an example of what Morton calls the *exemplum* and *excursus* trope of ecomimesis that appears in the opening pages of *Ecology without Nature*. About this trope, Morton writes

> [e]comimesis is a mixture of *excursus* and *exemplum*. *Excursus* is a "tale, or interpolated anecdote, which follows the exposition and illustrates or amplifies some point in it." *Exemplum*, also known as *paradigmata*, or *paradiegesis*, is "an example cited, either true or feigned; [an] illustrative story." What then, of the specific features of ecomimesis? *Paradiegesis* specifically implies narrative. (33)

There are countless examples of this structure, which ultimately serves as what Morton calls "an authenticating device" in *Desert Solitaire* but a particularly interesting one, one that has to do with one of the book's majors concerns, that of water, in the chapter of that name.

"Water" appears very near the middle of *Desert Solitaire* and is of about average length for the text's chapters.[94] It begins with one of Abbey's trademarked jaunty re-tellings of an encounter he may have had while serving as a park ranger for what was then Arches National Monument in the form of a skit. He writes in dialogue form of talking to a tourist from Cleveland, Ohio beginning the chapter with the following: "'This would be good country,' a tourist says to me, "if only you had some water'" (112). Abbey the character notes that if there were water, not only would "the country not be what it is," that is, a desert, but that no doubt it would be taken up for agricultural "cabbage farms" or recreational use "golf courses" (ibid). The

[94] They might also be called vignettes or essays.

brief conversation between Abbey and the tourist resolves when they agree that each of them is happier where the other has no interest in being: Abby in what he calls "canyon country," and the Southwestern desert; the tourist in Cleveland, Ohio.[95]

Right after the conversation with the tourist, we find a perfect example of the common *excursus*/*exemplum* model. Using the conversation with the tourist as the first link in an associative chain on things aqueous, Abbey writes that in canyon country,

> [i]t seldom rains. The geography books credit this part of Utah with an annual precipitation of five to nine inches but that is merely a statistical average…. And in fact the rainfall and snowfall vary widely from year to year and from place to place even within the Arches region. *When a cloud bursts open above the Devil's Garden the sun is blazing down on my ramada* (113, emphasis added).

It seems clear that this is an example of *excursus* and *exemplum* in ecomimesis. First, we have an evocative discussion of the lack of rain in the desert, a discussion that prefigures the latter half of the book's incessant, nearly pathological, use of rain as a dramatic device. The discussion relies on "the geography books" which serve for Abbey as figures of the solid ground of "fact," here immediate ontological factuality. The text argues then that this place, canyon country, is <u>real</u> and is both constituted and delimited by a lack of water. Its sheer factuality figured as the books stands in for the hard reality, the bedrock, of the immediate and as we shall see aesthetic perception of the nonhuman world. In this passage, Abbey would seem to appeal to the ethos of fact in order to subtend his text's central binary: that of the real, the true, the bedrock versus the degeneracy and paradox of human culture. Now, it should be clear that the establishment of the

[95] In a foreshadowing of a later point in play here is the theme of drought as the central environmental factor in the desert. Paucity of water is the definitive fact of the geology and biology of the region; it is also the reason that, at least on Abbey's argument, that it had not been "ruined" by mass human immigration. Of course it is this very paucity, in the chapter "Down the River," that engenders what Abbey sees as the greatest symbolic threat to canyon country, river damming. Water, then, has a great deal of thematic and symbolic weight in *Desert Solitaire*, as we shall see.

specific facticity of this place is what Morton identifies as *excursus*. Recall that "*[e]xcursus* is a 'tale, or interpolated anecdote, which follows the exposition and illustrates or amplifies some point in it.'" In this present passage lack of water as thematized in the dialogue with the tourist (exposition) is illustrated or amplified by the reference to the figure of fact, the geography books (*excursus*). If we have *excursus*, we can expect *exemplum* to follow (33). Sure enough the text proceeds directly to an illustration as ambient example. "When a cloud bursts open above the Devil's Garden," Abbey writes, "the sun is blazing down on my ramada."

We see here as starkly as can be the authenticating move of ecomimesis, one that relies heavily on *exemplum*, or more properly the passage from *excursus* to *exemplum* and it seems to work precisely along Morton's argument. That move provides precisely the kind of evocation Abbey seeks by establishing of the reality of nature as in Morton's words "solid, veridical, and independent (most notably of the writing process itself)" (*Ecology without Nature* 30). Thus, per Morton's account, the passage from *exemplum* to *excursus* here makes the claim that this reality in the world would be better experienced than read about, that it privileges presence over writing. To recap, the exposition, which wryly sets up the issue of water for us in dialogue form, and the *excursus* both lead ultimately and inevitably to the powerful *exemplum*, the payoff as it were, in which Abbey again appears as a character, this time not in dialogue, but as narrator and witness to the veridicality of nature. In the ecomimetic shift from *excursus* to *exemplum*, its authenticating power then relies on the attempt to cover up its own artificiality. This is why, on Morton's argument, ecomimetic writers have a "guilt about writing" that manifests itself precisely in the ecomimetic tendency to devalue the act and artifact of writing (*Ecology without Nature* 33).

So, it is clear enough that we have an example of the *exemplum/excursus* structure that Morton so perspicuously identifies. On his argument, *exemplum* serves as *paradigmata* or *paradiegesis*. Morton favors the word *paradiegesis* over *paradigmata* for the simple reason that the former "implies narrative" while the latter would simply act as an example.[96] For Morton, *exemplum* in its *paradiegetic* aspect is another authenticating trope that indicates the inherent instability of ecomimesis by predicating the solidity of the nonhuman world cannot be established without imposing the narrative voice. In doing so, of course, the human—the very thing ecomimesis ostensibly wants us move beyond—is brought in. We might say a bit reductively that Morton argues that because this is move is rhetorical, it shows not only that the reification of the nonhuman cannot be rendered without the imposition of the human, but that its *paradiegesis* points to its own irreducible humanness. As such, *exemplum* as *paradiegesis* is an allegory for ecomimesis itself. Nature is shown as a construction and thus ecomimesis does not evoke the nonhuman but radically unseat it. As such, the solidity of the nonhuman world, the rendering and valorization of which is very goal of ecomimesis, becomes a supplement to the human. This effect could be called something like the drama of ecomimesis, and for Morton it reveals the impossibility of establishing a distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Thus Morton's deconstruction of ecomimesis.

I have suggested though that it is possible take this kind of analysis further than Morton does, and that perhaps this all too obvious example of *exemplum* has more to offer. We might begin by asking what we are assuming about the text when we perform the above analysis. Implied in the *excursus*/*exemplum* model is a narrative shift, and in fact such a shift is what we find. The *exemplum* in which Abbey inserts himself into the text further draws in the reader and is marked by a rather dramatic shift from figured fact to description and narrative. This shift

[96] Morton uses definitions from Richard A. Lanham's *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*.

occurs not as a textual break, but directly in the middle of the paragraph. Because of this, because the shift is not highlighted, we might well take up an attitude of suspicion toward it, a properly critical attitude that makes it clear that Abbey seeks to cast the "spell" of ecomimesis by covering up its own troping. But such an attitude of skepticism relies on a strangely naïve kind of posited reader, one who is all too easily "swept away" in the ecomimetic moment. This reader is a bit of a rube upon whom this sleight of hand doesn't register as even slightly strange. Such a reader of *Desert Solitaire* might exist, but given the text's own preoccupation and foregrounding with the problems of language, representation, and the nonhuman, we might argue that such a reader is not a very attentive one. No doubt this preoccupation is one reason why *Desert Solitaire*, generally understood to be a central text of post-World War II "nature writing," merits no mention in *Ecology without Nature*, a book about nature writing.[97][98]

As we saw, Morton's account of the move from *excursus* to *exemplum* is one of a hidden shift. The question of whether that shift is in fact hidden or not in this case then is of some importance. One way to begin to ask that question is to look a bit more closely at Morton's definitions. He identifies *exemplum* as a species of *paradiegesis*. Defined literally, *paradiegesis* is that which occurs alongside (*para*) the narrative (*diegesis*). We might already begin to notice something strange here. Does the *exemplum* from *Desert Solitaire* in fact give us an example of *paradiegesis*? It seems strange to argue that the intrusion of the narrative voice here at the beginning of "Water" constitutes a para- or non- or extra-diegetic moment. Surely a narrative moment cannot be alongside the narrative. To argue that it could would be to say that "narrative" is so inclusive as to be meaningless. So this *exemplum*, at least, does not seem to be a species of

[97] Lawrence Buell spends a few pages on the book in his central book of ecocriticism *The Environmental Imagination*, and SueEllen Campbell writes that *Desert Solitaire* is "as close as we come in modern American nature and environmental literature to a classic" (34).

[98] There are no doubt many other reasons including Morton's training (he is a romanticist), Abbey's well-deserved reputation as a reactionary, and perhaps matters of taste.

paradiegesis strictly speaking. The very fact that there can be dispute about these matters should indicate that Morton's rhetorical reading of *excursus/exemplum* is not, and cannot be, definitive. In fact in the shift to the ramada, *Desert Solitaire* seems to be using structure in a different way. The shift *exemplum* here can, I think, be better understood as an example of *parecbasis*, or digression. It is difficult to see Abbey's jump from the geology books to the rain on his ramada as "alongside the narrative" precisely because it is in fact a moment of narrative, as indeed are all ecomimetic shifts from the *excursus* to the *exemplum*. In fact, in ecomimetic texts like *Walden* and *Desert Solitaire*, it is not as easy to extricate the *exemplum*, which seeks to place the reader in the "here and now" of the writing moment, from the narrative as Morton seems to think.

I have said *parecbasis* is a digression or apparent break from the logic of that which precedes it, for the purpose of illustration. This sounds like Morton's *exemplum* initially, but there is a crucial difference. Digression, unlike the occult shift of *paradiegesis* is fully legible to the reader. To even be able to name something as a digression, we must be able to identify that from which it digresses, which in the present example seems a much easier task than identifying where the narrative *per se* begins and ends. But the legibility of digression is not based solely upon our ability to differentiate it from narrative. In fact, the defining characteristic of digression is that it draws attention to its rhetoricity. *Desert Solitaire* is nothing if not incessantly digressive, but in this specific moment, we have a particularly clear digression that follows the *excursus*/*exemplum* model. As a digression, though, it broadcasts rather than hides its rhetoricity.

Paradiegesis or *parecbasis*, what does it matter? Morton's marshaling of the first term indicates his reading practice even as it serves a key polemic role. To restate, *paradiegesis* is meant to trick us; it is a subtle shift that helps create the spell of language, which we might add appears to be a kind of reification, or of naturality. But if we characterize Abbey's ayguous move

to the ramada as a *parecbasis*, we stress not the seamlessness of the spell of language but rather the jarring nature of the shift from the appeal to ethos to narrative. Put bluntly, at stake with the differentiation of *paradiegesis* and *parecbasis* are conflicting strategies of reading. Morton's strategy relies on the conceit that ecomimesis should be mistrusted because it wants to fool us into accepting the reification of "real" world over the artifice of writing. It does this because it is, in Morton's words, "guilty" about writing. But read another way, the very same move can point not (only) to ecomimesis' deceptive and ideological essence, but also to the fact that inscribed in all attempts to fool through language is the failure of that deception. That failure must occur because of a simple fact: that the nature of literary language is that it draws attention to and problematizes itself because literary language does not work in the same manner as ordinary language. Indeed for language to be literary at all, it must be other than ordinary language. That otherness puts language into question in a special way, as we know from Russian formalists. Reading, as opposed to listening, is the activity in which we confront that strangeness. As we know all too well from life experience, it is much easier to be fooled by speech than by a text for a number of reasons.

Most important to me of these reasons is the ephemeral nature of the spoken word that, when combined with its performance, can be very persuasive indeed. We are not able to examine the spoken word's artifactuality, to return to it, to linger on it, to ponder it in the same way we do with a text. We are not, in short, able to *read* the spoken word. But central to literary ecomimesis is the act of reading. We do, and must, read ecomimesis. And to read, although it is too soon to say this, is not the same thing as to interpret. Reading requires text; it requires a material inscription of language that precisely allows for a temporal extension of an ephemeral act. It is reading that, in some sense, allows us to argue what a given rhetorical move might be in the first

place, *paradiegesis* or *parecbasis* for example. The issue of reading, and we might even call it the *problem* of reading in the most felicitous sense of the word problem, will be of great import below. For now, I have tried to show in a small way that the question of how we read ecomimesis is indeed the question. The question of how we read shows that there is nothing self-evident or "natural" about Morton's reading of *excursus/exemplum*. There is no reason we can't read it in another way. Contra Morton, the implied "as I write" we find the ramada example does not hide its digressive character. What Morton identifies as a symptom of a guilt about writing can be also be understood as a digression that broadcasts its own artifice, and the indeterminacy here points to a crucial point.

According to *Ecology without Nature*, that is, getting a purchase on ecomimesis' rhetoricity allows us to see it for something like what it is, an artifice. By association, then, we can through such a purchase begin to "deconstruct" the very idea of nature itself as a reification and a construction that impedes our ability to towards an ecological vision or, as Morton calls it in a later book, "thought." But what Morton's analysis of the ecomimetic spell of language fails to note is that alongside its deception comes the legibility of that deception. That is to say that the ecomimetic spell can only be cast if we are presumed to fail to read ecomimesis critically in the first place. This point is legible in Morton's neologism: ecomimesis. For ecomimesis to be mimetic assumes that its goal and its practice are one. But this assumption relies on a certain naiveté in the reader. Indeed Morton's imagined reader must always fail to notice the artifice of ecomimesis. Certainly, it is possible that people can and do read in this way. But these people, are not, by definition, critical readers. We might even go so far as to say that they are not even very good readers, and in fact to read in this manner may not be to read at all.

So in Morton's argument, ecomimesis actively seeks to close off critical reading via its aesthetic ideology. At heart of this point, it must be understood, is his critique of ecomimesis, nature writing, and of the idea of nature itself as reifications. I have tried to show in a very isolated example that at least in the case of ecomimesis of the *exemplum*/*excursus* variety, things are not quite so simple as all that. For what ecomimesis can also do is draw attention to its rhetoricity, its artificiality, its aesthetic ideology. Ecomimesis *per se* then has the potential to be critical rather than reifying. We are warranted in asserting this in the case of *Desert Solitaire* precisely because it is so entirely aware of its own rhetoricity and of the epistemological problems that underlie its ecomimesis.

Aesthetic Bedrock; Linguistic Paradox

Let us look more closely then at the ways in which Abbey's text thematizes the problem of representation in regards to nature. One of the best-known passages in *Desert Solitaire* occurs in its first chapter, "The First Morning." The passage in question sets up the very problem of representation of the nonhuman in language, and thus of the anthropocentricity of language itself, that is at the center of the book. Towards the end of an evocative setting of place, Abbey describes a rock formation in the following way "Near the first group of [rock] arches, looming over a bend in the road, is a balanced rock about fifty feet high, mounted on a pedestal of equal height; it looks like a head from Easter Island, a stone god or a petrified ogre" (6). Directly after this sentence comes a paragraph break, after which Abbey queries his own ecomimetic practice. He writes

> Like a god, like an ogre? The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here to… confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the

> bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and to see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description (6).

Abbey mobilizes a richly problematized view of ecomimesis, anthropomorphism, and anthropocentricity. Although at first glance what we have here is concerned with perception rather than writing, it is the act of writing that is primarily at stake. For it is through writing that Abbey thinks he can render the "in itself" of the nonhuman to his reader. As we have seen, this is the urge of ecomimesis one that attempts to provide a picture of the so-called natural world that is in Morton's words "solid, veridical, and independent." The attempt at veridicality makes figuration, the very lifeblood of poetic/poïetic writing a problem, as we have seen in the case of Thoreau. At the same time, to the extent that Abbey wishes to promulgate his experience and his view, he must communicate it through language. And of course language cannot render experience *per se*; it can only approximate experience.

This is why poetry, that is figure, is so valuable to us. It allows us to communicate impressionistically, to say that which cannot be said so to speak. In any case, the very premise of ecomimesis is that need not render the truth of the world when one is in the midst of it. One renders only for another; indeed the act of re-presentation implies and requires audience, whether of one or of millions. So despite the above excerpt's apparent focus on perception, and despite its reliance on the grammatical first person, it is only partly an example of what Jakobson calls the emotive function of language, one that refers primarily to the addresser.[99] Because his ecomimesis is precisely writing it implies, or even interpellates, an audience, which is in turn to say that Abbey posits a reader. In Jakobson's terms the passage above functions at the level the conative and phatic functions of language as well as emotive. The posed here is not about

[99] Cf. "Linguistics and Poetics."

whether we perceive the nonhuman in anthropocentric, personifying terms, but to what degree our attempts to communicate such a perception are irretrievably bound up in mediacy and anthropomorphism.

Just as the ramada digression in "Water" does the double work of drawing us in while at the same time highlighting its own rhetoricity, the jump from personification to a query of anthropocentricity here explicitly articulates the same double-bind, one that haunts the text. That is, for all of its focus on the paradox of immediate perception and the inherent mediacy of language, *Desert Solitaire* is very much a literary work that as such highlights the intrinsic paradox(es) of language as such. If Abbey contradicts himself above, which he does often and gleefully throughout his *oeuvre*, he does so fully reflexively. He knows that he cannot have it both ways, that he cannot embrace raw perception devoid of meaning at the same time that he embraces the truth as poetry or poetry as truth. The figure of paradox here, especially in light of its opposite bedrock, becomes even more crucial. The entire project of *Desert Solitaire* is paradoxical to the extent that it seeks to render in language that which is utterly non-linguistic, something like the autonomy of the nonhuman, its wildness. Language, Abbey knows, has the tendency to tame wildness even and perhaps most when it is at its most poïetic.

As we saw at the beginning of this essay, despite all of this Abbey is one of the most important thinkers and writers of wilderness, that most unpopular of concepts in contemporary environmental thought. I wish to take him seriously on these matters then. He powerfully advocates for wilderness in the chapter "Down the River," writing

> *Wilderness*. The word itself is music.
>
> *Wilderness, wilderness*…. We scarcely know what we mean by the term, though the sound of it draw all whose nerves and emotions have not been irreparably stunned,

deadened, numbed by the caterwauling of commerce, the sweating scramble for profit and domination. (166)

We can see here Abbey's debt to romanticism[100] and American transcendentalism, as well as his own mid-twentieth century American lens. Wild nature here has a palliative effect, a story codified into American culture by Cooper, Thoreau and John Muir to name only a few. As Abbey notes, very much following Thoreau, such a palliative is especially needed as we become more and more (post)modern. The value of wild nature then is specifically palliative one and it is characterized by the fact that it is both real in the sense that it is not the product of the human hand, and that it is at the same time an aesthetic object. Abbey is a committed sensualist, although he is something more in that he is an aesthete in the fullest sense. [101] This latter point is essential, for it will have tremendous consequences the issue of language in *Desert Solitaire*.

Language is, like the world, for Abbey an aesthetic medium, a fact attested for above when he celebrates the word wilderness in terms of music. To the degree that language presents aesthetic possibilities, to the degree that it is literary, it would seem to count as truth in *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey's investment in the truth of poetry crops up in the text's rich allusions to poetry, including a striking epigraph from Canto XII of Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* I will discuss briefly later: [102]

Give me silence, water, hope

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

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[100] Abbey writes of "that great expansion of human consciousness called the Romantic Movement, which opened up for men a whole new world of truth" in the chapter "Episodes and Visions" (239).

[101] He persistently figures his feelings about the desert in terms of sexual desire, going to so far as to use the virgin land trope in problematically carnal ways. He was also, as Callahan notes again and again, a serial philanderer for much of his life as well as an alcoholic.

[102] Poet David Rothman's essay "Poetic Past in *Desert Solitaire*" does an excellent job of excavating many of these allusions. Rothman writes "Abbey quotes or refers to about thirty poets in *Desert Solitaire*: Neruda…, Keats, Dante, Thoreau, Whitman, Jeffers, Frost, D.H. Lawrence, Houseman, Eliot, Sophocles, Ben Jonson…, Philip Larkin, Shakespeare, Raleigh, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Blake, Marvell, Donne, William Henry Davies, Rilke, Burns" among others (51).

Desert Solitaire also contains a brief but important meditation on one of the most important poems of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and that thematizes Abbey's vision of language as aesthetic medium. "Far off," he writes of a thunderstorm, "the muted kettledrums of thunder, *pianissimo*… T. S. Eliot and *The Wasteland* [sic]. Certain passages in the professorial poem still appeal to me, for they remind me of Moab, Utah. In other words I like the poem for the wrong reasons—and dislike it for the right ones." (184) One of passages from *The Waste Land* that Abbey alludes to is in the poem's second stanza where Eliot figures modernity as a desert.[103] I note this allusion to Eliot for two reasons. First, it establishes the sonorous and thus sensuous importance of poetic language. If we follow the passage closely, we see that it progresses from the "the kettledrums of thunder," a figure in which natural sound is cast as music to "pianissimo" and finally to Eliot's poem. This progression makes the same connection just noted in the passage on the word wilderness. That is, for Abbey the sound of words enables us to have an aesthetic reaction. Such an establishing is vital to *Desert Solitaire*'s project. Abbey,

[103] 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. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu,
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?
"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl."
–Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer. (I. 19-43)

we know, styled himself as a writer and "not a naturalist," as he puts it in the Introduction to the collection *The Journey Home* (xiii). And *Desert Solitaire* is full to the brim with writerliness sometimes graceful, sometimes not. We might even say that perhaps the book is a bit too Eliotian, and that Abbey's dismissal of *The Wasteland* is less a dismissal than a symptom of the anxiety of influence. But the point is that *Desert Solitaire* is invested in an understanding of language as something that can produce an aesthetic response through sound.

This would appear all to the good at least to the extent that *Desert Solitaire*'s logic is an aesthetic one. Recall that in the Author's Introduction, he writes "I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact" (xii). A clearer statement of the aesthetic value of poetry could not be made. The poetic is the aesthetic and the aesthetic is truth. The truth of the world, the accurate "recording" of his "impressions about the desert," is the recording of the truth of beauty. Recall Keats' Grecian urn who famously says to us

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

But there is a second reason I pause on the allusion to *The Waste Land.* Allow me to excerpt the same passage from *Desert Solitaire* this time with additional text:

> Far off, the muted kettledrums of thunder, *pianissimo*… T. S. Eliot and *The Wasteland* [sic]. Certain passages in the professorial poem still appeal to me, for they remind me of Moab, Utah. In other words I like the poem for the wrong reasons—and dislike it for the right ones.
>
> Here I am relaxing into memories of ancient books—a surefire sign of spiritual fatigue. <u>That screen of words</u>, that veil of ideas, issuing from the brain like a sort of

> mental smog that keeps getting between a man and the world, obscuring vision. Maya. Time to go back down to the river and reality (184, emphasis added).

Yet another digression, yet another *parecbasis*, and like the anti-Kantian passage from the first pages, yet another direct attack on language and representation that poses world against words and immediate perception to the mediacy of language. How can Abbey evoke the sensual or aesthetic aspect of language only to cast it as that which obscures vision? Another paradox, we might say, and perhaps it is time to explain what at least one aspect of that figure of paradox might mean in its most significant valence.

Desert Solitaire simultaneously poses two paradoxical models of language: the aesthetic model, consisting of sound and figure, and the referential or mimetic model, which represents accurately. The latter refers to the phenomenal world, while the former produces a linguistic reality that to borrow a formulation from "The Resistance to Theory" evokes phenomenal reality but which, importantly, is not available to the senses in the way that the phenomenal is not. We have seen that the senses are Abbey's privileged mode of access to the nonhuman. For him, sense perception is precisely what allows access to the nonhuman world (recall the third of Twining's three Abbeyian propositions, "*We can know the world*"). It would therefore be the aestheticization of pure perception that produces, in Abbey's words poetry and truth. While language can be approached aesthetically, the problem appears when we understand that there does not seem to be a pure perception of language. This is especially true of language in the form of text, which bypasses the sonority of the spoken word. Reading text is in no way a matter of sense perception. Instead it produces a non-sensuous linguistic and mental picture or imaginary, if you like. So at stake here, as is always the case of ecomimesis is an apparently contradictory valorization of the reality of the physical world over the purely linguistic world of the text and

thus a valorization of sense over the nebulous idea of the imagination. Indeed, Abbey could not be clearer about the "screen of words" and its relation to perception and to reality. Words are *māyā*, an illusion or a veil, as understood in some Hindu and Buddhist traditions.[104] They are a "smog that keeps getting between a man and the world." We can take written language as aesthetic, and indeed we do in a strange way, but it is precisely the fact that the world produced in the linguistic act is not available to the senses in text that devalues language for Abbey. Importantly, the tension between the two models of language in *Desert Solitaire* is not at all obscured contra Morton's over-generalizations about ecomimesis as such. At the same time, it is a tension that cannot hold, if only because of its radical implications about language. If we take seriously the notion of language as veil— obscuring, anthropocentric and anthropocentrizing— mustn't we cease to write about the nonhuman at all? We should on this logic abandon ecomimesis all together. As a reader and a writer, of course, this conclusion is anathema to Abbey. So what is to be done?

The epigraph from Neruda signals the answer in a subtle way. In its asyndetonic listing, it presents a grouping in which no one item is singled out as of special import. But if we look closely, we see that only one of these items is strictly necessary for life:

Give me silence, water, hope

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

Subtly hidden in the middle of the first line where it is relatively unstressed is the important word "water." Water, both in its lack and its status as necessary for life, is one of the book's most

[104] It is safe to assume that Abbey alludes to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* with the image of *māyā*, and very possibly to the source of that image in *The Birth*, which is Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Worth noting is that for Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin (in part three of his long essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, for example) Schopenhauer's concept of the veil as an illusion is recast as a necessary mediating force between world and human. (Pierre Hadot's *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* is an interesting look at an analogous image in the Western philosophical tradition.) Perhaps not coincidentally, the German excerpt in the second stanza of *The Waste Land* is from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, a work that profoundly influenced Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and of course discussed at length in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

repeated and most important themes as is perfectly logical in a book about a desert. It is in a chapter of the same name, it turns out, one that like the positioning of the word "water" in Neruda's line is located in a medial space, that Abbey will try to articulate his two conflicting models of language in a deeply complex figural economy that bears close attention.

The "Waters" of Truth

That economy is broadcast immediately in the chapter "Water." The tourist skit I noted above and the concomitant account of the lack of water in the desert, as well as the subsequent the jump from that account to the *exemplum* of rain on the ramada all center on water. This overdetermined thematic play serves to lead in to the chapter's own central moment, a discursus on the importance of being able to find water in the desert. That ability in the parched desert of is crucial to desert travellers and it is a matter of survival for a wanderer like Abbey.[105] Indeed, he writes that when one spends "[l]ong enough in the desert a man like other animals can learn to smell water" (114). But water, of course, has no smell. So Abbey clarifies: "Can learn at least the smell of things associated with water –the unique and heartening odor of the cottonwood tree, for example, which in the canyonlands is the tree of life" (ibid). In a crucial passage that follows, he writes of the cottonwood tree

> In this wilderness of naked rock burnt to auburn or buff or red by ancient fires, there is no vision more pleasing to the eyes and more gratifying to the heart than the translucent acid green… of this venerable tree. It signifies water, and not only water but also shade, in a country where shelter from the sun is sometimes almost as precious as water (114).

[105] It is worth noting again that the Abbey of *Desert Solitaire* never seems to bring enough water on his desert explorations. We might psychologize this as a symptom of the intentionally foolhardy bravado that Abbey the man was well-known for, although such a reading is perhaps not very interesting. But for our purposes here, it is more important simply to keep in mind that water, or the lack thereof and the subsequent search for it, serves as a main thematic concern for *Desert Solitaire* for obvious reasons. Suffice to say for now that water carries with it heavy, even overdetermined, "symbolic" weight in *Desert Solitaire*. But more on that symbolism in a bit.

Two things must be noted here. First this passage contains a cliché of nature writing on display: that of localism. This cliché couldn't be more starkly mobilized than it is in this case. To know that the cottonwood is a tree that can grow only in a riparian zone near surface and ground water can mean survival in the desert. This specialized knowledge is a matter of life and death, and it is knowledge which the interloper or visitor or tourist does not necessarily have but that the person familiar with the area does. So Abbey here valorizes the familiar sense of place, as Ursula Heise calls it, that we find in so much nature writing. But more important than this simple valorization is the word "signifies." In the paragraph that begins immediately after this, Abbey repeats and italicizes the word: "*Signifies* water, which may or may not be on the surface, visible and available" stressing once more that the cottonwood tree is a sign for water, and that as such, it is a sign for survival (ibid). In a text that is concerned centrally and perhaps even primarily with linguistic representation of the nonhuman, that again and again broadcasts its ambivalence about language, we must pay special attention to passages that address signification, semiosis, and their paradigmatic model, language.

Clearly semiosis is at stake in Abbey's stress of the word "signifies." A particular understanding of the sign structure appears here, one that carries deep implications for language and the problem of representation. This passage hints at a key aspect of *Desert Solitaire*'s program: the investment in what might be called a naturalistic semiosis, one that seems at least at first to solve the problem of language as obscuring veil. In the naturalistic account of semiosis, it is posited that language is merely one of a species of natural semiotic systems, and even more importantly that language is derivative of earlier, more primordial types of semiosis. The stakes of this latter claim are high indeed, for if language is derivative of other "natural" semiotic structures, perhaps its relentless anthropocentrizing is not essential to it but rather

epiphenomenal. If that were the case, language can be rescued from its veiling aspect, and can be seen instead as a tool through which the world can be known. Language stops being that which is most human and artificial on this account and becomes something "natural." The aesthetic response to language becomes, ipso facto, the preferred method for experiencing the natural world. Here we can see the coming together of nonhuman, poetry, and truth that Abbey so desperately wants. As we shall see, not only is Abbey always and insistently equivocal about this naturalistic account of semiosis, but that the case he tries to build for it radically escapes him in important ways.

Let us turn then to that account. It is important to note that Abbey does not develop a theory of natural semiosis through propositions and reasoning. Instead, he works with admirable subtly to establish the account through the figure of cottonwood tree and its relation to water that we have just seen. This relation is a natural and factual one; it is if you like an immediate relation. In the Saussurean terms Abbey evokes then, water is that which is "signified" and the cottonwood tree is that which "signifies" water by pointing to with no ambiguity whatsoever. Indeed, this figure seems to skip over the arbitrary connection of signifier and signified that the Swiss linguist posed, going instead straight to "the referent," the actual thing in the world.[106] All of this is a complex way of saying a simple thing--that cottonwood trees point to the presence of water because they require ample groundwater to grow. And while a given living cottonwood may or may not indicate surface water, it always and without error indicates the presence of water.

This is a specific kind of signification that the philosopher Albert Borgmann calls in *Holding onto Reality* a "natural sign." According to Borgmann the natural sign, when paired with

[106] I am not prepared to guess whether Abbey was familiar with Saussure's work or not, although if he were the former would seem to be getting it wrong.

human significance forms "ancestral information," which is to say basic information about the world that exists prior to linguistic signification (24). The word natural is central here. Borgmann writes that in the early days of human society, "signs and things were naturally and intimately related" (26). To illustrate the point, he cites an imagined example of the historical Salish people in what is now the state of Montana:

> When a band of the Salish, some two hundred or two thousand years ago, moved its summer camp in the Missoula [valley north to a winter camp by the "Stream of the Little Bull Trout," now called Rattlesnake Creek, the distant narrows where the creek turns east must have been the first sign they followed. Once they reached that area, a western tributary to Rattlesnake Creek would alert that they were within a few hundred feet of the campsite. Finally, cairns, tipi rings, or remnants of brush and hide shelters marked the place where they would winter (25).

I quote this long passage not only for its own, to use a term Borgmann favors, eloquence, but because it is necessary to understand both its resonance with the excerpt from *Desert Solitaire* above and the central claim that Borgmann makes. Prefacing the imagined description of Salish patterns, Borgmann writes "The ancestral environment was profoundly coherent because of the regular interplay of signs and things" [emphasis added] (ibid), and that "the ancestral environment is the ground state of information and reality" (24). Those familiar with Borgmann's work, specifically his discussion of what he calls focal things and practices, will not find this characterization new, but what is central here is that by drawing on a particular understanding of Heidegger, Borgmann seeks to establish the primordiality of natural signs and what he calls "significant structures" in contrast to the postmodern obsession with information

(27). [107] In doing so, Borgmann like Abbey makes an important claim about language. On both accounts, language though its connection of signifier to signified may be contingent (or in Saussurean terms, arbitrary) can be grounded in the natural sign structure. Put another way, both seem to argue that linguistic signs are epiphenomenal for the reason that they are derived from the signifying character of things in our world. This is the naturalistic account of semiosis, an account that seeks to ground linguistic semiotics in existence.

Why is Borgmann interested in grounding language in such a way, and what does it have to do with *Desert Solitaire*? Borgmann's account is a response to the core of deconstruction. In a brief passage early in *Holding onto Reality*, he writes

> When used to illuminate contemporary culture, *structural information*, like *text* in deconstructionism, amounts to a distinction between everything and nothing. Everything is information, nothing is not. The purpose of such distinctions is to push unclean stuff into the abyss of nothingness—no more confusions for the information theorist, no more objective things for the deconstructionist. (11, author's emphasis)

Immediately after, he sums up his position by writing that "barrenness is the price of cleanliness" (ibid). By re-establishing a naturalistic semiosis as the basis for language, Borgmann seeks to fight deconstruction's corrosion of meaning (or significance), a corrosion that occurs through an analysis of language made possible largely by Saussure's analysis of the sign.

This same focus on a naturalistic and primordial semiosis is at stake in Abbey's attention to the cottonwood. For as repetition of the word "signifies" suggests, Abbey is concerned with much more than water and trees. He is concerned with language and representation. Of course,

[107] I think it fair to say that Heidegger is Borgmann's most prominent influence, if not by any means his only one.

this is not a response to deconstruction as Borgmann does.[108] But it is a response to the problem posted by the rhetorical dimension of language, a problem that Paul de Man's "deconstructive" literary criticism draws attention to. Abbey is concerned that language cannot be relied upon to accurately represent anything in the natural world, and this concern is only amplified by the mediacy and figural economy of literary language. Language cannot "accurately represent" anything; it is not mimetic of the thing itself, Saussure's referent or Kant's *Ding an Sich*. Instead, Abbey worries language is a veil of words, one which is not only incapable of transmitting meaning reliably but in which meaning seems to get lost due to its essentially arbitrary mediacy. That undecidability, the result of the rhetorical dimension of language that is essential to it, produces the guilt that Morton so astutely notes. And it precisely the same guilt that Abbey wants to obviate by making language epiphenomenal to a naturalistic semiosis that will redeem language as a vehicle of truth.

I have argued that the word "signifies" in reference to the cottonwood and to water indicates a moment in which Abbey tries to counter his own sense of the instability and untrustworthiness of literary language. In fact, the passage also dramatizes this attempt. The word "signifies" cannot help up but signify itself, causing the reader to relate the natural sign of cottonwood to water to the sign structure of language. This in turn would mean that this natural semiotic relation signifies not only its referents but also the relation of language to the world, or what Abbey calls truth. The natural sign [tree to water] idealizes language by figuring it in such a way that that its slippery mediacy and inherent instability are cleared away. An illustration of how this work should make things clearer:

[108] Although *Desert Solitaire* was published in 1968, only a year after Derrida's epochal appearance at the Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man Symposium at Johns Hopkins, much of *Desert Solitaire* was drafted as journal entries during Abbey's 1956 and 1957 summer stays at Arches.

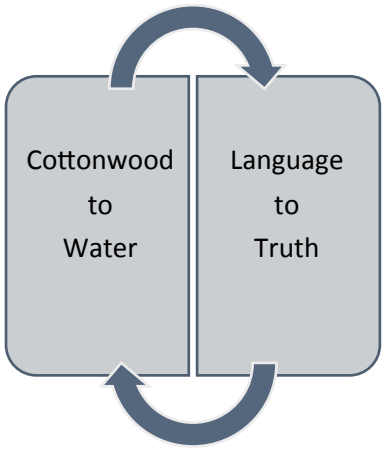

Figure 1

In order to make sense of the relation in the figure, we must remember what truth is here. Truth has two valences in *Desert Solitaire* as both the hard factuality of the world and the aesthetic experience gleaned from sensory perception of that world. The former is the immediate ontological haecceity of the nonhuman while the later is an aesthetic experience mimicked in language. The ecomimetic project is to evoke or represent both the world and Abbey's impressions of it "accurately" enough through language that the reader is able to have an analogous aesthetic experience. But, as Morton points out, always already has inscribed within such a project are two troubling claims. The first is the reliance on the notion that the text is always of radically lower importance than an experience of the world itself. The second, a result of the first, is the self-negating devaluation, distrust, and active obscuration of the very rhetorical dimension of language that makes ecomimesis possible in the first place. It would appear that we could not have a better example of these problems than the figure in question, a figure that seeks to resolve *Desert Solitaire*'s conflicting models of language, the veil and the poetry of truth, through a metaphor by analogy.

There is much more here than impossibility though, and it is here that I can return to the wild reading, stepping beyond Morton's analysis. As we noted above Abbey's metaphor by

analogy from [cottonwood-wood] to [language-truth] posits naturalistic semiosis at the root of language. This is done in order to ground language by in essence gliding over the problem of trope/figure. In short, when Abbey posits the ground of language in this way, a ground that allows him to continue writing *Desert Solitaire* in something like good faith, he is attempting to rid language of its rhetorical dimension. Ironically, of course, it is that very rhetorical dimension that makes literary language possible in the first place, as I have been at pains to argue throughout this monograph. In this way, Abbey's ostensible redemption of the potential of language to render truth would seem to foreclose upon itself. What we are seeing here is the way in which the commitment to language as an aesthetic medium inherently erodes its own ground of meaning, the way in which the aesthetic in language threatens always to collapse the ideological aspects of the aesthetic. The stakes of avoiding this possibility of auto-deconstruction could not be higher for Abbey the writer as well as Abbey the thinker of wildness. To see the way in which the veil of linguistic trope simultaneously constitutes and annihilates meaning and the phenomenal world would seem to be to be give up hope on any number of levels. This is why Abbey strives for a naturalistic semiosis, and why he finds himself in the uncomfortable position of paradox here yet again.

What Abbey strives for here, what Borgmann calls the natural sign and what I have referred as a naturalistic semiosis, is nothing other than the logic of the Hegelian symbol. In his work on Hegel, de Man discusses the role of the symbol in Hegel's aesthetics, and in fact takes the symbol as the paradigmatic form of aesthetic ideology. Here symbol has a specific meaning in which that which is perceived by us, the symbolizer, is naturally and necessarily connected to its conceptual equivalent, the symbolizes. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel writes that

> the symbol is a sign, but it is distinguished from the signs of language in this: that between the image and the idea which it represents, there is a relation which is natural, not arbitrary or conventional. It is thus that the lion is the symbol of courage, the circle of eternity, the triangle of the trinity (304).

Hegel's symbol opposes a natural semiosis to the "arbitrary or conventional" semiosis of language. And while it would appear that Hegel wants to oppose the symbol to language, in fact what we have in the Hegelian understanding of the symbol is the same dream that Plato has in the Book II of *The Laws* in a brief discussion of Egyptian art. That dream of is of a species of sign in which signifier and signified are naturally and intrinsically and necessarily related. Such a sign, of course, *cannot* be misunderstood or misread. It is, if you like, a completely stable allegory that prevents us from misreading it, and thus rendering a perfectly reliable semiosis. It takes no great leap to see that such a dream is symptomatic of an abiding anxiety about linguistic semiosis. We should remember that in *The Republic*, the poets are banned not only for being mimics but for being *bad* mimics. And the reason they are bad mimics is because they are poets, that they are at a triple remove from the referent due to the fact that their medium is language.

The cottonwood in the desert is a natural sign—a symbol for water. It is thus not like the linguistic sign, in which the signifier and signified are yoked arbitrarily. Instead it is an ontological fact that grounds semiosis as such. Being able to properly <u>read</u> this symbol, and the fact that one reads the desert is crucial, is the difference between life and death. Because the relation of cottonwood to water is a symbolic one, ontologically speaking it is not possible to misread it. Although we can certainly imagine a scenario in which a person does not know that green foliage indicates water, or one in which a person who thinks that greenery does <u>not</u> mean

that water is nearby, in both cases the person in question is simply wrong about the world. These would be misreadings that stem from basic errors in understanding facts about the world, and thus they would not be misreadings at all. Cottonwood trees simply do indicate water, and any misreading or misunderstanding of that fact is not the result of some problem with the relationship between the two, but with the human who does not know that relationship. But language, and especially text, does not work this way.

When he figures the natural sign through metaphor, he authorizes his own aesthetic practice by posting the logic of the symbol as the primordial logic of the sign, and thus of language as such. Let us look at this metaphor then, for it carries a great deal of weight for Abbey. First, note the analogical structure of the metaphor. If it is the case that language is to truth as cottonwood is to water, it would appear that in order to reach truth we need to go through language just as we need the cottonwood to find the water. And truth is analogized with hidden water in the desert, so it would be the case that finding the truth is also a matter of survival.

Ultimately, then, language becomes a sign of truth, which is turn is necessary to survival. Language is no longer a veil in this metaphor; it is instead a sign that produces aesthetic experience by revealing hidden truth. To establish meaning through metaphor in this way seems natural enough, whether we think in terms of the *poeisis* we saw in earlier in Emerson and Heidegger, or in terms Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive account of metaphor to take only two examples. It is simply a fact that we use metaphor to mean, and that metaphor shapes our ability to mean to a greater or less degree. But isn't there something unsettling going on in this case? How can Abbey use a metaphor to in essence disavow metaphor? Or to put the same question in another way, does the text on the page bear out the naturalistic logic of the symbol that Abbey wants to instill as the essence of language? Surely, if we read the passage the way Abbey wants

to us to, the problem of the instability of rhetoric solved. On the other hand, if we read the passage the way Morton likely would, we pathologize ecomimesis as that which plays out a guilt about language, and even about itself. The outcome of this metaphor then, and of course it is not limited to these two options, depends on how we read the passage, a fact that suggests in turn that in de Man's words that rhetoric is entirely "an epistemological discipline" ("The Epistemology of Metaphor" 25). To read the passage as I suggest Morton might, or in any other way really, is to show precisely the way in which language in its rhetorical, figurative aspect is not, and cannot be, understood to be grounded in a naturalistic semiosis. In other words, and without generalizing the point to other media, language cannot be properly symbolic on the Hegelian definition.

Allow me to put this point into practice. In the figure with which we began the cottonwood tree equals water in the desert and water in the desert equals life. This is nothing other than a natural metonymy—a symbol in the Hegelian and de Manian sense. As I noted above, it is clear that Abbey wants to use this metonymy as an analogy for the relation of language to truth, indeed to the ability of language to access the aesthetic truth of the world. But how do we get from [cottonwood-water] to [language-truth (of the world)]? While the cottonwood and water pairing uses metonymy to establish a symbolic relation that implicitly counters the dangerous and disruptive power of figuration, it does so through, as we have seen, a different figure, namely metaphor. The metaphor though has a very different logic than the metonymy. The metonym operates on the symbolic register. That is to say that the yoking of one thing to another thing in metonymic relation relies on a natural and necessary ontological between them: the tree needs water to live and therefore the tree is an indication of water below the surface. This relation is clearly metonymic and as such, clearly symbolic. But when Abbey

uses the tree to water metonym as a metaphor for linguistic signification itself, and more specifically for the relation of language to the truth of the world, something strange happens. Unlike the symbolic logic of metonym, metaphor by analogy uses a logic of implied similarity, and as such it requires no ontological relation of signifier to signified. In metaphor then is inscribed the very arbitrariness of the sign as composed of signifier and signified with no necessary ontological or epistemological to each other. This would mean that it is precisely in metaphor that the semiotic and epistemological instability of language most powerfully manifests itself. The metaphor of [cottonwood-water] as [language-truth of the world] then can't help but put into question the correspondence between the two pairings. In fact the relations do not match up, as we have seen, and in fact when considered for more than a moment appear utterly dis-analogous—the first has two concrete referent, the second only one; cottonwoods need water to live while language cannot be said to need the truth of the world; cottonwoods are not essentially media of semiosis or communication while language is; and so on perhaps literally *ad nauseum*. Not only does relationship of analogy not work, but also the yoking of the two pairs themselves is not based on any kind of necessary relation to each other, and in fact there is no relationship prior to or aside from the metaphorical one.

And in fact when we read the figure figuratively as it were, we see that its re-figuration of [tree-water] as [language-truth] has the rather unpleasant effect of colonizing or eroding not only the figure itself (to the degree that it is meant to show us something about the ground of linguistic semiosis), but also crucially the naturalistic semiosis of the first pair. The re-figuring power of the catachrestic metaphor creeps back on the metonymy; the caprice of trope and the problem of its readability bends or curves back on that which set it in motion appearing to

undermine the very ontological factuality of the natural sign. De Man discusses this tendency evocatively in "The Epistemology of Metaphor," writing that catachreses

> are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways, pairing man with woman or human being with beast in the most unnatural shapes. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopoeia, and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters. (21)

This kind of dismembering of the texture of reality happens in reading because we grasp a figure's meaning means only when we see it as a figure. That is, when it dawns on the reader that the discussion of the cottonwood tree's relation to water should be read two ways, literal (stable) and figurative (unstable), the literal meaning is in a certain way completely subsumed in a figurative one. As a result once the reader has understood that all of this a is figure, and thus that it cannot be read (only) literally, only a residue of the literality of the metonymy remains in tact. Once this has happened, once the text has been read that is, there can be no going back.

Abbey's figuration of a metonymic and symbolic relation as metaphorically analogous to epistemo-linguistic relation then radically reverses the figure as we learn that a phenomenal relation cannot be used to phenomenalize and ontologize a linguistic relation. The implications for the understanding of language as a product of a natural and primordial semiosis could not be more dire. In the passage from symbolic, metonymic logic to a metaphorical a-logic, the reader becomes privy to, as de Man puts it "a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes," just as we did with the *excursus*/*exemplum* ("Excuses [*Confessions*]" 301).

Reading in this case then, allows us to see precisely the opposite of what Abbey wants us to see. We find that the symbol or natural sign is not in fact the paradigm of language from which corrosive figuration deviates, but the other way around. Figuration seems to have transformed the natural, phenomenal, ontological relation of the cottonwood to water into a figure. Of course, the relation between cottonwood and water does not actually change. But because here in the text that relationship is figured, its literal meaning erodes just as water erodes bedrock. Figure, the rhetorical aspect of language, cannot be contained or constrained in the way the text needs it to be, or the author wants it to be. This figure like all figures disfigures itself, but it also disfigures or erodes the notion of the symbol as ground of semiosis, as well as the reality upon which it relies.

Eroding the Meaning of the World: The Poison of the Aesthetic

As seen in the early goings of "Water," water is figured first as life and second as nature seen as aesthetic truth. In this figure, the text produces in spite of intent an additional layer of complexity, an interference pattern that problematizes the central issues of concern in *Desert Solitaire*—distinctions between language, truth, and the nonhuman. Although this self-problematization can be called a symptom, it is important to note that the text (not to say Abbey) is well aware of its own epistemo-ontologic-linguistic problematic.[109] Indeed, it is of great import that a text so explicitly concerned with the "bedrock" of reality uses water, the eroder of rock, to figure that same reality. But it is not simply that truth and reality are figured as water. The text's vertiginous economy, if not logic, of tropological substitution continues as the chapter proceeds, further complicating its account of the relation of language to world.

[109] All too often so-called symptomatic readings betray their basis in psychoanalysis by analyzing a text from an Archimedian remove, forgetting that in therapy the analysand is typically more or less aware of her symptoms. The crimes of high literary theory, such as they are, are usually thought to be the result of this methodology, a methodology that can and has attempted to justify any and all readings. While the critique is valid as far as it goes, a strong rhetorical reading will avoid these problems by locating the ways in which the text is cognizant of its symptoms, so to speak.

Just after the [cottonwood-water] [language-truth of the world] section, we find a list of springs that provide potable water in and around Arches. The context has to do with Abbey's desert wanderings and the importance of knowing the location of drinking water, since if we are to believe his account he often disobeys the first rule of desert hiking and does not bring his own. But as we know, these springs cannot be seen only literally. Following the figural logic we have already seen, the list of springs is also on some level a list of places where the aesthetic truth of the nonhuman flows—founts of meaning as it were. In their ability to sustain life, these desert springs figure for Abbey the salutary, necessary aesthetic effect of the nonhuman world. So far, so good but as might be suspected things change quickly and in striking ways. Permit another long excerpt:

> Other springs, more surprises. Northeast of Moab in a region of gargoyles and hobgoblins, a landscape left over from the late Jurassic, is a peculiar little waterhole named Onion Spring. A few wild onions grow in the vicinity but more striking, in season, is the golden princess plume, an indicator of selenium, a mild poison often found in association with uranium, a poison not so mild. Approaching the spring you notice a sulfurous stink in the air though the water itself, neither warm nor cold, looks clear and drinkable (116).

Although it's worth noting Abbey's recourse to the very kinds of anthropomorphizing imagery he denounces in the "anti-Kantian" passage, something more important occurs here. That fact becomes apparent as the passage continues: "Unlike most desert waterholes you will find around Onion Spring few traces of animal life. Nobody comes to drink. The reason is the very good one that the water of Onion Spring contains not only sulfur, and perhaps selenium, but also arsenic." The plant Abbey calls the "golden princess plume" here, more commonly known as the Desert

Prince-plume or Desert Prince (*Stanleya pinnata*), is a selenium accumulator, meaning it can absorb that element without damage. As such, it often grows, as Abbey notes, near uranium deposits. In fact, uranium prospectors have even used it as a more or less reliable sign of the presence of that element.

It is also, as Abbey tells us, a sign for water naturally contaminated with the arsenic that often co-occurs with selenium; the former is a much more deadly poison to animals, including humans, than the latter. We might again notice the sheer number of strategic substitutions and significations here: from cottonwood to price plume, from water to poisoned water, from selenium to uranium to arsenic. But more importantly, we have here yet another recasting of the same pairing of signifier and signified that we had above in the cottonwood example. If in the previous example Abbey figures a specific tree--a cottonwood--as language, and life-giving water as the aesthetic truth of the nonhuman, all of that is revised and even revered here. The basic relationship between signifier (plant) and signified (water) is retained, but if water serves as a figure for the nonhuman world, for nature, then here through a figural reversal we find that truth itself, the aesthetic truth of the nonhuman, has become deadly!

On the surface level, or what we might call the literal level, this passage is clear enough. It is yet another example of the authenticity of sense a place. If one knows the country, that is, one would know that the yellow flowers of the Prince Plume indicate water, yes, but a different kind of water than that indicated by the cottonwood: a deadly kind. So on this literal level, knowledge of place plays out as an exclusionary criterion that yet again validates nature over language and over text. But as Lacan would insist, we cannot take the surface of an onion for its content, even if its content is nothing but surface.[110] In fact for the reasons we have seen above, we cannot ignore the figural valence of this passage, that of reading. When in the earlier

[110] Lacan makes passing reference to the ego as onion "The See-saw of Desire" in Book 1 of the *Seminar*.

example, we see the cottonwood in the desert and we know that the tree symbolizes water we would seem to be reading the desert in something like the way we read a text. But as I have argued throughout this monograph, reading does not work in this manner something the appearance of Onion Spring dramatizes. If with the cottonwood Abbey articulates reading as an act of immediate and unproblematic understanding subtended by a naturalist semiosis, the relation of the so-called golden princess plume to the toxic water of Onion Spring throws that initial figure into confusion.[111] What seemed to be an obviously natural and necessary connection between life-giving water and vegetation, which was then used as a metaphor for the aesthetic truth of nature and its relation to language through reading, becomes deeply troubled by the possibility of a radical misreading. The result of such a misreading—drinking the poisoned water of Onion Spring—results in sickness or death.

The consequence of all this could not be clearer. The structure upon which the first figure relied stays the same, the symbolic structure of natural, ontological relation, but its meaning has been changed through its re-figuration by the Onion Spring. Abbey's figuration of truth and language becomes frighteningly, disruptively fluid. This is not bedrock, but paradox as the inaugural act of meaning upon which the naturalistic account of semiosis relies slips, like so much water, out of our hands. With the advent of Onion Spring then *Desert Solitaire* has thrown its own investiture in the truth of language. The veil of words that Abbey works so hard to lift by deriving language from the natural sign reasserts itself here in this re-figuring as the condition of the possibility of its own lifting.[112]

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[111] I will justify my equivocation momentarily.

[112] In his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* Benjamin presents a striking image from which I borrow here. Regarding beauty (not language), he writes

> Beauty is not a semblance, not a veil covering something else. It itself is not appearance but purely essence—one which, of course, remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled. Therefore, even if everywhere else appearance is deception, the appearance of the beautiful is the veil thrown over what is necessarily the most veiled. *For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object*

The poisoned spring then indicates the danger of assuming symbolic and metonymic correspondence between language and world by pointing out exactly what the figure wants to hide—that the reading of text is not at all like the reading of a place or a landscape. In fact to say that they are analogous is to make a grievous error—reading a landscape has to do with ontological matters, while reading a text has to do with tropological matters. In the case of landscape, one only needs to know the facts to "read" reliably. But of course this notion of reading a landscape is itself a figure, a metaphor, and indeed a kind of catachresis. In the chiasmic reversal of the initial figure found here then, the "bedrock" of the nonhuman world becomes paradox, the paradox of trope as the second figure, call it F2, [plume plant-Onion Spring] turns in on the first, F1[cottonwood-potable water]. In F2, the potable water of F1is substituted by poisoned water. On the figural level of F1, let us call it M1, the cottonwood is figured as language and the potable water is figured as the aesthetic truth of the world. The figural level of F2, M2, then would indicate that something like false language can lead to deadly effects. The question then would be M2 affects M1. If we read F2 in the light of M1, that is if we see the structure of F2 as analogous to F1 and M1, M2 would have to be said to figure the aesthetic truth of the nonhuman as poisoned water, as that which is toxic and deadly. (It must here be stressed that the water of Onion Spring is "naturally" poisoned rather than poisoned by humankind.) "Nature" then has become unnatural as the result, at least in the sense that naturality means organicism, vitality, stasis, and solidity. That in turn would mean that the very "natural" world that *Desert Solitaire* seeks to establish becomes deadly by virtue of the same tropological valence that establishes it. To the degree that it relies on rhetoric, which is to say entirely, the text erodes its own epistemological and ontological ground.

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in its veil. (*Selected Writings Vol. 1* 351, emphasis added)

Paradox seems to have eroded bedrock then, leading us to ask if all is lost. Of course the epistemology of metaphor does not alter the nonhuman world in its *noumenal* aspect, its haecceity. It does, however, have the potential to radically disrupt its phenomenal character, the character that makes aesthetic perception possible. Abbey seems to be aware, at least subconsciously of this when he writes

> The poison spring is quite clear. The water is sterile, lifeless. There are no bugs, which is itself a warning sign, in case the smell were not sufficient. When in doubt about drinking from an unknown spring, look for life. If the water is scummed with algae, crawling with worms, grubs, larvae, spiders, and liver flukes, be reassured, drink hearty and you'll get nothing but dysentery. *But if it appears innocent and pure, beware*. Onion Spring wears such a deceitful guise. (116-117, emphasis added)

Here, the very purity of vision, and of language, that Abbey initially calls for is nothing less than deadly. That vision of purity and innocence, of course, is precisely the aesthetic view of nature, a view in which as we have seen Abbey is deeply invested. But here we are told to be wary of the beautiful and thus of the aesthetic, and thus of the world, and thus of the nonhuman. In a certain way, Abbey earns this conclusion, which is to say that the text works through its own figural logic, its own paradox, only to find that its notion of bedrock cannot stand, that there is. There are things outside of language of course, but the text here recognizes that there can be no immediate access to them, and that the double mediation resulting from noumenon to mediated phenomenon to further mediated language is difficult enough without adding the third level mediation of the figurative dimension language. This theme is further reinforced in what we might call a crisis of naming here. It turns out that Abbey, who has admitted that he is no naturalist, has fallen victim to misnomer. What he calls the "golden princess plume" is not in fact

known by that name, a fact he acknowledges elsewhere.[113] There is perhaps no better reminder of the arbitrariness of language than naming, which is both the inaugural act of language and the paradigm of confusing phenomenon with referent.[114] In the name, we see that language is not at all like a natural sign or a metonym, that whatever language is, it is avowedly not natural in this way. The Cratylistic assumption that it is may seem like an impossibly naïve position, but it precisely the one that Abbey attempts to establish with F1. It is also, I think, something that many of us internalize and use as a heuristic operative principle even if we are intellectually aware that it is not so.

As *Desert Solitaire* indicates—with its recursive economy of trope, its thematic concern with the entirely mediate paradoxy of language, and the relation of that mediacy to the immediate bedrock of the nonhuman—these problems are inherent to both the fraught business of ecomimesis and notions of nonhuman value. Of course, we know that the relation of flora to water is not ontologically altered by its involvement in a tropological nexus. But when we read figuratively, we cannot stop the epistemological contamination of the ontological by the figural, of the truth of the signifier by the content of the signified. Epistemology bleeds through attempts to ontologize language, whether those attempts are those of the naïve Cratylist or of the theorist of naturalistic semiosis. Figure/trope/rhetoric escapes us, infecting and eroding that which it figures and thereby relentlessly and infinitely self-allegorizing. The tropological aspect of language, that which makes literature and reading possible, is autonomous. It is nonhuman, and it exceeds attempts at human control. What this means then is that it is wild. Taken this point

[113] In text that accompanied 1979's *Desert Images*, a large format book featuring Abbey's prose and the photographs of David Muench, Abbey writes, "A secret flower, a hidden special, little known, seldom publicized: the desert prince's plume, *Stanleya pinnata*" (qtd. in *Beyond the Wall* 90).

[114] The discussion of naming in the continental tradition is beyond the purview of this paper, but it is worth noting that for the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer and the young Walter Benjamin to name only two, the proper name has metaphysical and ontological import (Cf. Cassirer's *Language and Myth* and Benjamin's "Concerning Language in General and the Language of Man" in *Selected Works Vol. 1*).

seriously, this point has tremendous implications for problems of language, "nature," and aesthetics.

Remember that a central concern of *Desert Solitaire* is a vision of wildness as entirely other, of the alterity of nature. We have seen that this vision presents the author and text with any number of epistemological and linguistic problems, problems with which the text engages and avoids in many ways. Nevertheless nature understood as that which is wildly autonomous is central to Abbey's book. Such an understanding is the condition of possibility for the text's claim of the importance of preservation or conservation over a logic of use. In light of the foregoing analysis, one might ask something to the effect of: But isn't the figural erosion of the ontological, metonymical fact just another example of human violence being done to nature understood as other? Have not we ended up siding with Morton after all as we critique of the very notion of "wild nature" and thus against the "naïve" conservation ethic of second wave environmentalism, the very ethic I set out to defend?

It is true, as Morton knows, that the rhetorical dimension of language poses a threat to a naïve understanding of naturality. But that threat has everything to do with figuration's ability to counteract linguistic reification. The only way Abbey can "naturalize" language is to use a figure. But as I have tried to show the attempt to phenomenalize and ontologize the referent, the thing itself, through figure reveals the essentially catachrestic structure of figure itself. At stake here then is not simply this figure or this text, although they are both indispensible, but ecomimesis itself, nature writing itself. By definition, ecomimesis is the inscription of the trope of naturality. It strives to make language symbolic, to link language in a necessary way with the nonhuman, just as in the present figure. What becomes legible when these attempts are read closely is both Morton's understanding "nature" as fiction and the erosive effect of linguistic

trope on all that it touches. The reader might well ask about the point of all this. Have I simply "deconstructed" Abbey's text by bringing out its own paradoxes in order that we may dispense with it? I said earlier that my intent here was defend the notion of wilderness from *Desert Solitaire* through what I am calling a wild reading. The question wildness and its import must now be addressed.

Conclusion: The Inoperativity of Reading Wildly and the Matter of the Text

On the general level I have argued thus far that the way in which linguistic figuration erodes itself and the concepts it is deployed to posit illustrates the impossibility of grasping nonhuman haecceity. On the level of particularity, I have suggested that these issues manifest themselves in instructive ways in *Desert Solitaire*. By way of drawing this essay to a close I want to look at the ways in which this analysis might be said to address the question of the wild, understood as that which is completely autonomous from the human project of meaning, that which is "outside" of anthropogenic meaning, and "outside" the language of reference.

Above I claimed that Abbey's text shows us that there is, and can be, no immediate access to that which is "outside" meaning, signification, and language—a point that might seem to suggest that we simply give on even trying. I must insist that the former point is the case, but that it does not imply or necessitate the latter. To say that there is no access to the autonomously nonhuman, or to say that the tools used to approximate such access are so thoroughly mediate that they can render only in terms of their own schemata, is not and is never to say that the nonhuman does not exist or is somehow irrelevant. I am of course using the language of Kant when I use such terms, and not on accident. We must remember that one of the central projects of the *Critiques* is to show the limits of reason, i.e. the ways in which even if they are transcendental and *a priori* schemata are able to produce only results appropriate to them. In

other words, for Kant it is nonsensical to apply reason to things that are non-phenomenal, things such as God, the paradigmatic *Ding an Sich*. We are not concerned with divinity at present, but this manner of thought, a manner that attests to certain similarities in Kant to medieval apophantic theology or *via negativa*, is highly relevant to the problem of ecomimesis, to the problem of wildness, and to the problem of reading.[115] Kant agrees in principle, if not necessarily in substance, with influential medieval Jewish theologian and philosopher Moses Maimonides when the latter articulates perhaps the central principle of apophantism in his *The Guide for the Perplexed* "In the contemplation of [God's] essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient; in the examination of His works, how they necessarily result from His will, our knowledge proves to be ignorance, and in the endeavor to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure!" (1.5). Without going into stifling detail, we can say that Maimonides is approaching a problem very much like that of Kant's: the problem of reason and its relation to revealed religion. The solution posed by Maimonides to the problem of attributing qualities to a divinity is that of negation: "positive attributes, although not peculiar to one thing, describe a portion of what we desire to know, either some part of its essence or some of its accidents: the negative attributes, on the other hand, do not, as regards the essence of the thing which we desire to know, in any way tell us what it is, except it be indirectly" (ibid).[116] To sum up, the only way to characterize God is to say what He is not. For Maimonides to describe God positively, that is attribute qualities to it Him in the essentially equivocal medium of language, is to commit idolatry and in fact a double idolatry. Not only can qualities not be attributed to Him but also to do so in language is always already to equivocate.

[115] See D.M. MacKinnon's "Kant's Philosophy of Religion" (1975) and the opening chapter of Don Cupitt's *Is Nothing Sacred?;The Nonrealist Philosophy of Religion* (2002) called "Kant and the Negative Theology" for in-depth discussion of the relation to Kant's thought to apophantic theology.

[116] Like all medieval philosophers, and no doubt nearly all theologians of the period, Maimonides uses Aristotle's thought as his primary point of philosophical reference, thus the discussion of quality and attribution.

The problem Abbey comes up against in *Desert Solitaire* is a variation that faced by Maimonides, Pseudo-Dionysus, and Kant. The radical alterity of the nonhuman so crucial to Abbey cannot be described because words do not apply to it, and to apply words to it is to abrogate the very possibility of grasping its alterity. The issue here is not of idolatry but of erosion, the way in which figural attribution is always already a mediation of a mediation has the effect of eroding alterity. To repurpose Walter Benjamin on the notion of beauty, to figure the nonhuman in language is to show that that the nonhuman "is neither the veil [language] nor the veiled object [the nonhuman other] but rather the object in its veil," which is tantamount to saying the nonhuman exists only insofar as it as we humanize it, precisely the opposite of what Abbey wants to say, and very similar indeed to the problem that any philosopher who adheres to a revealed religion must confront (*Selected Writings Vol. 1* 351).

A reasonable question at this point might be why Abbey does not take up apophantic thought in his defense of the wildly autonomous nonhuman. Why does he flirt with it here and there, such as in the anti-Kantian passage, only to run headlong into the inevitable epistemological abyss that results from attempting the impossible? The answer comes down to Abbey's conflicting convictions. Unlike most theologians, and certainly the apophantics, Abbey is a sensualist, an aesthete, and a writer. He wants beauty and alterity and he wants to communicate both. As such he is shackled to language. He loves beauty, but not on the disinterested Kantian model. His beauty is something like the purely sensual, not the pleasure of contemplation. As a sensualist and as a writer then, he wishes to marshal language and imagery in such a way that they have sensual impact. This fact helps explain his many allusions to music in the text. Like Walter Benjamin, Abbey seems to equate music with "pure feeling," (*Selected Writings* 61 "Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy"). It also helps explain Abbey's tendency to

figure the world in problematically sexualized terms. All of this is to say that the *via negative* is not open to Abbey.

Nevertheless there are no workarounds to these issues, as we have seen. Apophantism addresses them by admitting that to communicate the value of that which has value precisely because it is incommunicable and in-valuable is impossible, at least on the terms of predication. In the case of revealed religion, perhaps it is reasonable to say that we needn't even use predication since we have revelation. But the defense of the nonhuman wild is an ethical and political problem, not a theological one, and as such surely it must be able to be predicated. Abbey's attempted solution to the philosophical and political problem of communicating the incommunicability of the nonhuman is to communicate it aesthetically, to dwell in the double mediation of language as figure. But this cannot be a solution, really for any number of reasons. With what are we left then? Should we simply follow Wittgenstein's dictate of silence about that of which we cannot speak? The answer to both is nested in the answer to an earlier question having to do with the foregoing analysis of figure and language in *Desert Solitaire*. In short, the wild reading of *Desert Solitaire*, one that is entirely specific to that text, has the effect of supplementing it apophantically in such a way that the site of its impossibility comes to be the site of its im-potential.

My examination centers on the way in which references to ontological and phenomenal reality, the cottonwood literally refers to water, are entirely tropological in structure. In that example, the natural sign dissolves under the weight of the disfiguring act of substitution required for it metaphorization. This tropological analysis foregrounds the issue of metalanguage, and thus, as de Man puts it, the problem of literary theory. Morton's rhetorical analysis of ecomimesis falls short of embracing this latter problem, and as such that critique is—

and I am aware of the apparent absurdity of the claim in light of Morton's theoretical acumen—insufficiently theoretical. It fails to theorize itself, thereby failing to take the problem of literary theory as seriously as it must. My account of *Desert Solitaire* means to take that problem deadly seriously by beginning with the understanding that the division of language and "nature" is both unavoidable and completely unstable, and that a solution that simply reverses the structure of the supposed problem is no solution at all. In short, that "nature" is always already a trope means neither that it is the real thing to which language ought be opposed nor that it is hopelessly romanticized and thus without critical potential. What makes this analysis possible is the appearance of what de calls "the autonomous potential of language," an appearance that becomes available only through the reading of particularity. The rhetorical and "wild" reading shows us not that language is a species of "natural" semiosis, or that naturality is a purely linguistic concept, but that language <u>is</u> "nature" precisely to the degree that the human relation to language, that which appears to us on both the banal and theoretical level as completely "natural," is radically un-natural. In apophantic terms, reading wildly enacts paradox. "Nature" can be defined only as that which is un-natural, the nonhuman predicated only in the way that it is not "human" (and of course *vice versa*), and language only as that which is non-linguistic.

Although these formulations might sound irreverent or even nonsensical, what I am proposing neither simply a heuristic nor merely a rhetorical game. Critical thought of the past three decades or so has turned against wilderness, or the wild if you prefer. As a thinker and critic devoted to the importance of the nonhuman, especially now, my task is to find a way to thematize this importance in an era in which the nonhuman becomes less and less a part of everyday life. As I discuss in my first chapter, I take it to be true that people can and do experience the disruptive alterity of the nonhuman in the sublime. That experience is crucial to

changing course in what is being called the Anthropocene, to a critical revaluation of what Giorgio Agamben, after Jean-Luc Nancy, has been called the modern ontology of operativity.[117] Following in his own unique way Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, Benjamin, Heidegger, Arendt, and Nancy among others, Agamben has argued that operativity, meaning very roughly the use of power to do things in the world, is the fundamental Western conception of humanity. If we take that conception seriously, we find that the same fundamentally instrumental character lies at the heart of the projects of capitalism, nationalism socialism, Marxism, and communism to name only a few. To the degree that all of these articulate themselves in terms of productivity, of doing things, whether those things are in pursuit of personal wealth or in pursuit of social justice, they function on the logic of operativity, which essentially includes seeing the nonhuman in terms of natural resources or in Heidegger's term standing reserve. Agamben's solution to this logic is the notion of the inoperable or inoperativity:

> Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but names an operation that deactivates and renders works (of economy, of religion, of language, etc.) inoperative. It is a question, that is, of going back to the problem that Aristotle fleetingly posed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b, 22 sqq), when, in the context of the definition of the object of *epistēmē politikē*, of political science, he wondered if, as for the flute player, the sculptor, the carpenter, and every artisan there exists a proper work (*ergon*), there is also for man as such something like an *ergon* or if he is not instead *argos*, without work, inoperative. ("What is a Destituent Power?" 69)

To the degree that Agamben smacks of quietism, he is likely to be dismissed—perhaps rightly so. Nevertheless, the attempt to articulate the inoperative as a disarticulation of the operative is

[117] For Agamben, both the source of the problem and its solution are ontological. I tend to think that the phrase "the logic of operativity" is more useful, even as it attenuates Agamben's formulation.

radical in the sense that it attempts to look beyond inherited patterns of thought. It is also an apophantic view in the sense that it is entirely predicated on negation. The example Agamben gives, that of the poem, is particularly instructive for our purposes:

> What is a poem, in fact, if not an operation taking place in language that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use? What the poem accomplishes for the potentiality of speaking, politics and philosophy must accomplish for the power of acting. Rendering inoperative the biological, economic, and social operations, they show what the human body can do, opening it to a new possible use. (70)

Here, Agamben uses the relation of the poem to language as an analogy for a new kind of politics and philosophy. But to what degree might a picture of language itself be in a foundational relationship to the new politics and philosophy rather than an analogical one?

Agamben's understanding of the role of the poem and its relation to language is not centrally different from that of Heidegger seen in the first chapter. In both cases, the poem has a something like a therapeutic value in the way it thematizes its own linguisticality. What de Man's work contributes is the notion that such a view can, and indeed must, be taken further. Indeed, de Man focuses not on the recuperative power of poetry but the way in which literary language contains within it its own immanent critique, a critique that points toward linguistic inoperability. To discover this, to go through not only the so-called deconstruction of the literary object but the subsequent problematization of language as a medium of meaning, is to experience the sublime in all its shattering, inoperative power, even if only momentarily. Language is rendered nonhuman as a result and its wildness, its autonomy, comes forth in powerfully negative fashion. When this happens, as in the case of the wild reading of ecomimesis, the logic

of operability is disrupted by and in its very medium and a different, inoperative thought may become possible. And it is important that this possibility, a kind of negative potential, comes forth through reading, language, and their relations to ideas and to the world.

Because the inoperative possibility resides in the analysis of the rhetorical dimension of language, it can be said to escape at least two central problems with the sublime experience of the nonhuman. Such an experience has been said to contain deeply troubling ideological commitments (we need not recap the debate about fascism and the sublime). The discussion of whether this is the case or not will have to wait, but when through reading we can make language—the primordial tool of operativity—inoperable, we are warranted in saying that this is a critical move and not an authoritarian one. The second problem with the experience of the sublime in "nature" has to do with accessibility. It is simply the case that such an experience is increasingly distant for many people. We are more urban than ever, there are more of us than ever, we are more reliant on technology than ever before, and there are fewer and fewer unpopulated areas on the globe. The encounter with the wildness of language however is available to all. To do this is to un-master the relationship to language, meaning, nature, and the human of both writer and reader.

What the wild reading makes available then, by rendering language inoperable is a textual sublime, a sublime and inoperative intra-mediacy. Rather than simply reinscribing the aesthetic ideology of ecomimesis, then, when read wildly Abbey's text indicates the mortal danger of confusing what de Man calls phenomenality with reference. *Desert Solitaire*'s ecomimesis seems to rely on a number of such moves as text blurs over the boundary between world and language in both its aesthetic practice and its explicit theme. As I have tried to show here, though, such blurring produces intense aberrations precisely because it relies on that which

disrupts the reliable passage from language to meaning, trope. And in fact, the text tells us outright that that which is most pure and most innocent-looking is deadly. We see too that truth, meaning and reality are not as solid as they appear, and are indeed closer to paradox than to bedrock. What we learn from this is not simply that Abbey's ecomimesis is unstable or that we must not trust the aesthetic or simplistic passages from language to nature. It is not enough then to say that what Abbey characterizes as anti-Kantian perception is deeply Kantian. Instead, what must be said is that at the moment at which reading allows us to see the wild meaninglessness of the text an encounter with the immanent alterity of language is produced. The work of reading must be done for this to happen, and thus a methodology of reading must be clearly delineated. It is a rigorous path, but it is one does not give up on text, on alterity, on the nonhuman, or on politics. To do this work is to show the inherent contradictions of the work itself, and the effect is a chastening one. Potency as that which Agamben argues is enshrined in the Western tradition is conceived of as the ability to do things, to use power to effect the world. This is the moment of creativity, of course, but it is also the moment of domination that has in part lead us into the Anthropocene. If we can find sublime, even terrifying, alterity in one of the central mediums of potency, if we can perform work as immanent critique, if we are able to reject the logic of reference and predication when we address the nonhuman, perhaps we will learn that we can think, and be, otherwise. The wild reading of *Desert Solitaire* leaves us with is an encounter with alterity that is like, but importantly not the same as, the sublime encounter with nature. The effect of that encounter with the textual sublime does not reassert the human, but rather defaces and erodes the very *topos* from whence the human begins. And it is in this moment that our relentless anthropocentricity can also be defaced, if even for a moment, sparking an ethics not of

mastery or abjection but of inoperability that occurs not in the "face of nature," but in the de-facing of a textual wilderness.

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Appendix I

Against the Sublime: Kant, Absolute Idealism in Emerson, and the Instrumental View of Nature

The "transcendent" aspect of Emerson's transcendentalism, the same that Thoreau adopted, owes a partial debt to romanticism. With their shared focus on nature, quasi-pantheism, and individual fulfillment Emersonian transcendentalism and English and German romanticism are notably similar. But Emerson's transcendentalism has another crucial (and related) antecedent: the critical "transcendental idealism" of Immanuel Kant. Kant was known, of course, to German and English Romantics but his thought, through the lens of others, was of particular import to Emerson. We can see this in something as obvious as Emerson's choice of terminology. In his first major work the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant formulates a difference between what he calls *Verstand* (Understanding) and *Vernunft* (Reason). Emerson, of course, makes use of the English equivalents of these terms in what can be considered the program piece for Transcendentalism, his seminal essay entitled *Nature*. I shall have more to say Emerson's understanding of these terms later, but first let us look at what Kant means by them.

Put very roughly indeed, one key part of Kant's notion of *Verstand* (Understanding) is that it processes sense data according to what he calls categories: *a priori* structures that serve as the conditions of possibility for how we perceive and process the information we receive from our senses. While the categories themselves are of little interest to us, the central thesis is an important one. Kant argues that in order for our experiences and thoughts to be what they are, they must be shaped in some universal and "transcendental" way. For human beings to have the experience of cause and effect at all for example, Kant argues that the structure of causality must already exist in our apperception of the event. The logic works like this: The fact that we all do have this experience of causality, and that causality is not a thing we perceive but instead is

something that makes our everyday perception possible, means that there must be a structure of causality in our basic capacity for understanding.

This formulation of *Verstand* is part of Kant's response to the skepticism of Hume and the empiricism of Locke. In fact, Kant addresses Hume's discussion of causality from the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* directly. Hume argues that the perception of causality we derive from causes and effects is not the work of reason but simply the work of experience. Hume's point has to do with his account of reason, which he sees as concerned with producing statements about facts and about the relations of ideas. That account in turn seeks to show that the perception of causality does not stem from reason, and thus that reason cannot be said to rely on *a priori* structures. Kant takes issue with it by arguing that the fact that we are able to experience causality at all indicates that there must be some transcendental structure that underlies such a perception, a structure that is a necessary condition of possibility for causality to exist for us at all. For Kant, then, *Verstand* i.e. the Understanding, that which includes the transcendental categories, is distinct from *Vernunft* (Reason) because *Verstand* is that which enables and structures our cognitive experience; it is the necessary precondition of experience as we have it. Reason on the other hand is something different. It has two "uses:" a "formal" or "logical use" and a "real use" (Kant *CPureR* 387). The first is something like Hume's relation of ideas in that it "draws inferences from principles" and while the second "seeks to base series of ordinary inferences… in ultimate foundational principles" (Kant *CPureR* 15). It is this latter view of reason that Hume attacks as logically incoherent in the *Essay* and that he uses to dismiss *a priori* structures of reason. But in Kant's response to Hume, this "real use" of reason is simply the logical consequence of the nature of reason itself. A useful and important, indeed crucial, corollary is Kant's discussion of what he calls the dynamically sublime in the *Critique of*

Judgment. In the so-called dynamic sublime, human reason seeks to comprehend the incomprehensible—an impossible task. Kant understands this impossible task to be the result of the way Reason works. It is the task of Reason to seek comprehension no matter its object. If that object exceeds comprehension, reason collapses on itself. This is what happens in the dynamic sublime. As Kant writes

> Although we found our own limitation when we considered [the dynamic sublime] and the inadequacy of our ability to adopt a standard proportionate to estimating aesthetically the magnitude of nature's *domain*, yet we also found, in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard that had this infinity itself under it as a unit; and since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small, we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. In the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature (120-121)

So Reason here attempts to "go beyond itself" but even though it cannot do this, it paradoxically asserts the superiority of the human as reasoner. Reason, according to Kant, confirms its power by attempting to do something it simply cannot do.

It is this same quality of Reason to attempt to go beyond itself that, Kant argues, leads to the kinds of metaphysical errors that manifest themselves when we speak of souls and attempt to describe God, things about which inferences based on experience and cognitive data are useless. Kant's well-known defense of God in fact rests on the same interplay, or lack thereof, of Understanding and Reason found in the dynamic sublime. If we use reason, either "formal" or "real," on an object that is not available to our senses and thus not available to our Understanding, we inevitably end up speaking nonsense. But that nonsense is not proof that God

does not exist. Instead it points to two central points. The first, and fairly obvious, point is that to use Reason to on an entity like God, one that by its definition exceeds human reason, is a category error. The second, and perhaps more important, point is what this says about Reason itself. Reason, by its "nature," necessarily treats that to which it is applied as objects of Reason, as things we might say. Reason does not stop reasoning then when it encounters something that is, shall we say, un-reason-able. And it is here that the sublime becomes important for Kant. For even when it fails, Kant argues, what we learn about Reason is that it always seeks to comprehend. Reason is limited but it does not and cannot know its own limitations. For Kant, this striving of Reason to know that which it cannot know is, for lack of a better work, heroic. Reason can only proceed as it does; it is only capable of doing what it does. The negative experience of the sublime, in which Reason is outstripped, is thus transfigured by Kant into a heroic experience as we see in the excerpt from the *Critique of Judgment* above.

As I hope is clear, my reading of cliché and the sublime in "Ktaadn" takes the Kantian point elaborated above as a template, albeit with some modifications. In fact, it rejects the heroic aspect of Reason's failure and dwell instead in the abyss of that failure. The point here though is not that Kant's account of *Verstand* and *Vernunft* is philosophically persuasive. Instead it is merely to note that per the Kantian account reason is not all-powerful. It can, and indeed must, fail in certain circumstances. In this aspect then Kant's thought can be used in two radically different ways. The first is deeply anthropocentric, but the other dwells on the divide or boundary between human and other.

In the first case, it can be noted that Kant's "Copernican revolution" of transcendental idealism theorizes the mind in a radically different way than did previous philosophy. Kant understood the mind not as observer of a world or of things in a world, but as an active

participant in the world. He shows the mind to be necessary to and prior to experience. As a result, the mind in essence constitutes the world insofar as the world is something that is experienced. Kant's purpose, then, in distinguishing between Understanding and Reason, between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, is to make a place for the *a priori* structures that precede experience and this is contra the empiricism of Hume and Locke. At the same time, with this division Kant argues that attempting to use Reason, which remember is a tool derived from and appropriate to making judgments about empirical or experiential data, and which we may see as something like rationality, to investigate that which is not empirical—the soul or God, for example—necessarily produces distortions. Put too simply, the consequence of all this was that philosophers could begin to see the world, and objects in it, not as separate entities from mind but as, in a very strange sense, stemming from the mind. Kant bridges world and mind in the first *Critique*, a project that will be carried to full completion by Kant's most important descendent, Hegel. It is in this sense, the sense in which the world can be seen as an extension or at least a projection of mind, that Emerson and his acolyte Thoreau should be considered "transcendental idealists." An examination of the role of nature for Emerson will illustrate the point.

The question of what "nature" is for Emerson in the long essay of that name is—at the same time—a deeply complex and fairly simple one. We know that in that essay, Emerson makes use of the Kantian distinction between Understanding and Reason, although in a revisionary fashion. In fact though Emerson's knowledge of Kant at the writing of *Nature* seems to have come indirectly. Emerson gets his Kant, so to speak, from Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle and perhaps from Wordsworth, rather than through direct exposure to Kant's writings (Keane 41). As Patrick Keane has shown, the Coleridgean (and subsequent Wordsworthian) discussion of Reason is derived from Kant but contra Kant makes Reason itself "transcendent"—precisely the

opposite of Kant's view (57). Keane attributes this in part to a quirk of translation. As we saw, Kant argues that data comes into our Understanding and is then processed by *a priori* structures of that Understanding. After this Reason takes over and forms principles and makes judgments about that sensory data that has come under the Understanding. In the German, Kant uses the word *Anschauung* to refer to this sensory data. Coleridge then translates *Anschauung* as Intuition. Keane's persuasive argument is that the English Romantic interest in feeling and what we might call the everyday understanding of intuition as an unmediated, non-rational insight or revelation found in Coleridge and Wordsworth led to a misunderstanding of Kant's *Anschauung* (57-58). As Keane puts it, "[Kant's] denial of metaphysical knowledge, even if it was a provisional preclusion in the effort to save philosophy, was intolerable to Coleridge" (57). When Coleridge translates *Anschauung* as Intuition, then, he wants to align it with his own romantic celebration of feeling or mysticism over the rational. But for Kant *Anschauung* simply means raw sense data. As such not only does it not imply any kind of insight or revelation, it is in fact precisely raw data without any kind of insight. Because Coleridge is pre-disposed to seeing a mystical connotation in the word intuition however, and of course because Kant's first *Critique* is very difficult, and finally because Coleridge like Carlyle and Wordsworth is a creative thinker and not merely a translator, Keane argues that Coleridge ends up claiming that Reason is the superior power to Understanding. That is for Coleridge, Reason is intuitive; it is non-rational. Understanding, for Coleridge, on the other hand, is mere calculation. As such for him, Reason is something like inspiration while Understanding is cold rationality.

Coleridge's view takes the following shape. If Reason (*Vernunft*) is what gives content to Intuition (*Anschauung*), which is a fair paraphrase of Kant, and the content of Intuition is an unmediated, non-rational insight or revelation, which has nothing to do with Kant, then Reason

as the capacity for revelatory knowledge must be celebrated by the romantic over the regime of everyday rationality, which Coleridge identifies with Understanding. Coleridge then begins to regard Understanding as, as he puts it in an 1806 letter to the English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, "that Faculty of the Soul which apprehends and retains the mere notices of Experience" while Reason is "most Eminently the Revelation of an immortal soul" that exceeds experience and that can apparently apprehend the truth of what Kant called the *noumenal* realm, things as such (*The Portable Coleridge* 300-301). To Kant this view would be nonsensical. As we saw above, in Kant Understanding is not calculation and Reason is not intuitive. Further, Kant's Reason requires Understanding, or put it another way, Understanding is a prerequisite of Reason. To put the two into a hierarchy would make no sense to Kant, to say nothing of Coleridge's erroneous understanding of what the two terms *Verstand* and *Vernunft* and their associated concepts mean.

But it is this view of Reason and of Understanding that come down to Emerson through Coleridge and Wordsworth and that achieve fruition in *Nature*. That essay proposes that, as Lawrence Buell puts it, "the human mind possesses a higher 'Reason,' or divine intuition, distinct from mere 'Understanding,' or inductive reasoning, that is capable of direct intuitive perception of Truth with a capital *T*" (xix-xx *American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*). Now it is important to remember that both Kant's *Anschauung* and Coleridge's Intuition have to do with sensory data, for it is this fact that enables Emerson's recasting of Reason as a way of accessing what Thoreau will come to call "higher laws" through nature.[1] That is to say that

[1] In the Introduction to "The Idea of Transcendental Logic" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant briefly discusses what he calls "pure" *Anschauung* as opposed to "empirical" *Anschauung* in a way that may lead one to think that pure *Anschauung* is not in fact sensory: "Empirical if sensation… is contained there in; but pure if no sensation is mixed into the representation…. Thus pure intuition contains merely the form under which something is intuited" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 193). Empirical *Anschauung* requires "the actual presence of the object," true, and pure *Anschauung* does not. But an example of pure *Anschauung* would be to imagine a triangle floating in the air in front of one. One "sees" the imaginary triangle, but the actual presence of the object is not required. What is required is

Emerson's Reason, the Reason that Buell writes of, comes into play in an epiphantic or revelatory way as one's Intuition of the world contacts divine Reason—a pantheistic conception that Emerson writes in a letter to his brother Edward "is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself" (*The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 133). It is in this sense then that Emerson's lauding of nature in *Nature* can be said to be simple. For Emerson nature is instrumental; it is the sensory material that enables Reason to contact the divine, a divinity that ultimately resides in humanity, not in "nature."

This view, we might say, is pure Coleridge. It is also as clear an example of what we might call pure romantic aesthetics as we are likely to find. To understand Emerson's view on Reason and Intuition as romantic in origin and intent is no doubt correct. At the same time, we have already seen that there is a sense in which Emersonian Transcendentalism is less obviously romantic than it might appear and in fact a bit more Kantian than Coleridgean. Recall that Kant's project is to bridge mind and world. When Kant distinguishes between the *noumenon* (the thing itself) and the *phenomenon* (our perception of the thing), he (thinks he) is putting rationality into what its rightful place. In doing so he is preserving free will, and he is saving God and the immortal soul. Like Reason and the sublime, because we have no access to the *noumenal* world, Kant argues, it is foolish to try to say or think anything concrete about it. Our senses present us only with the thing as it appears to us, not with the thing itself. Our faculties of Understanding and Reason shape and synthesize that sensory data and our thoughts about it. What they do not and cannot do is tell us anything about the *noumenal* world or about non-cognitive things like God and the soul. The only world we have, so to speak, then is the phenomenal world; a world perceived by our senses and structured and considered by our faculties. The *noumenal* world,

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that one visualizes it or "constructs" it. The object of pure *Anschauung* is an imaginary thing that presents itself through the habits of sensory perception. *Anschauung* is something cognitive, then, something that derives from sensory apparati and it is precisely because of this that Emerson can make nature the object of Reason.

like God and like the soul, is not within the ken of either our senses or our faculties. It exists, but it is importantly irrelevant to the project of the Critiques.[2] What is relevant for Kant on the other hand is the *phenomenal* world.

As we saw above, the *phenomenal* world is not to be understood as an object for perception. Instead, and this presages the Hegelian bridging (or collapse) of the ontological and the epistemological realms in his metaphysical view of the dialectic, the phenomenal world is constituted by the mind. The *noumenal* world exists literally with-out us, but we have no cognitive access to it. The *phenomenal* world is the opposite. It exists only *with* us, and we might say, because of us. For Kant this is the only world we know or can know, and thus it is the only real object of study, which is to say that it is the only real object of Reason and Understanding. What all of this means, at least according to some readings of Kant, is that a certain kind of epistemological dualism is surpassed in the first *Critique*. The problem of knowing the world is not, Kant says, a problem. We simply can't know the world in the *noumenal* sense. We can only know the *phenomenal* world, a world of which we are constituent factors. To paraphrase Paul McCartney, in the end the world you know is equal to the world you make. What all this means, to finally return to Emerson and to being to turn toward Thoreau, is that perception of and subsequent thought about or aesthetic reaction to the (*phenomenal*) world of nature tells us not about the (*noumenal*) world but about *ourselves* as constituent factors of the (*phenomenal*) world. And it is here of course that we can see Emerson's strong affiliation with a properly Kantian transcendental idealism as well as his Coleridgean romanticism. The concept of Reason we find in Emerson's *Nature*, then, uses "the natural world" as its object in order to have a revelatory experience of the divinity that resides within the human mind. In chapter VII of

[2] Whether or not the same can be said for God, free will, and the immortal soul in Kant's philosophy is an argument for a different time and place.

Nature, Emerson sums this up in his own fashion by writing, "the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it" (215).[3] In the sense that nature turns us from the inaccessible *noumenal* world to the *phenomenal*, sensible one this is Emersonian and Thoreauvian transcendentalism at its most Kantian—in spirit if not in letter.

But it must be stressed that the revelatory aspect of all of this uproots us from a Kantian groundwork and sends us back into what appears to be a rather clichéd version of romanticism. It is of course deeply ironic that Kant's goal, which was to rein Reason in from applying itself to the divine, while at the same time cordoning off the divine as that which cannot be experienced and thus cannot be cognized, is precisely the reverse of the Emersonian thought in *Nature*. That thought claims that Coleridgean Reason goes <u>beyond</u> cognition through Intuition and in doing so reveals the divinity within us. It is probably fair to say that Kant would be shocked (again) by this turn of events. So Emersonian Transcendentalism, at least as it relates to the issues of Reason and Understanding is both deeply and fundamentally Kantian and deeply and fundamentally Coleridgean—and thus anti-Kantian—at the same time. Nowhere is this fundamental tension between the romantic and Kantian aspects of Emersonian transcendentalism more evident than in the interest in nature.

Perhaps the most famous image in all of Emerson is the transparent eyeball in Chapter I of *Nature* an image that comes in context of a discussion of nature. Emerson writes of the

[3] It is important pause here to note the religious dimension of Emerson's thought. As Barbara Novak sums up a view derived from the work of Perry Miller and Henry Nash Smith among other co-called Myth and Symbol or American Mind scholars, "By the time Emerson wrote *Nature* in 1836, the terms 'God' and 'nature' were often the same thing, and could be used interchangeably" and as a result "Ideas of God's nature of God *in* nature became hopelessly entangled" (3). These tendencies can be seen in the passages from *Nature* cited thus far. I choose not to address the Christian aspect of Emerson's Transcendentalism in detail here not because it is less important than his interest in German Idealism, but because the matter is somewhat too complex to be of service in the present argument. I am also not convinced that Thoreau's adaptation of Transcendentalism is nearly as theological as its source. This duly noted, any broader account of how Emerson imagines nature than I attempt here is bound to address Emerson's distinctive religious ideas. I leave that work for a later time.

experience of nature: “Standing on the bare ground,–my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite Space,–all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (Emerson *Selected Writings* 104). Read in terms of the points above, it is clear enough that Emerson’s transformation into the transparent eyeball is a symbolic manifestation of Kant’s bridging of mind and world. What allows Emerson to come into contact with Universal Being, what allows him to be a part of particle of God, is the sensory experience of the natural world. To be a transparent eyeball, of course, is to be both an observer and at the same time a part of the world. The eyeball still sees, and it is still a material thing, but it does not impose on the world. Like Emerson’s first person pronoun in the sentence “I am nothing,” that eyeball both is and isn’t at the same time. And in fact it is the act of seeing itself, the sensory presentation of the world to the mind, that figurally tears this eyeball from the head. That act of perception also makes the eyeball transparent, partially dissolving its solidity. Like the Kantian mind then, the transparent eyeball constitutes its world via its perceptual capacity. The eyeball both makes the world in the sense that it transforms the *noumenal* into the *phenomenal* while at the same time simultaneously, albeit liminally, existing within the world it constitutes.

But the word I use above—“transforms”—is not quite right. Indeed, transformation seems to be an inadequate conceptual schema here. In the image of the transparent eyeball, the *noumenal* world maintains its completely irrelevant existence even as the eyeball observes it. But the eyeball brings forth the *phenomenal* world out of the *noumenal* world, even though the *noumenal* world persists alongside or underneath the *phenomenal* one. A better image might be that of tracing paper being laid over a model, or of a map’s relation to the territory. If we extend the metaphor we might say that with this crucial image, Emerson argues that the making of the map

or the tracing of the original fundamentally reorients the subject's relationship to the object. What seems to be abyssal epistemological separation in Kant becomes in Emerson (through Coleridge) a relationship of mutual engagement. Such a view is ultimately an aesthetic view, and in fact it perfectly demonstrates what is a, and perhaps the, central ideology of aesthetics from the romantics on: what the later and deeply aesthetic Heidegger calls *poiesis*.[4] The act of *poiesis*

[4] Heidegger's later philosophy, which comes after the so-called "turn," is an aesthetic philosophy through and through. His concern with aesthetics predates his late philosophy, of course. One of his most celebrated, and complex, essays is "*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*" ("The Origin of the Work of Art"), was written in the mid-nineteen thirties. But it is in the nineteen fifties that Heidegger's thought becomes essentially aesthetic, not coincidentally as it moves away from what Richard Rorty saw as the pragmatism of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) and toward a critique of technology. Even in Heidegger's most pragmatic phase though, a phase evidenced in Part One of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger alludes already to the role poetry, which he considers the paradigmatic art form, will take in his later work.

For example, in his analysis of discourse and "communication" in Part One, Section V, Heidegger reserves a special place for poetry (in one of the text's many seemingly offhand asides): "*Die Mitteilung der existenzialen Möglichkeiten der Befindlich-keit, das heißt das Erschließen von Existenz, kann eigenes Ziel der »dichtenden« Rede warden*" (*Sein unt Zeit* 162 emphasis added). In the Macquarrie and Robinson translation this reads "In 'poetical' discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence" (*Being and Time* 205 emphasis added). The term "disclosing" alerts us right away of the importance being attributed to poetry because for Heidegger, disclosure amounts to his theory of truth (Cf. Mark A. Wrathall's *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* [Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2011] for an in-depth look at these issues).

One of Heidegger's central philosophical projects is to eradicate the notion of truth he sees as the foundation of the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is in service of re-defining truth. In the Western tradition truth, Heidegger thinks, is a metaphysical concept and as such a theological concept. He wishes to replace this understand of truth with what can only be called, after the very different but concordant work of Alfred North Whitehead, a "process" understanding truth, an understanding Heidegger calls, using the ancient Greek word for truth, *aletheia*. The word itself is an allusion to the second part of a poem often referred to as *On Nature* composed by fourth century BCE Greek philosopher Parmenides, a fragment of which is of vital importance to Heidegger. The title of that second part is *ἀλήθεια* or *aletheia*, which in English is usually translated as "The Way of Truth." Heidegger then translates *aletheia*, the Greek word for truth, into German as *Erschlossenheit* – in English, "disclosure." We see this above in the conjugated form of "*Erschließen*." Truth for Heidegger is *ἀλήθεια/aletheia/Erschlossenheit*/disclosure, which in turn he understands as a Parmenidean "identification" of "Being and with the perceptive understanding of Being: *τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι*" (*Being and Time* 256). The Greek here is a fragment from the *ἀλήθεια* section of *On Nature*. In Kathleen Freeman's translation of Heidegger's source text, Hermann Diel's *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, it reads "For it is the same thing to think and to be" (Freeman 42). Alternately Macquarrie and Robinson use Arthur Fairbanks' translation: "for thought and being are the same thing" and John Burnet's: "it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be" (*Being and Time* 493). The point is that, as Heidegger stresses in italics in *Being and Time*, "*[t]he most primordial phenomenon of truth is first shown by the existential-ontological foundations of uncovering*" (263) or in German "*Die existenzial-ontologischen Fundamente des Entdeckern selbst zeigen erst das ursprünglichste Phänomen der Wahrheit* (220). That is, truth for Heidegger is uncovering; it is precisely disclosure. (Wrathall draws a useful distinction between *Entdecktheit* and *Erschlossenheit*, arguing that the former is "the truth (uncoveredness or discoveredness…) of entities" while the latter is "the disclosure… of Dasein and of the world" [13]. While Wrathall's book does an excellent job of working through the complexities of Heidegger's position, for my purposes all we need to note is that the model of truth as disclosure is present in both cases.)

And it is *poiesis*, which is most prominent in poetry, at least in the later Heideggerian writings, that is the fundamental act of disclosure, of truth-making. As he states in the 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*

found in the transparent eyeball—the interaction of raw perception with Coleridgean intuition stemming from an encounter with nature—is fundamentally self-reflexive. What we learn by making the map, we might say, is how we interact with territory and with the activity of mapping. What we do not learn is anything "objective" about the *noumenal* territory itself. As Aristotle notes in the *Poetics*, when we engage in mimesis we learn first and foremost about ourselves. It is this self-reflexivity that—even as it dismembers and hollows out the "I" of *Nature*—allows for the encounter with the divine, a divinity which exists in the dialectical act of *poiesis*, an act which is, as we have seen at length, predicated on the mind. The transparent eyeball then is precisely a figuration of Coleridge's understanding of "Perception" moving to "Intuition" and then into "Reason" recast as the latter is into a manifestation of the merging of mind and world that we saw as so vital to Kant's project in the first *Critique*. So later in *Nature* when Emerson writes

> Man in conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul he calls Reason; it is not mine or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason (194)

it becomes a bit easier to understand what he might mean. Reason for Emerson is an *a priori*; it is not "mine or thine or his, but we are its." That is, it lies within or behind us. Note that in this passage we access it through not just the sky, but through the <u>blue</u> sky. Emerson could not have

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> Only poetry is of the same order as philosophical thinking…. because… an essential superiority of the spirit holds sway in poetry (only genuine and great poetry is meant). Because of this superiority, the poet always speaks as if beings were expressed and addressed for the first time. In the poetry of the poet and in the thinking of the thinker… each and every thing—a tree, a mountain, a house, the call of a bird—completely loses its indifference and familiarity (28).

This "poetry of the poet" is *poiesis* at work in language, and it is not by coincidence that it very closely resembles the *ostranenie* (остранение) of Viktor Shklovsky and other early twentieth century Russian "formalist" literary critics.

produced a more appropriate image. The sky is not blue in the *noumenal* sense. To say that the sky itself has the quality of blue-ness is either false or so meaningless as to be nonsensical. To say that the sky is blue to us on the other hand is to agree with Kant that our world is the *phenomenal* world. And of course the very self-reflexivity inherent in the difference Kant draws between the two worlds comes forth just as we become aware of this fact.

In becoming so aware, we are privileged to encounter what Emerson calls Spirit or the universal Soul, which is itself Reason, and which lies behind our lives and behind our individual subjectivities. The blue sky is a metaphor then for the *poiesis* that occurs when Coleridgean Reason, via the similarly Coleridgean Intuition here of nature, reveals Spirit as the fact that the phenomenal world is in fact constituted *a priori* by the mind. We can therefore access Justice, Truth, Love, and Freedom by looking inward as we look out, by using nature as a mirror, to paraphrase Richard Rorty, into our minds. In a sense, although not Kant's sense, this vision is one of true transcendental idealism. The *phenomenal* world is in a very real sense created by the transcendental mind. As Emerson writes in Chapter V of *Nature*, entitled "Discipline", "Reason transforms [understanding's] lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind" (200). What we see here are both the simple role of nature that Emerson proposes in the essay of that name, in which nature has an instrumental value, as well as the complexity of how he understands that instrumentality. As such in *Nature* Emerson's view relies upon a Kantian enough theory of the predication of the phenomenal world on what I have rather loosely been calling the mind. Put another way, for Emerson nature has an instrumental value that points out that the mind, a metaphysical set of faculties with *a priori* structures, is part of and crucially underlies the phenomenal world. Emerson transcendentalism then is a kind of

Absolute Idealism in which Mind and Spirit are seen as the metaphysical basis for the ontological world.

Appendix II

The Cliché of the Sublime in Nineteenth-century American Landscape Painting

By the time "Ktaadn" was first published in 1848, the romantic sublime had already become well established enough in the U.S. to be clichéd, a fact illustrated in contemporary American landscape painting. In the final chapter of first part of her seminal book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting 1825-1878* art historian Barbara Novak traces the mid-nineteenth century move away from the romantic sublime and the development of an importantly modified version. From reliance upon a "late-eighteenth century" "romantic-Gothick [*sic*] sublime" American landscape painting began to shift to what Novak calls a "*Christianized* sublime, more accessible to everyone… [and that was] more democratic, even *bourgeois*" [emphasis added] (34, 35,38). Novak maps this shift on to a move from figural "sound," which she argues typifies the romantic sublime, to a bourgeois sublimity that centers on the depiction of a "silence" corresponding to Christian "pious morality" (37). Novak reads the appearance of that morality through evocations of "quiet" scenes of sublimity, which she characterizes as featuring abundant light and the still waters of ponds and lakes (think Walden Pond) rather than "the vigorous sound of a cataract" found in the dangerous older sublime. This marks an absorption of the sublime "into a religious, moral, and frequently nationalist concept of nature, contributing to the rhetorical screen under which the aggressive conquest of the country could be accomplished" (38).

It is easy to see this rhetorical screen in action in a work like Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* and in the later works of prominent Hudson River School painters Frederic Church and Alfred Bierstadt. *The Course of Empire* is a narrative painting, a five part series of paintings that allegorizes a civilizing sublime. Although the final two pieces, "Destruction" and "Desolation,"

show the end of empire, the elegiac mode of those two clearly serves as a warning rather than a prediction. The first three paintings are, as the cliché goes, bathed in Novak's silent light of the Christian, democratized, nationalist sublime. We can see the same in Bierstadt's most well-known works, which are heavily romanticized paintings of the Rockies. They share with Cole's work a powerfully nationalistic bent played out in idealized luminous landscapes that lack the danger and darkness of the romantic sublime. Fellow Hudson River School painter Frederic Church's bourgeois sublime landscapes are perhaps the most interesting of the three. Heavily influenced by Humboldt's *Kosmos* in tandem with an abiding Christian faith, many of Church's often massive paintings border on kitsch to the modern eye. [1] Some prominently feature rainbows (cf. *Rainy Season in the Tropics* and *The Aegean Sea*) and nearly all rely on the same kind of glowing effect that the recently deceased and critical derided "painter of light" Thomas Kinkade specialized in.

Novak persuasively argues that these painters and others display a fundamental shift in the sublime. This shift was, on her account, subtended by increased national interest in Protestantism and democracy views she opposes to the aristocratic romantic sublime. As Novak puts it, "[t]he older sublime was a gentleman's preserve, an aristocratic reflect of romantic thought" (38). In the typical story, the erstwhile individualism and everyday pragmatism that is the legacy of New England Puritanism and which persists and mutates down through Emersonian transcendentalism is at odds with the apparently mystical and even anti-human or trans-human thrust of this older romantic sublime. But while Novak notes an important shift from this older sublime to something else, she errs in her characterization of it.

It is difficult to see how what she calls the Christianized, quiet, bright, almost pastoral sublime can be understood to be the sublime at all. The defining character of what we call the

[1] Church's most famous work during his lifetime was the ten-foot wide and five-foot high The Heart of the Andes.

sublime is its overwhelming power. It is true that painters like Church and Bierstadt clearly draw upon the techniques often used to render the trope of sublimity—the miniaturization of figures in favor of natural features or landscapes, for example. In this way, they might seem to be engaged in the project of evoking the sublime. At the same time, though, sublimity as it is understood in the late eighteenth century and beyond is the product of a phenomenological encounter. That is, the sublime is an experience; it is something one experiences. Artists—painters and others—seek to mimic or evoke or allegorize the sublime in their work, of course. The classic example has to be the work of German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. What Novak has done in her powerful account of a shift in the sublime in nineteenth-century American landscape painting is to confuse the techniques used to evoke the sublime with the experience of the sublime itself. That experience, the one Kant discusses, is characterized by ego-loss, or in Kant's account near ego-loss, caused by witness of something that dwarfs the human. So while the Hudson River school painters like Bierstadt and Church often draw from techniques used to point to the sublime in order to render what Perry Miller calls "Christianized naturalism" or American exceptionalism, or *Naturphilosophie*, what they are assuredly not doing is revising or absorbing the sublime.

Indeed, because the definition of the sublime is that of an overpowering and ego-threatening experience, there can be no gradations or variations to that experience. Like the old saw about pregnancy, one cannot have an experience that is "a little bit" sublime. What Novak documents then is the change in use of certain established patterns and techniques in painting that have been used by artists interested in the sublime. The Hudson River painters use these techniques to do other things, to tell other stories, but the sublime itself as experiential content remains unchanged. Like all artists, the nineteenth century American landscape painters who begin to

commandeer the techniques associated with the sublime drew from their cultural and historical moment while interrogating familiar and inherited techniques. When they do so, they are simply taking part in what Arthur Danto calls the artworld. So when Novak discusses this supposed change in the sublime what she is actually doing is identifying a change in how painterly techniques formerly associated with the sublime are being used. The techniques remain the same, but they are not longer used as a way to mimic or evoke the sublime.

The real question then is why this happens. As I have noted, it is the "natural" course of an artform to evolve and mutate as it develops. In this sense, the repurposing of these techniques comes as no surprise. But Novak wants to attribute this repurposing primarily to a cultural shift. What she passes over in doing so is the other crucial—although perhaps more pedestrian but also organic reason—that artforms evolve: the fact that they become static over time. In every art what was once a powerfully evocative technique becomes first a thematic trope, and if it is overused a cliché. As this happens, the techniques or stylistic formulae once used for a specific rhetorical purpose begin to be repurposed. It is precisely this action that Novak draws attention to. What she investigates is certainly a notable shift, and it is equally certainly tied to cultural changes. But the end result is not a revised sublime, something that can no more be revised than orgasm or death. What is revised is the rhetorical use of certain techniques. And what this realization attests to is the fact that "the sublime" had become by the time of the Hudson River painters, a cliché in painting—a trope in the sense we most often use the word today. Of course this was not true in painting alone. As Novak understands, the trope of the sublime permeated the post-romantic arts—painting, music, and literature. And as values changed, that trope of the sublime, which again is not identical to the <u>experience</u> of the sublime, seemed less and less relevant and simultaneously the artistic techniques used to render it seemed more and hackneyed

at least insofar as they were deployed in a static fashion. The Hudson River School's revision of this clichéd trope indicates to us that the arts of the time were in a phase of self-critique, a critique driven by cultural and material shifts, yes, but also by reaction against clichés.

Now, both Emerson and even more so Thoreau are engaged in these same critiques. In fact, the "nature" that Emerson celebrates in *Nature* is not the "wild and savage" nature Novak identifies with the romantic sublime. The nature of Emerson's *Nature* is more pastoral, more agricultural, than it is wild and savage. He writes

> [t]he charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title. To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. (*Nature* 183)

Clearly enough, Emerson identifies nature here with an agricultural landscape; a landscape that itself is the product of human labor. This is avowedly not the absolute bigness found in Kant's sublime. In fact what Emerson writes here is closer in tone to George Inness' *The Lackawanna Valley* (fig. 2) than it is to a Caspar David Friedrich painting. But although Emerson focuses here on an agrarian and very human vision of nature as landscape, in doing so he remains a certain adherence to Kant's account of the sublime.

We must remember that Kant's analytic of the sublime in the third *Critique* is a crucially revisionist one that seeks to revise earlier accounts of the sublime, such as Edmund Burke's, in two ways. First, Kant argues that the sublime is not a property or quality of an object or a scene. Instead, like so much else with Kant, the sublime is a cognitive matter. As a result, and this is the

second revision Kant makes, the sublime ceases to be ego-shatteringly anti-human. The key moment of the sublime in his analytic is not the overmastering initial experience but the *return* of the mind to a sense of control. Kant takes the experiential content of the sublime, that of self-effacement in the confrontation with that which exceeds our cognitive and intellectual capacity, and argues that the sublime moment is not one of devastation of the ego but of rescue from that devastation that results from the understanding that the mind is attempting to do something that is simply cannot do. In doing so, he wants to bring the sublime under control as it were. This is because he recognizes that an anti-human sublime, a "wild and savage" sublime, threatens his transcendental idealism. Kant is interested in the sublime then not because he wants to highlight

Figure 2. George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*

the notion that there are things we cannot countenance and that thus threaten our egos, but instead because he believes that the recuperative aspect of the sublime demonstrates a heroic

attempt by the mind to go beyond its ken. So the Kantian sublime is not about nature at all but about the sublimity of the powers of the mind.

In this way Emerson's turn away from the romantic, Kantian sublime is not so un-Kantian after all. Allow me to explain. Kant thinks that if we are to retain both rationality and religion, we must limit the objects of Reason to those things that are phenomenal, things that we can perceive with our senses. What happens in the sublime of absolute bigness, of "wild" nature, is that Reason shows its limits by attempted to apply Reason to things that exceed phenomenal perception. Irrespective of the place of the sublime in Kant's system, what he describes discusses is an experience. That experience is of ego loss in the face of that which exceeds us. What Emerson seems to know here is that despite Kant's attempt to rescue it, the sublime experience has little value for the transcendentalist. Even in Kant's revision the crucial moment of the sublime is one of ego loss in which Reason, aesthetic Reason, and thus Mind, are rendered silent. This is a problem for Emerson because Emersonian transcendentalism is more idealist by far than is Kant's thought.

If Kant's project in the *Critiques* is understood as an attempt to make a case for things outside of the human mind (*noumenon*, God, the immortal soul) while acknowledging the power of Reason, Emerson's view is that the noumenal (Matter) is Reason (Mind). This brings Emerson closer to the absolute idealism of Hegel than to Kantian transcendental idealism. As such, and consciously or not, Emerson knows that Kant's recuperation of the sublime is unconvincing. If the experience of the sublime is one that by definition is a failure of Reason, to acknowledge that sublime is to admit that Reason is very much "mine" and "thine," that we are not its, that it is not transcendent. So Emerson's turn away from the sublime makes a great deal of transcendentalist sense. We have seen that Emerson's aesthetic Reason is not one of rationality but of romantic

intuition. Nevertheless the role of Emerson's aesthetic Reason is to marry Mind and Matter in an ontological sense rather than in Kant's epistemological sense. To say this is to say something else: Emerson wants to make humankind itself divine. To do so is radically un-Kantian. The Kantian sublime is in essence a phenomenological response to the realization of the *noumenal* world and of divinity. Since Emerson denies a divinity outside of humankind, and in fact sees humanity as divinity (in an admittedly far more complex way that I can work through here), he does not accept a *noumenal* world at all. What Emerson needs to support his metaphysico-ontological vision of Matter as Mind exactly is what Novak finds in *The Lackawanna Valley*: not wild nature, and not the sublime, but the "juncture between nature and civilization," the agrarian/pastoral vision.

As a result, there can be no sublime for Emerson. Even Kant's humanized sublime points the way toward the unthinkable thought of that which is radically other, be it *noumena* or nonhuman divinity. There is simply no room for such otherness in Emerson's thought, and it is this fact that makes his account of nature instrumental in content and aligns it with something like Inness' vision in *The Lackawanna Valley*. Emerson's account, as we have seen, draws from our experience of nature an object lesson about the divinity of humankind through the force of intuitive aesthetic Reason. Emerson's absolute idealism transforms epistemology into ontology and in doing so makes everything product of "mind."[2] As James Russell Lowell writes perhaps not so jokingly of Emerson in *A Fable for the Critics*, "'Tis refreshing to old-fashioned people like me/To meet such a primitive pagan as he,/In whose mind all creation is duly respected/As parts of himself—just a little projected" (44).

[2] It is no accident that Hegel's first major work, the *Phänomenologie des Geiste*, can be translated into English as either *The Phenomenology of Mind* or *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Of course both translations are correct in a way, for in Hegel the two are (dialectically) identical.

So far I have argued with Kant that the sublime is an experience, not a quality of a thing in the world. As such, Barbara Novak's claims that the sublime undergoes a transformation in mid-nineteenth century America with luminism and the Hudson River School, which would seem to echo the literary renderings of nature we seen in Emerson and particularly in Thoreau, are incorrectly phrased. What Novak notes is a change in context of the rhetorical techniques commonly used to evoke the sublime in landscape painting. This change in turn indicates that those techniques had become completely absorbed into the artworld of the time; they had become tropes in the way we use the term commonly today, as a synonym for cliché. In their transformation from techniques that attempt evoke an experience of the sublime to formulaic techniques that allegorize that experience rhetorically by alluding to prior works, the rhetorical "the sublime" becomes a cliché.

Keeping all this in mind, I want to insist that the trope of the sublime, or really tropes plural, found in the arts are not identical with the sublime experience. And despite my agreement with certain aspects of Kant's analytic of the sublime, I have disagreed with his recuperative move—a move that papers over the anti-human and thus radically non-anthropocentric power of the sublime experience. Emerson seems aware of the threat of this anti-human aspect of the sublime and as a result Emersonian transcendentalism has little or interest in the sublime. This is because at its base, Emerson's transcendentalism is a form of absolute Idealism in which the human becomes divine through aesthetic Reason.

Appendix III

Milton and the Romantic Sublime

"No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity than Milton." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (100 Gale 18th C).

Paradise Lost plays a central role in the romantic recasting of Kant in Britain.[1] Patrick Keane notes the importance of lines in Book V of *Paradise Lost* to both Coleridge and Emerson's interpretations of Kant. The lines come from the archangel Raphael's response to Adam that the former compare the life of angels to the life of humans. Raphael here voices Milton's take on the Great Chain of Being, what he calls the "Scale of Nature" (Keane 47). In Book V Raphael says

> Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
> Proportion'd to each kind. So from the root
> Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
> More aery, last the bright consummate flow'r
> Spirits odorous breathes: flours and thir fruit
> Mans nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd
> To vital Spirits aspire, to animal,
> To intellectual, give both life and sense,
> Fancy and understanding, whence the Soul
> Reason receives, and reason is her being,
> Discursive, or Intuitive; discourse

[1] Sanford Budick has also recently argued that Milton was essential to Kant's own thought.

Is oftest yours, the latter most is ours,

Differing but in degree, of kind the same (5:78-90)

Keane establishes that this passage was essential for Coleridge's interpretation of Kant and the subsequent romantic misinterpretation of Kant's Reason and Intuition that eventually comes down to Emerson. In fact, Coleridge excerpts this passage at the beginning of Chapter XIII in his *Biographia Literaria* (370). So does important American transcendentalist James Marsh in his "Preliminary Essay" to the 1829 edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. Emerson too seems to have known the passage well, no doubt, as Perry Miller would have it, from this same edition of *Aids to Reflection*.[2] Emerson in fact alludes to it in an 1834 letter to his brother James; a letter that contains a very famous line central to Keane's work: "Do you draw the distinction of Milton Coleridge & the Germans between Reason and Understanding I think it a philosophy itself" (qtd. in Keane 46). And as the epigraph to this appendix makes clear, Milton is central to Burke's epochal *Enquiry*.

Paradise Lost then is, at least for a time, of a piece with Coleridge and Kant to Emerson's circle very much including Thoreau. It is no doubt overstepping to say that Thoreau's allusion to Satan's passage in Book II of *Paradise Lost* is a coded evocation of Raphael's speech in Book V, but it may not be to note that one aspect of the rhetorical strategy underlying this allusion is an evocation of the romantic sublime as a way of making this New World experience seem as epic as anything from the British canon.[3]

[2] In *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* Miller writes of Marsh that in producing the first American edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* "he put into the hands of Emerson, Parker, Alcott, and their group the book that was of the greatest single importance in the formation of their minds"(34).

[3] Obviously, Milton pre-dated the English Romantics and did not share many of their values. At the same time, his work was profoundly important to the English Romantic poets. See Jonathan Shears' *The Romantic Legacy of Paradise Lost: Reading Against the Grain* (2009).