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Narrative (K)notes / Symbolic Seduction:

Toward a Biopoetics of Second-Order Symbolism in the Storytelling Arts

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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December 2017

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December 2017

Narrative (K)notes / Symbolic Seduction:
Toward a Biopoetics of Second-Order Symbolism in the Storytelling Arts

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by

Nick Pici

DEDICATION

To

Joe and Anne

Jennifer and Kayla

Cooper and Roxy

Stanley, Edgar, and Ernest

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Deepest gratitude to Dr. Kay Young and Dr. Edward Branigan for their unyielding patience with my meandering intellectual explorations, writerly false starts, and frequent hesitations. Their willingness to allow me to build this project up slowly, brick by painstaking brick, and to write what I truly wanted to write is appreciated beyond words. The same can be said of UCSB's Department of English and Graduate Division. Great thanks also to Sowon Park, who nimbly agreed to join my committee in the late stages and who furnished eloquent and invaluable feedback about my project's content and trajectory. Further thanks to Dr. Miyoung Chun, who provided professional mentorship, morale boosts, and employment during across the entire arc of my graduate career and dissertation-writing process. Love and special thanks to my parents for being the most unswerving and persistent supporters of my ambitions to earn the PhD. And to my partner Kayla, whose love, tolerance, and belief in my abilities have remained resolute during the final stages of writing. Lastly, for offering the purest forms of unconditional love, positive energy, and perpetual furballs I have yet known, Cooper Pici earns special canine distinction for his loaned spirit and free therapy.

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ABSTRACT

Narrative (K)notes / Symbolic Seduction:

Toward a Biopoetics of Second-Order Symbolism in the Storytelling Arts

by

Nicholas Fate Pici

This dissertation intends to reimagine and reinvigorate theoretical criticism on symbolism in the narrative arts from an evolutionary-cognitive perspective. It gestures toward establishing a more robust, scientifically informed, consilient view of how symbolic devices operate in aesthetic-narrative texts and inside the minds of artists and audiences: i.e. toward formulating a biopoetics of symbol. It presents, specifically, a biocultural treatment of the nature, function, and value of indirect referential complexes precipitated by the techniques and modes of second-order symbolism within aesthetic-narrative art.

Aesthetic text-makers configure the cues and patterns of their texts to tap specific and sometimes multiple stages of the mind-brain's PECMA flow, serially or in parallel. This peculiar cognitive orientation—wherein mental routines must cope with simultaneous multimodal “brain tappings”—has enabled a special mode of meaning-making to take shape: second-order symbolism within a replete aesthetic environment. Certain cultural energies, traditions, and technologies have enabled Western artists and their interpretive communities to refine second-order meaning-making, giving rise to a generic mode of symbolic realism—a mode that might be useful for demarcating between so-called literary/artistic texts and non-literary/non-artistic texts. Selections from American short fiction and film are offered as paradigmatic instances of symbolic realism: Hemingway, Poe, and Kubrick are spotlighted. Non-American texts establish a cross-cultural, cross-temporal, species-typical profile of

second-order symbolics. Traditional boundaries between poetry, fiction, and visual art are crossed to reckon second-order symbolism as a multimedia, multimodal platform of artistic technique.

Foundational questions explored include:

- Why and to what ends do some artists deploy devices of second-order symbolism?
- How does a biopoetics of symbol embed with theories of reading and hermeneutics?
- What are the cognitive advantages and disadvantages of engaging in an open-ended, or elusive and obliquely decodable, signification process?
- How do the cognitive mechanisms of the evolved mind-brain enable, constrain, or otherwise contribute to second-order symbolic processes of meaning-making?
- How are these symbol-producing/symbol-reading ev-cog mechanisms implicated in the larger replete aesthetics of meaning-exchange ecologies that emerge in the artistic transaction between textmaker, text, and text-interpreter?

This dissertation sets out on an interdisciplinary, biocultural sortie for thinking through these questions.

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PREFACE

Hedging the Fox: An Epistemic Speciation

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

πολλ' οἶδ' ἀλώπηξ, ἐχῖνος δ' ἓν μέγα

— Archilochus¹

Archilochus's now-memetic aphorism about the pluralistic fox and the monistic hedgehog has been interpreted variously over the years. Most significantly, Isaiah Berlin resurrected the phrase, culled from the Greek lyricist's written fragments, to apply it as an epistemic framing device for his critique of Tolstoy and our habits of mind more generally. Berlin observes the history of the phrase's polyvalence at the outset of his 1953 eponymously titled long-essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*:

Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defense. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system [...] in terms of which they understand, think, and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue

¹ In the first footnote of his eponymously titled essay, Isaiah Berlin attributes Archilochus's quote to fragment

many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.^{2 3}]lmhj

Since the publication of Berlin's essay, the fox/hedgehog trope has circulated widely, experiencing a modestly meteoric rise across the cultural firmament of English letters and even on occasion entering the currents of mainstream media. Berlin would later say, "I never meant it very seriously. I meant it as a kind of enjoyable intellectual game, but it was taken seriously."⁴ In a 1955 letter, he even confesses, "I am very sorry to have called my own book *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. I wish I hadn't now."⁵ The hedgehog/fox schema was nonetheless taken seriously enough by many of his readers. And judging by the dominant tone of Berlin's essay—one of sober well-measured reason—it is reasonable to think the author was being retrospectively reserved or glib in the face of the analogy's new-found celebrity. As Berlin scholar Henry Hardy writes in response to the author's ostensible regret, "This may be sincere, but the intellectual influence of the book has surely been significantly enhanced by this felicitous title."⁶

As for their imputed mental traits and patterns of intellection, Berlin's foxes "perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences

² Berlin, *Hedgehog*, 1–2.

³ Certain interpolations and revisions have been made silently in quoted passages throughout in accord with CMS style: e.g. serial commas are added where there were none in the original; British spellings are transliterated and Americanized (e.g. *organise* to *organize*, *colour* to *color*); original misspellings are corrected without using an intrusive *sic*; correcting for initial caps or lowercasing original text to fit the grammatical structures of my own sentences is done without brackets.

⁴ Ramin Jahanbegloo, interview with Berlin, 1988, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 2007), 188.

⁵ Letter from Berlin to Morton White, May 2, 1955. See Henry Hardy, "Editor's Preface," *Hedgehog*, epigraph, xiii.

⁶ Hardy, "Editor's Preface," *Hedgehog*, footnote 1, xiii.

and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.”⁷ Translating this through the conceptual and terminological filters of cognitive psychology, we might say foxes privilege a default bottom-up reasoning system, rather than a top-down⁸; in epistemological terms, they seem a hybrid of phenomenological and empirical inductivism, fueling their inferential engines with an open plurality of observation-based inductions, rather than a fixed set of centrally governing *a priori* deductions; in classical philosophy terms, foxes are more Aristotelian than Platonic. Presumably, such cognitively fleet and flexible foxes would be more apt to allow novel findings and context to revise any deeper deductive rules and axiomatic propositions; cognitive dissonance could also be managed without overzealous preservation of fundamental beliefs. While some of Berlin’s descriptors for foxes—“scattered, “diffused,” in pursuit of “unrelated and even contradictory” ends—sound unflattering at first blush, even these traits turn out to be more asset than liability in Berlin’s

⁷ Berlin, *Hedgehog*, 2.

⁸ *Top-down* and *bottom-up* are applied here not in the most technical senses that cognitive-psychology research deploys when studying how brains derive fundamental cognitive percepts via below-conscious, automatized translations of data/information from sensory streams originating outside bodies (e.g. in visual perception research). Rather, they are aimed at describing events and habits of mind occurring more downstream in our perceptual-cognitive flow, at levels of collected reasoning. In Dan Kahneman’s fast/slow model of cognition, they are applied to our second, slow system (effortful, infrequent, logical, calculating, consciously accessible), and not necessarily to the first, fast system (automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic, below conscious access). I would also argue that these fast and slow systems, while distinct in important ways, are likely to share some fundamental operating principles; it seems plausible that the evolutionarily newer, faster systems could be in some ways projections of the evolutionarily older, faster systems. Since our high-level cognitive functions stem from a neocortical motherboard that is composed of basically uniform anatomical componentry (neuronal units and their support cells), the higher circuitry is likely to build off of and show some recursive iterative processes across levels (see footnote 44 below for further theory on the possible fractalized nature of higher-brain circuitry). Thus, we can reasonably think of top-down and bottom-up processing as native to both fast and slow levels of cognition. Moreover, fast and slow cognitions are certainly inextricably linked, constantly feeding each other serially or in parallel, even if we see them as conceptually or topographically encapsulated. The upshot: top-down and bottom-up are, in my view, very useful approximations for understanding the cognitive routines deployed as we consciously reason through problems of generalities and particulars, theory and data, universal Platonic ideals and unique Aristotelian distinctions. And these routines are what I think Berlin, and possibly Archilochus himself, had in mind here.

worldview. His hedgehogs are painted in far less approbatory light. More fundamentalist and obstinate in mental habit and orientation, hedgehogs hew their intellectual commitments and observations of the world to some singular, sacrosanct, non-revisable grand theory. This stance can generate forceful rhetoric and sow great confidence in hedgehogs, but it also threatens to restrict or distort their bottom-up processing of reality, closing them off to potentially vital paradigm shifts.

Berlin's foxes would perhaps feel comfortable sharing their dens with Gérard Genette's *bricoleurs*, while hedgehogs could burrow happily with Genette's engineers.⁹ Prominent foxes for Berlin include Aristotle, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, and Joyce. Whereas Plato, Lucretius, Dante, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Proust "are, in varying degrees, hedgehogs."¹⁰ Tolstoy, Berlin concludes, "was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog."¹¹ The Russian novelist emerges at the conclusion of Berlin's essay as a fox who fancied himself, or wished he could be more of, a hedgehog. Berlin further adduces that because of this unreconciled philosophical/cognitive orientation, Tolstoy met a despairing end in his own life.

Mindful that a broad-brushed, binary model of mentation is vulnerable to indictments of false-choice and oversimplification fallacies, Berlin judiciously qualifies his controlling metaphor out of the gate: "Of course, like all over-simple classifications of this type, the

⁹ Gérard Genette, "Structuralism and Literary Criticism," *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). The analogy is a bit asymmetric but the general spirit holds: Genette's *bricoleurs* (and their critic brethren) reconstitute available parts into emergent structures through a means of analysis and re-synthesis, while his engineers (and, oddly, their artist brethren) rely on proven road-tested rules to guide the building-out of their functionally oriented world-structures. Coincidentally, Lisa Zunshine, in her prefatory chapter to *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), encourages students and practitioners of cognitive cultural studies to become *bricoleurs* who use "the best mix of insights cognitive theory as a whole has to offer without worrying about blurring lines between its various domains" (3).

¹⁰ Berlin, *Hedgehog*, 2.

¹¹ Berlin, *Hedgehog*, 4.

dichotomy becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic, and ultimately absurd. But if it is not an aid to serious criticism, neither should it be rejected as being merely superficial or frivolous: like all distinctions which embody any degree of truth, it offers a point of view from which to look and compare, a starting-point for genuine investigation.”¹² Ever cautious to moderate and fine-tune his positions even late into life, Berlin, in a 1988 conversation with fellow philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, reasserts that his model “is not exhaustive. Some people are neither foxes nor hedgehogs. Some people are both.”¹³ Both indeed.

Fox Dens and Hedgehog Burrows: Dedicated Mind-Brain Circuits?

Despite obvious shortcomings (which Berlin himself pointed out on various occasions) and some periodic ham-handed vulgarizations since its popularization, the binary fox/hedgehog framework might still offer us a valid heuristic for gauging a certain range of tendencies in human intellection and cognitive style, both within and among individual minds. The insights, intuitions, and observations driving Archilochus’s conceit, and Berlin’s elaboration of it, adumbrate certain models that are gaining scientific credence in cognitive psychology and neuroscience circles today. But for this dichotomous mode for perceiving, ascertaining, and thinking about the world—hedgehog vs. fox mode—to maintain purchase as a viable descriptor of ontic cognitive systems or their underlying neural mechanisms, it will prove profitable to re-conceptualize the pairing as defining a continuum rather than a dipole: a continuum that operates both within individual minds and as average tendencies across populations. Foxes and hedgehogs are better imagined as *cognitive systems* that probably *co-operate* with each other as often as they compete, jostling for cognitive

¹² Berlin, *Hedgehog*, 2–3.

¹³ Jahanbegloo, 188.

hegemony and harmony more as allies than adversaries. In accordance with biological systems theory, cybernetics, and neural networking theory, it is plausible to envision their cognitive-critter rivalry as enacted through interdependent reciprocal feedback circuits, not through self-contained mental modules existing in sharply bounded enclaves.

Like with any idealized psychological model charting the operant variables of the human mind-brain¹⁴ and its multivectored event dynamics, while simultaneously accounting for the behavioral personalities and cognitive styles those mind-brains give rise to, the reality is going to be far richer and more complicated than the idealization. But if the fox/hedgehog scale is re-imagined as a sliding spectrum, more analogue than digital in nature, describing dynamic interpenetrating fields or fluid interactions, not static bounded boxes, its relevancy could hold.¹⁵ That said, the executive consciousness must telescope onto some provisionally-unified vision to coax the organism into its next behavioral or cognitive move, or else face paralysis; analog fluidity must at some point defer to the digital either/or nature of embodied

¹⁴ The term *mind-brain* or some version of it has become common parlance in neuro, cognitive, and neurophilosophical circles and publications today. Sometimes the word order is reversed; sometimes it is contracted through hyphenation, en dashing, or compounding. Affect-neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, for instance, prefers the capped compound “BrainMind,” which he has called a “monistic term” in recent publications (e.g. “Affective Neuroscience of the Emotional BrainMind: Evolutionary Perspectives and Implications for Understanding Depression,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 12, no. 4 [Dec. 2010]: 533–545; and “Cross-Species Affective Neuroscience Decoding of the Primal Affective Experiences of Humans and Related Animals,” *PLOS ONE* [Sept. 11, 2011], DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0021236). Word-formation variances aside, such blends all serve as shorthand for encapsulating the inextricable yet still-fuzzy connections between the embodied brain and the experiential mind. Vis à vis ancient philosophical questions and boundary problems of mind-body dualism, these compounds also acknowledge the still-sticky semantic and logical problematics for how to best conceptualize, divide, articulate, and label the interfaces between and causal explanations for how subjective mind emerges out of embodied brain. I prefer the hyphenated *mind-brain* mostly for aesthetic reasons, and my word order in no way reflects conceptual privilege or import: i.e. mind should not be understood as either sequentially or hierarchically primary over brain. If there obtains any subconscious logical justification for placing mind at the head of my formation, perhaps it would be this: since my primary subject matters are symbols and narrative texts, which are generally thought of as cultural products, and since cultural products are most amiably thought of as mind products rather than brain products, mind might earn a very modest jolt of schematic privilege.

¹⁵ The analog-digital nature of neuronal activity and the larger wet-brain circuitry this activity gives rise to are matters of heated debate in neuroscience, neurophilosophy, and information science today. But until that debate is (if ever) settled, a more fluid sliding-scale metric seems a better match to the physical matrices and electrochemical substrates that give rise to the fluctuating neural firing patterns of the brain—as well as to the introspective experience of ourselves, so often mercurial, variable, moody—than more rigid either/or scales.

decision-making. Conscious cognitive effort might be envisioned as partially the result of a serial toggling between below-conscious, parallel-running fox and hedgehog “circuits” laid down within individual mind-brains. Complicating the picture, of course, is the likelihood that whichever mode becomes dominant at any given time will be dependent as much on situational context and experiential priming as on genetic codes and innate cognitive predispositions. And none of this considers the vagaries and viscissitudes of emotional dispositions and emotive acts, which can usually override the more “cerebral” fox/hedgehog machineries of cognition at any time: that is, Kahnemanian “fast” systems can readily overpower any “slow” fox/hedgehog systems vying for decision-making dominance.¹⁶ Still, fox and hedgehog march on.

As anyone familiar with recent literature in the cognitive sciences will be quick to point out, conscious cognitive effort constitutes mostly blips on the mind-brain radar screen—a curiously singular process based on an ensemble of underlying subprocesses that feed it. Randall O’Reilly, a leading researcher and theorist of computational cognitive neuroscience, employs an iceberg analogy¹⁷ to explain:

Our introspections into the nature of our own cognition tend to emphasize the “conscious” aspects (because this is by definition what we are aware of), which appear to be serial (one thought at a time) and focused on a subset of things occurring inside and outside the brain. This fact undoubtedly

¹⁶ See footnote 8 for prior glossing of Dan Kahneman’s fast/slow cognitive systems. The work of Joseph LeDoux and Jaak Pansepp is also pertinent for factoring in emotional dominance of our higher cognitive systems.

¹⁷ Hemingway’s ghost might find Randall’s choice of metaphor, and the biopsychological realities it refers to, revealing. The writer’s own iceberg approach describes a particular lexical and narrative style of fiction—one that privileges minimalized action, vernacular diction, and external focalization (see Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003], 29)—not a model of psychology or consciousness per se. Yet the connections between any artist’s crafted style and their models of epistemology, human behavior, and psychological reality are surely tightly bound.

contributed to the popularity of the standard serial computer model for understanding human cognition. [...]

These conscious aspects of human cognition are the proverbial “tip of the iceberg” floating above the waterline, while the great mass of cognition that makes all of this possible floats below, relatively inaccessible to our conscious introspection. [...] Neural networks focus on the *microstructure* of cognition. Attempts to understand cognition by only focusing on what’s “above water” may be difficult, because all the underwater stuff is necessary to keep the tip above water in the first place—otherwise, the whole thing will just sink.¹⁸

Below Randall’s icy waters, in other words, one observes a massive, and massively complex, distributed cortical circuitry of concurrently running subprocesses neuronal units.¹⁹

Randall delineates five further features of the human mind-brain that are important not just for complicating the crude fox-hedgehog model of mentation, but also for contextualizing the broader epistemic and methodological sweeps of the remainder of this research project:

- 1) the massively distributed parallel processing (PDP) nature of neural-cognitive architectures;
- 2) the analogue gradation properties of neural function;

¹⁸ Randall O’Reilly, “Motivating Cognitive Phenomena and Their Biological Bases,” *Computational Cognitive Neuroscience*, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder, <http://psych.colorado.edu/~oreilly/cecn/node18.html>, online textbook version of O’Reilly and Yuko Munakata, *Computational Explorations in Cognitive Neuroscience: Understanding the Mind by Simulating the Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Those neuronal units, together with their equally complex support infrastructures constituted by various glial cells and enzyme-rich interstitial fluid, furnish the physical substrata that enable the computational platforms from which conscious (and unconscious) thought emerges.

- 3) the interactive recurrence or bidirectionality between top-down and bottom-up processing;
- 4) the neural Darwinism that putatively shapes our continuously updating cognitive landscapes through a cellular-electrochemical form of adaptive competition;
- 5) the always-on recursive learning processes that arise out of these fussy noisy neural arrangements to influence, and become influenced by, our behaviors.²⁰

Particularly germane for reimagining our strained, mutually distrustful, interspecies relationship between proverbial fox and hedgehog are: the mind-brain's parallel-distributed networks, its gradational analogue-like functional capability, its bidirectional top-down and bottom-up processors, and its reciprocal learning mechanisms.

An auxiliary note on parallelism will help inform the remainder of this Preface and this project as a whole. According to evolutionary geneticist Eörs Szathmáry, whose multinational team of researchers is responsible for advancing one of the more ambitious versions of neural Darwinism in the field, “Cognitive processing in the brain may occur in a massively parallel way.”²¹ Fellow computational neuroscientist Randall O'Reilly parses the concept of parallelism further, providing a more assured stance than Szathmáry's hedged claim and use of the speculative-conditional modal “*may occur*”:

At the lowest level of analysis, we know that the human [neocortex] contains something like 10 [or 20] billion neurons, and that each one contributes its little bit to overall human cognition. Thus, biologically, cognition must emerge from the parallel operation of all these neurons.

²⁰ O'Reilly.

²¹ Eörs Szathmáry, Chrisantha Fernando, Luc Steels, and Michael Öllinger, *INSIGHT: Darwinian Neurodynamics: Evolutionary Foundations of Darwinian Neurodynamics*, Seventh Framework Programme proposal, Mar. 31, 2014, <http://cordis.europa.eu/docs/projects/cnect/3/308943/080/deliverables/001-INSIGHTD11FINALsubmitted.pdf>, 4.

We refer to this as parallel distributed processing (PDP)—the processing for any given cognitive function is distributed in parallel across a large number of individual processing elements. This parallelism occurs at many different levels, from brain areas to small groups of neurons, to neurons themselves.

Parallel processing can make it challenging to understand cognition, to figure out how all these subprocesses coordinate with each other to end up doing something sensible as a whole. In contrast, if cognition were just a bunch of discrete sequential steps, the task would be much easier: just identify the steps and their sequence! Instead, parallelism is more like the many-body problem in physics: understanding any pairwise interaction between two things can be simple, but once you have a number of these things all operating at the same time and mutually influencing each other, it becomes very difficult to figure out what is going on.²²

For a specific instantiation of this many-body parallelism in action, neurocognitive research indicates the human mind-brain contains several specialized memory-buffer modules that head up our cognitive-processing stream: according to neuroscientists Joseph LeDoux and Jean-Mark Fellous, dedicated buffers exist for each sensory-pathway system as well as for

²² O'Reilly, "Parallelism," *Computational*, <http://psych.colorado.edu/~oreilly/cecn/node19.html>. In a later Wikibook version of the text, co-authors O'Reilly, Michael Frank, and Thomas Hazy, Yuko Munakata update the number of neurons counted in the neocortex to 20 billion: O'Reilly, Frank, Munakata, Hazy, et. al., "Introduction," *Computational Cognitive Neuroscience*, 1st edition, 2012, <https://grey.colorado.edu/CompCogNeuro/index.php/CCNBook/Intro>, 3. In *The Human Advantage: A New Understanding of How Our Brain Became Remarkable* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), Suzana Herculano-Houzel provides a more recent estimate, returned by her "brain blending" techniques, at 16 billion cerebral-cortex neurons.

language/word perception, and they all “work in parallel, independently of each other.”²³ In *The Emotional Brain*, LeDoux presses the point on serial and parallel processors in the brain, noting their possible relationships to consciousness and unconsciousness respectively: “The conscious and unconscious aspects of thought are sometimes described in terms of serial and parallel functions. Consciousness seems to do things serially, more or less one at a time, whereas the unconscious mind, being composed of many different systems, seems to work more or less in parallel” (280). LeDoux also references philosophers of mind Daniel Dennett and Stephen Kosslyn, who have described consciousness as a virtual parallel processor that acts as a serial processor. Particularly relevant to this project’s larger goal of updating symbol theory, LeDoux alludes to the work of cognitive psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird to emphasize the symbol-centric operations of serial processing and, hence, consciousness itself: “the consciousness processor works at the symbolic level, which yields introspectively accessible content, but the parallel processors work subsymbolically and their operations are not directly accessible to consciousness.”²⁴

With this key principle of mind-brain functionality firmly planted—that of a massively distributed neurocognitive architecture, composed of mutually interinfluencing subprocessors, operating predominantly under the levels of waking consciousness—our emblematic critters can be better situated within this cognitive ecology.

Further Fox/Hedgehog Sitings and Shadows

Within recent philosophy of science, the most prominent appropriation of the

²³ Joseph LeDoux and Jean-Mark Fellous, “Toward Basic Principles for Emotional Processing: What the Fearful Brain Tells the Robot,” *Who Needs Emotions? When the Brain Meets the Robot*, ed. Fellous and Michael Arbib (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 97.

²⁴ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 280.

fox/hedgehog schema is Stephen Jay Gould's posthumous collection of essays *The Hedghog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox* (2003).²⁵ In that work, Gould strives to account for the ongoing communication breakdowns plaguing Snow's two cultures of science and the humanities. He also erects his controversial epistemic that argues for independent non-overlapping magisteria (aka NOMA).

I want to inspect a lesser known instance of fox/hedgehog appropriation, however, this one from Sunny Auyang, MIT physicist, complex-systems theorist, and author of *Mind in Everyday Life and Cognitive Science*.²⁶ In her 2006 paper "The Hedgehog and Fox—Two Styles of Science," Auyang overlays the fox/hedgehog grid onto two fundamental modes of scientific thinking and, by extrapolation, thinking in general. The two styles of cognition she addresses have much in common with the traditional philosophical divisions of inductive and deductive reasoning. Connecting up in more direct ways with the evolutionary-cognitive (ev-cog) tack I will use to explore symbol theory, Auyang is principally invested in identifying where evolutionary biologists fall along this spectrum: "The metaphor of the hedgehog and the fox can also be applied to two styles of science. Generally, the theoretical sciences with their penchant for generalization are hedgehogs; the historical sciences with their emphasis on particulars are foxes. Within theoretical science, elementary particle physics is the prime hedgehog, whose whole effort gravitates toward the fundamental building blocks of the universe. Chemistry, biology, condensed matter physics, and economics are foxes. Evolutionary biology, I think, is somewhat like Tolstoy."²⁷ While Auyang can fall prey to the charms of a Lewontinian skepticism about the theoretical power of natural selection's role in

²⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedghog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²⁶ Sunny Y. Auyang, *Mind in Everyday Life and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

²⁷ Auyang, "The Hedgehog and Fox—Two Styles of Science," *Creating Technology: Engineering and Biomedicine* (Feb. 2006), online paper collection, <http://www.creatingtechnology.org/papers/fox.htm>.

evolutionary processes, she does carve out important points about the current status of Darwin's grandest of grand theories. She prudently notes the difference between a scientifically viable evolutionary theory—which is obliged to account for a multiplex of recursive and not-altogether-understood genetic, morphological, and ecological mechanisms driving the process of descent with modification across branching populations and expansive timescales—and the cruder, totalizing, glitzy versions of evolutionary theory peddled about in the popular presses:

Sciences that try to wrestle with complex phenomena, especially those [at] high organizational levels, tend to be foxes. *Foxes lack a central vortex, but that does not imply their thoughts are incoherent, inconsistent, or entirely fragmentary.* Just as Aristotelian philosophy has a cohesive core, a foxy science such as condensed matter physics does have cohesive principles. To overcome the complexities, condensed matter physicists have to make *idealizations* and introduce new concepts. They do not try to find exhaustive theories covering all aspects of a kind of many-body system, [a] system made up of myriad interacting constituents, nuclei, and electrons. Such systems are too complicated and multifarious to be exhausted by any principle. Instead, scientists raise specific questions *targeting some salient features* and make simplifications to disentangle the targeted phenomena from other factors. The result is *a host of models and regional theories* explaining various aspects. These theories with limited scopes—*the fox's many tricks*—are *pragmatic rather than idealistic*. They are gems with unsurpassed strong explanatory and predictive power within their limited domain. Although less glamorous than

the “the theory of everything” and all but neglected by philosophers of science, they contribute no less to the progress in science and technology.

*Evolutionary biology is somewhat like Tolstoy. It is a fox but is sometimes advertised as a hedgehog in the popular media.*²⁸

Auyang presents a number of well-wrought observations in this passage (see my italics), including the evolutionary scientist’s foxy needs to target the most salient features of phenomena while embracing regional models, to build up a bag of pragmatic tricks, and to remain vigilant of media hyperbolics. This last assertion deserves some special commentary here.

Evo-bio and its growing numbers of proximately and distally related fields (neuropsychology, evolutionary psychology, bioanthropology, biosociology, neuroaesthetics, biocultural criticism, etc.) resemble the Janus-minded Tolstoy not just because they get hijacked and portrayed *externally* by our soundbyte-hungry media culture as hedgehogs peddling “The Answer”—an unfortunate affair, to be sure, resulting in undercooked caricatures of these rich fields, which can be easily impressed upon both the popular consciousness and even our time-constrained scholars who happen to alight on such under-digested mischaracterizations in their informal reading. Evo-bio and its sister fields also *internally* orient themselves to function as hedgehogs in observance of at least a few stalwart overarching Darwinian axioms. And properly so. Adhering to mutually agreed-upon if provisional sets of broader unifying principles—while voraciously observing data across platforms and perspectives, which could result in a refinement of those very principles—is a tricky balance to strike; but it is one critical for any sound, consilient epistemic to truly

²⁸ Auyang, “Hedgehog.” Italics mine.

emerge. A fox's regional theories must orient and adapt themselves to the baseline meta-theories that constitute the lower rungs of the ladder of conceptual integration, while refusing to get swallowed up entirely by their powerful meta-explanatory vortices and the allures of pat reductionism.

Relevant here are Patrick Colm Hogan's models of conceptual integration and complex emergence. Hogan, who maintains a slightly paradoxical position as both a defender of science-friendly cognitive-oriented humanities and a harsh skeptic of its evolutionary instantiations (possibly due to his exposure to some early crude applications of evolutionary psychology to the arts), nonetheless offers some useful ideas for thinking through consilient integration. Hogan emphasizes that the bottom-rung laws must always be conserved upwardly, constraining any and all explanatory causes for emergent phenomena. At the same time, these primary laws cannot adequately describe more complex emergent patterns that arise from the upper rungs, which supervene upon those bottom levels. Hogan sees yet another bidirectional dynamic at work here, although his articulation of how this works can get fuzzy: the upper phenomena have a downward effect in that they reorganize or restructure the components below into new configurations and patterns, whose laws cannot be fully and adequately captured by the more elementary laws governing inorganic matter (physics and chemistry) at the root level, and on up through organic matter (biology), mind (psychology), or social systems (sociology, political economics, etc.). According to Hogan,

While laws are conserved upward, *structures are projected downward*.

In other others, the emergent structure is not simply dependent upon lower-level structures, but in fact organizes elements of the lower level in its own terms. So, psychological structure does not fix social structure, though the

laws of mind place limits on social structure.

[...]

I should emphasize that I am not saying the higher levels have *causal* consequences for lower levels. Again, causal principles are conserved upward. Rather, I am saying that higher levels have *organizational* consequences for lower levels. Several sequences of tones do not form themselves into a set of [musical] theme and variation due to their physical properties. Rather, our mentalistic experience of those sequences organizes them in this way. [...] In other words, the selection and segmentation of brain events is a result of their interpretation in mentalistic terms.²⁹

While “organizational consequences” is conceptually vague, Hogan’s basic claim seems to be this: our upper-level schemas, formulas, laws, and arguments—which are constrained by, yet cannot be satisfactorily articulated through, the constituent laws below them alone—will always be needed to describe the larger-scale organizational emergences, which themselves reconfigure the elementary components of the universe in new, inter-influencing, many-bodied ways.

Compounding the material complexities of emergent phenomena in the universe are the human social complexities and occasional *ad hoc* nature of the knowledge work that attempts to describe and explain that emergence. As many scholars and philosophers of science before me have insinuated, the methods deployed within any discipline along the conceptual ladder, the actual ways their practitioners work out their problems, and the incremental real-world progress made in knowledge fields across the scholarly community

²⁹ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 207–8. Italics in original.

are probably much foxier than many would care to admit. A more accurate characterization, then, might be to say that evo-bio and its related fields are motivated by hedgehog-like mission objectives, but constantly defer to foxlike principles of operation. This invites back in Berlin's image of Tolstoy, intuitively a fox yet longing to be a hedgehog. The realities of knowledge-work are just more complicated than either Auyang's or Berlin's theories imply. Instances of epistemological hybridity and methodological "schizophrenia" are not necessarily strikes against knowledge-making disciplines, as Berlin suggests they were for Tolstoy the man. There will necessarily be reciprocal give-and-take between these systems of cognition. And all knowledge fields are probably stronger for it, as our next thinker suggests.

Whereas Auyang is inclined to essentialize disciplines and fields of knowledge into foxes or hedgehogs, neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran stakes a slightly different claim in his introductions to *The Tell-Tale Brain* (2011). Though not invoking proverbial fox or hedgehog by name, their totemic spirits are palpable in Ramachandran's personalized narrative of the scientific methodology he privileges, which he calls "unapologetically old-school."³⁰ The following encapsulates his attitudes:

My preference for low-tech methods has both strengths and drawbacks, of course. I enjoy it—partly because I'm lazy—but it isn't everyone's cup of tea. And this is a good thing. Science needs a variety of styles and approaches. Most individual researchers need to specialize, but the scientific enterprise as a whole is made more robust when scientists march to different drumbeats. Homogeneity breeds weakness: theoretical blind spots, stale paradigms, an echo-chamber mentality, and cults of personality. A diverse *dramatis personae* is a powerful tonic against these ailments. Science

³⁰ V.S. Ramachandran, "Introduction: No Mere Ape," *The Tell-Tale Brain* (W.W. Norton: New York, 2011), 5.

benefits from its inclusion of the abstraction-addled, absent-minded professors, the control-freak obsessives, the cantankerous bean-counting statistics junkies, the congenitally contrarian devil's advocates, the hard-nosed data-oriented literalists, and the starry-eyed romantics who embark on high-risk, high-payoff ventures, stumbling frequently along the way. If every scientist were like me, there would be no one to clear the brush or demand periodic reality checks. But if every scientist were a brush-clearing, never-stray-beyond-established-fact type, science would advance at a snail's pace and would have a hard time unpainting itself out of corners. Getting trapped in narrow cul-de-sac specializations and "clubs" whose membership is open only to those who congratulate and fund each other is an occupational hazard in modern science.³¹

Ramachandran's distinctively colorful prose and approachable tone of voice should not diminish the cogent power and pragmatic plausibility of his arguments here, or anywhere else in his prevailingly astute and erudite books. He sensibly contends that every discipline needs a motley array of thinkers and practitioners—call them foxes, hedgehogs, or hybrids—to survive and flourish. Individuals might be bent toward foxy or hedgehoggy behaviors, but disciplines benefit from their synergistic collaborations. Collegial discord ultimately breeds epistemic, if not necessarily social, harmony. Better to have a restless, cacophonous truth-distillery of malcontents than a disciple-populated echo chamber of self-contents.³²

³¹ Ramachandran, *Tell-Tale*, xxi.

³² Ramachandran's communal-epistemic model could benefit from one socio-bureaucratic amendment: if university departments and research organizations want to obviate against ego wars, promote generally affable interactions among faculty members, and foster productive intellectual climes, the members of these scholarly communities must be primed to truly *welcome* that diversity, to *value* the variable perspectives and methods of their fellow scholars. From a visionary standpoint, though, Ramachandran's ideas and normative values of knowledge-formation are persuasive. His characterization of the research landscape aptly captures the messy

Despite certain differences between Auyang's and Ramachandran's points of view, which are largely a result of their respective analytical scopes and preferences for lumping or splitting, both suggest that thinking entities—be they individual minds or aggregated disciplines—are predisposed toward one dipole of the fox/hedgehog spectrum or another. I generally agree. My added contention is that both individuals and collective bodies of individual thinkers also fluctuate between such predispositions, either strategically or instinctively, as particular situations and problems warrant.

The impetus behind this last assertion summons a philosophical spirit akin to the epistemological pragmatism of Nancy Easterlin and her biocultural approach to the arts and humanities, particularly her emphases on the provisional nature of knowledge.³³ Easterlin is very much a metaphysical and epistemic monist, someone who does not deny the existence of mind-independent reality and seems to subscribe to a Searlian biological naturalism. She is, moreover, a scholar amply versed in the scientific disciplines that neighbor her primary field of literary studies. Yet she is also a pluralist when it comes to allowing varying perspectives to inform or “get at” that objective monistic reality. And perhaps most importantly, compared to some of her colleagues in the evolutionary humanities and cognitive poetics, she also maintains a much more suspect view of what “external” pre-approved scientific theories might be able to supply practitioners in her home field when it

nonlinear social dynamic that undergirds the ongoing process of creating and validating reliable knowledge. As philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and others less radical in their aims like Susan Haack, have forcefully argued, knowledge creation follows an often haphazard course, one that entails persistent hypothesizing, testing, confirming, controverting, sifting, sorting, and triangulating empirical observations and abstract propositions within a community of truth-seeking minds deploying a liberal assortment of tools and method. See Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2009); and *Defending Science—within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2003).

³³ See, for instance, Nancy Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); and “The Functions of Literature and the Extended Mind,” *New Literary History* 44, no. 4 (Autumn 2013): 661–682.

comes to their bread-and-butter job: the interpretation of aesthetic-representational objects. For when it comes to the arts, particularly narrative art, interpretation remains king. It is what drives the meaning-transaction process an art object enacts on its interpreter, and it remains the foundation for all other kinds of critical commentary that might be brought to bear on those interpreted textual objects. It is also, crucially, a skill that to a large degree must be learned, taught, and refined, usually through some combination of repetitive exposure to art objects and their criticisms, institutionalized programmatic curricula, and/or concentrated “street” learning.³⁴ In light of this, Easterlin can be thought of as quintessentially foxy in her theoretical and critical performances, while still building her schemes upon certain deeper, well-tested, hedgehoggy principles about human nature and biological reality.

The leader of today’s Darwinian lit-crit movement, Joseph Carroll, on the other hand, might be viewed as hewing to some unapologetic hedgehog commitments—at least in relationship to Easterlin, whose work, while largely receptive of Carroll’s positions, has been unhesitant in interrogating certain approaches Carroll favors and his exhortations to more tightly integrate all humanities programs with higher scientific literacy in evolutionary social theory, the psychosocial sciences of human nature, life-history science, and statistics-based research programs. Others who would want to paint Carroll as too fervent a hedgehog usually do so more unfairly than Easterlin, and probably without having read his voluminous work over the last 20 years as closely as Easterlin has (a body of work that is routinely expanded, updated, and reframed with carefully nuanced integrations of current evolutionary social and psychological science, while never suppressing his clear and evident care for literature,

³⁴ For justifications and implications of these ideas, see section on hermeneutics in the following chapter.

literary scholarship, and the status of humanities departments).³⁵

In his introduction to *Darwin's Bridge: Uniting the Sciences and Humanities*, Carroll trumpets the Darwinian revolution resoundingly: “The new Darwinian revolution of the past several decades is not yet complete but has clearly passed the point of no return. One important indicator for this tectonic shift can be discerned in commentary on human behavior aimed at educated general readers. For the past several years, much of the most successful such commentary—successful in terms of sales, reviews, and prestige—has been deeply versed in current knowledge about evolved dispositions and neurobiological mechanisms such as brain structures, hormones, and neuro-transmitters.”³⁶ The difference is that these developments *energize* Carroll, who sees opportunities for, not obstacles against, enriching his home field of literary studies, while at the same time advancing our knowledge of humanity and culture toward a more consilient, fully integrated unity. Naysayers will view this as utopian hedgehogery. A more judicious assessment will see that Carroll is as foxy as anyone when practicing his literary criticism, and is aware as anyone of the upstream/downstream causal reciprocations that inhere between the disciplinary rungs of the conceptual knowledge ladder.³⁷ He simply commits more forthrightly to an optimistic epistemological progressivism, staked upon the firmest hedgehoggy footing in the life sciences: the theory of evolution.

Circling back to Easterlin, her prudent emphasis on the centrality of interpretation for

³⁵ Negative hedgehog portrayals of strong Darwinian critics like Carroll or his frequent co-author Jon Gottschall are probably symptomatic of acute cases of turf-usurpation anxiety, suffered out of certain scientific illiteracies or a more general aversion to the possibility of having to hold one's work to more rigorous accountability standards—standards involving statistically-driven scientific observations and an empirically testable reality that might bite back. Such anxieties are not altogether unwarranted, of course.

³⁶ Joseph Carroll, Introduction, *Darwin's Bridge: Uniting the Sciences and Humanities*, ed. Carroll, Dan McAdams, and E.O. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2.

³⁷ See, in particular, Carroll's most recent and cogent accounts of complex emergence and causal hierarchies of disciplinary knowledge in the subsection “What Consilience Means,” Introduction, *Darwin's Bridge*, 1–6.

humanist scholars should be re-amplified. For interpretation, apart from its exalted place in art experience, is also a more general mental act. It is likely a remnant from (in Carroll's words) a "major transition" in the evolutionary development of *homo sapiens*,³⁸ part-and-parcel to some suite of co-evolving mental adaptations related to symbol-use, language capabilities, and theory-of-mind mechanisms. As such, one could conceive of interpretation itself and its functions as one of the higher-level organizing forces and pivot points in the scale of conceptual integration. It does exactly that for Hogan, who brings it to bear as both a cognitive and epistemological counteraction to the mental work of explanation: "Sometimes the treatment of lower-level structures of higher-level structures (e.g. the identification of a particular sort of stimulation of the amygdala as fear) is referred to as 'interpretation.' Conversely, the treatment of higher-level structures in terms of lower-level structures (e.g. the identification of fear as a particular sort of stimulation of the amygdala) is referred to as 'explanation.' By the present account, both interpretation and explanation are important and neither is eliminable."³⁹ Here again we sense that strong pitch of fox/hedgehog bidirectionality and dual-mindedness, which suffuses the transdisciplinary rhetoric of thinkers aiming for more consilient bodies of knowledge.

Even philosopher-of-mind-and-aesthetics Nelson Goodman, who operates from a basically irrealist antifoundationalist epistemology to espouse a pluralistic cognitive constructivism, makes a case for how sound thinking (or at least compelling thinking) is predicated upon a process of navigating between the dens of the fox and the tunnels of the hedgehog. Goodman's terminological contributions to aesthetics and symbolism play important roles in the following chapters, so considering his epistemic stance is not

³⁸ Carroll, "What Consilience Means," *Darwin's Bridge*, 3.

³⁹ Hogan, 208.

ornamental digression. Referencing Ernst Cassirer—a towering influence not only on Goodman but on the twentieth-century philosophies of science, art, and symbol in general—Goodman prefaces his theory of multiple worlds and the attendant process of symbol-mediated worldmaking with a tightrope performance:

In what non-trivial sense are there, as Cassirer and like-minded pluralists insist, many worlds? Just this, I think: that many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base. The pluralist, far from being anti-scientific, accepts the sciences at full value. His typical adversary is the monopolistic materialist or physicalist who maintains that one system, physics, is preeminent and all-inclusive, such that every other version must eventually be reduced to it or rejected as false or meaningless. If all right versions could somehow be reduced to one and only one, that one might with some semblance of plausibility be regarded as the only truth about the only world. But the evidence for such reducibility is negligible, and even the claim is nebulous since physics itself is fragmentary and unstable and the kind and consequences of reduction envisaged are vague. (How do you go about reducing Constable's or James Joyce's world-view to physics?) I am the last person likely to underrate construction and reduction. A reduction from one system to another can make a genuine contribution to understanding the interrelationships among world-versions; but reduction in any reasonably strict sense is rare, almost always partial, and seldom if ever unique. To demand full and sole reducibility to physics or any other one version is to

forego nearly all other versions. The pluralists' acceptance of versions other than physics implies no relaxation of rigor but a recognition that standards different from yet no less exacting than those applied in science are appropriate for appraising what is conveyed in perceptual or pictorial or literary versions.

So long as contrasting right versions not all reducible to one are countenanced, unity is to be sought not in an ambivalent or neutral *something* beneath these versions but in an overall organization embracing them. Cassirer undertakes the search through a cross-cultural study of the development of myth, religion, language, art, and science. My approach is rather through an analytic study of types and functions of symbols and symbol systems. In neither case should a unique result be anticipated; universes of worlds as well as worlds themselves may be built in many ways.⁴⁰

Goodman's epistemic model of worldmaking comes down clearly in favor of a perspectival "egalitarian" cacophony of truths, marking him a quite radical fox who might insist that the very existence of hedgehogs is a myth, a necessary mental invention of any fox's worldmaking imagination. And yet Goodman is not wholly unlike Easterlin and Ramachandran, who also make room for social and epistemic discord in their more foundationalist pragmatic models of still-rigorous truth-obtaining. Still, there is something in Goodman's rhetorical tightrope that suggests that foxes could just as easily fall prey to a vapid meaningless pluralism as the hedgehog could succumb to a devouring greedy

⁴⁰ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978), 4–5. Italics in original.

reductionism.⁴¹ That is, such ostensibly radical foxism is matched on the other end of the spectrum by an ostensibly radical hedgehogism. But the operative term is *ostensible*. For within the precincts of thinkers and scientists who operate under some version of a pro-reductionist ontological physicalism, biological naturalism, or critical realism, the most eloquent tend to be judicious and generous about qualifying themselves. Science-philosophers like John Searle, Daniel Dennett, Steven Weinberg, and Patricia Churchland habitually acknowledge the dangers posed by an uncompromising greedy reductionism, whose imposing imperialist restrictions can stifle idea-creation and productive new perspectives on comprehending the world and our place as consciousness-wielding beings within it. On the other side of the street are cognitive-oriented humanists like Hogan, who are less willing to cede much ground to the epistemic values of a one-way reductionism, insisting more on a reciprocal bidirectional dynamic wherein the emergent phenomena supervening on the conserved lower laws significantly reorganize the componentry below—an attitude that in certain ways echoes Goodman’s search for unity in “an overall organization embracing” the multiple symbolic worlds created by multiple human minds.

In the same vein, it is interesting to note how the methods and approaches of cognitive neuroscientists and practitioners of many other transdisciplines today get couched in terms that reflect a striving to achieve a fox/hedgehog-like balance. Take O’Reilly again:

Instead of arguing for the superiority of one level over the other [i.e. the computational and algorithmic higher levels of cognitive science or the

⁴¹ Daniel Dennett explains the differences between “greedy reductionism” and “good reductionism” using his metaphor of “cranes” and “skyhooks” in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 81–82. Dennett’s concepts are analogous to and a direct development of physicist Steven Weinberg’s notions of an “uncompromising” versus a “compromising reductionism” in Chapter 3, “Two Cheers for Reductionism,” *Dreams of a Final Theory: A Scientist’s Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 51–64.

implementational lowers levels of neurobiology], we adopt a fully interactive, balanced approach, which emphasizes forming connections between data across all of the relevant levels, and striking a reasonable balance between the desire for a simplified model and the desire to incorporate as much of the known biological mechanisms as possible. There is a place for both bottom-up (i.e. working from biological facts “up” to cognition), top-down (i.e. working from cognition “down” to biological facts), and, most important, interactive approaches, where one tries to simultaneously take into account constraints at the biological and cognitive levels.⁴²

In a more recent collaborative edition of the *Computational Cognitive Neuroscience* text, O'Reilly and colleagues give further voice to their vision for disciplinary management and the epistemics driving their approach to modeling the mind-brain:

The approach taken for the models in this book is to find some kind of happy (or unhappy) middle ground between biological detail and cognitive functionality. This middle ground is unhappy to the extent that researchers concerned with either end of this continuum are dissatisfied with the level of the models. Biologists will worry that our neurons and networks are overly simplified. Cognitive psychologists will be concerned that our models are too biologically detailed, and they can make much simpler models that capture the same cognitive phenomena. We who relish this “golden middle” ground are happy when we’ve achieved important simplifications on the neural side, while still capturing important cognitive phenomena. This level of modeling

⁴² O'Reilly, “Levels of Analysis,”
<http://psych.colorado.edu/~oreilly/cccn/node11.html#SECTION01423000000000000000>.

explores how consideration of neural mechanisms inform the workings of the mind, and reciprocally how cognitive and computational constraints afford a richer understanding of the problems these mechanisms evolved to solve. [...].

Ultimately, it comes down to aesthetic or personality-driven factors, which cause different people to prefer different overall strategies to computer modeling. Each of these different approaches has value, and science would not progress without them, so it is fortunate that people vary in their personalities so different people end up doing different things. Some people value simplicity, elegance, and cleanliness most highly—these people will tend to favor abstract mathematical (e.g. Bayesian) cognitive models. Other people value biological detail above all else, and don't feel very comfortable straying beyond the most firmly established facts—they will prefer to make highly elaborated individual neuron models incorporating everything that is known. To live in the middle, you need to be willing to take some risks, and value most highly the process of emergence, where complex phenomena can be shown to emerge from simpler underlying mechanisms.

By designating the scientific territory they aim to inhabit as the “golden middle,” Randall and colleagues reanimate the basic thrusts behind the fox/hedgehog modes of interfacing—interfaces that can occur both within an individual mind-brain and across all rungs of the conceptual-integration ladder. This golden middle is reached for a scientist when a model is constructed that is abstracted and isolatable enough to allow efficient manipulation of it in our minds or upon the material model itself, while also maintaining sufficient detail and complexity of the phenomena being modeled so it does not lose its specificity, complexity,

and many-bodied reality. For a humanist, the same basic intellectual principles ought apply. Except that, in lieu of laboratory-housed models and experiments run through those models to better “get at” the reality of nature, texts and textmakers become our “reality” and subject matter of interest, while verbalized interpretations and criticisms are applied to better “get at” those texts. When investigating and interpreting textual-artistic objects, the opportunities and challenges for locating golden middles actually multiply, for better or for worse: the cognitive demands and disciplinary boundary-crossings that impinge upon transactions between textmaker, text, and text-intepreter are immensely complex and variable, as multiple worlds (real and simulated/fictionalized) and multiple perspectives (real and simulated/fictionalized) must be juggled and sorted.

These emergent spaces of golden middles ought to occupy sacred ground for artist, humanist, critic, and scientist alike. Indeed, one could reasonably contend that our best artists—those we keep going back to again and again for insight, instruction, and wisdom as well as pure pleasures, whose work resonates with us across times and cultures—also traverse these golden middles of knowledge and understanding. Not systemically, using pure analytical/synthetic/propositional argumentation that scholars and scientists privilege, but through their idiosyncratic expressive visions of the world and aestheticized convergences of ideas, emotions, and instantiations in their works. Considering these epistemological and, to a lesser extent, methodological alliances between the sciences, humanities, and arts, perhaps a foxy hedgehog like Tolstoy living today would have found a welcoming home in a contempory science like computational cognitive neuroscience—or, if his tolerance for computer modeling and high-level mathematics wore thin, a humanities-oriented evolutionary social science.

A final observation will reground us back into the art and praxes of text production and interpretation. These two competitive yet complementary, distinct yet inter-influencing cognitive modes—so tidily represented by the proverbial fox and hedgehog—are evident not just in our sensing and understanding of the world “out there” but also in our textually oriented interpretative experiences. Significant for the project at hand, these cognitive modes play starring roles in enabling our comprehension of aesthetic textual objects and our experiences of them. Despite expected variances in terminology, points of emphases, and causal vectors, almost all canonical hermeneutic and narratological theories have landed on one fundamental dynamic at play in textual interpretation: the hermeneutic circle. And it is a dynamic that can, today, be reconceptualized within a neurocognitive and fox/hedgehog worldview. At the micro-levels of that circle, language-buffer modules that LeDoux and other cognitive neuroscientists have identified can be isolated as the neural-cognitive mechanisms enabling the basic parsing and interpretation of words and sentences: “temporary buffers associated with aspects of language use [...] help you keep the first part of a sentence in mind until you’ve heard the last part so that the whole thing can be understood.”⁴³ With fractal recursion as a plausible basis for neural-circuit patterning (see footnote 43 below), it can be extrapolated that the same basic operating principles of these linguistic-parsing mechanisms will be evident at higher levels of interpretation, facilitating and constraining the execution of interpretations across many concentric circles of the hermeneutic process. In other words, in a larger-scaled neurocognitive hermeneutics, the separate-but-related acts of text-creation and text-interpretation can be mapped onto a complex circuitry of inferential feedback loops and cognitive mental progressions that involve both an unconscious parallel processing of and a conscious toggling between part

⁴³ LeDoux and Fellous, 97.

and whole, particular and general, instance and pattern, perception and expectation, induction and deduction, even the known internal self and our projections of external others.

Hence, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of comprehending texts and appreciating their aesthetic value, we should expect to find fox and hedgehog processing circuits working in tandem with each other, and with an ensemble of other cognitive subprocesses—both serially and as parallel-processing systems. An interpreter's decoding mind-brain is thus enabled to converge upon the encoded aesthetic products and conjured worlds of a mind-brain entirely remote from it in time and space.

The Bridge

This research project, which theorizes the nature and value of implicit second-order symbolism in narrative art, was shaped by a heterogeneous though concatenated collection of primary, critical, and scientific texts. Cultured within a multidisciplinary petri dish of regional theories and pragmatic epistemics, it was also inspired by and still supervenes upon certain deep principles of a more-or-less unified and universalizing evolutionary theory of human nature and behavior. As such, I feel a *simpatico* with Berlin's Tolstoy (without, I hope, the same magnitude of tragic consequences), Auyang's evolutionary biologist, Ramachandran's low-tech lazy scientist, Hogan's guarded conceptual integrationist, Easterlin's pragmatic *bricoleur* and exponent of interpretive excellence, and perhaps above all Randall's seekers of the golden middle. The reader can thus expect this author to unfold as a sometimes klutzy, chimeric foxhog, disposed to vacillations between observing particularities and seeking out their encompassing principles. With a romantic sense of Keatsian negative capability and its attendant affinities for the splendors of individuation and

cognitive dissonance, and a contravening “scientific” impulse to parse and synthesize integrative systematic resolutions out of contradictory bits of information, I will explore a range of territories before arriving at any provisional destination. To gain traction on any regional problem, I pull inductively from episodic memories of the experiential real world and semantic knowledge gained through the symbol-based worlds of books and texts, pushing to weave the disparate threads together, seeking out commonalities, origins, and abstract principles that might underlie and constrain the observable instances.

Chimeric operational mode in place, I embrace the following assumption to guide my inferences about the historically and theoretically fraught problem of symbolism: the human brain is the generative node of all our behavioral patterns, bodily events, mental activities, and cultural products; and despite its legitimately *sui generis* place amongst brains of other species, and despite all its trappings of infinite plasticity, the human brain remains a phylogenetically evolved, ontogenetically programmed, and biologically constrained organ. I recognize that these very same brains and cognitive systems have evolved, at least in part, to respond creatively to novel situations and ecologies; to form and store away memories from lived environments, be they procedural, episodic, semantic; to learn from those memories and lived experiences; to solve problems on-the-fly using any available material tools in concert with any relevant culturally transmitted “immaterial” knowledge; and to brace us, through their remarkable capacities for moment-by-moment plasticity, within a state of flexible responsiveness unrivaled within the animal kingdom.

With these jostling assumptions in play, I strive for a balanced biocultural criticism that accounts for both the incontrovertible fact that brains and the behaviors they give rise to are constrained by the deep overarching principles of evolution (i.e. phylogenetics) and the

equally insistent fact that these same brains re-wire and change their soft architecture throughout the individual organism's life history (i.e. ontogenetics) and in relationship to their cultural inputs (i.e. cultural plasticity). In addition to these diachronic levels of intra-species difference, I recognize that individual brains are the products of a unique genetic set of factors that are, nevertheless, products of both heritability *and* variation. Our genetically constrained neurological structures will differ—indeed they *must* differ for descent with modification to gain purchase—because of our varied, shuffled genotypes; as a result, phenotypic differences can be seen between individuals, between sexes, between personality types, between other categories we might choose. And yet these structures cannot be not so radically different either: because of the very principles of descent with modification—a process driven by the intermingled mechanisms of mutation, recombination, drift, migration, and natural (i.e. sexual + ecological) selection—the propagation of “winning” genetic variations down the generations results in statistically stable traits and behavioral patterns as the law of averages bears down.

As a result of this nested dynamic, humans as a group share an awful lot, look a lot alike, and act a lot alike. As individuals we are genetically recombined recursive iterations, not carbon copies, of our ancestors distant and close. Which means we are, to some degree, recursive iterations of all our human cousins fortunate enough to be living in the global

present.⁴⁴ According to recent neurocognitive modeling, even the neuronal spiking patterns within our brains, themselves the result of putative neural Darwinian paring processes, boil down to overlapping sets of fractal-like recursions distributed spatially and temporally across our cortices.⁴⁵ This dynamic could arguably be at the heart of what evokes the transcendent feelings of existentialist/spiritualistic interconnectedness, universality, and timelessness most of us experience at some point or another in relation to our fellow human travellers and our place in the universe—feelings that many of our enduring works of art draw on, exploit, exemplify, point out, and occasionally argue against. This biological-existential dynamic, taken as a whole, foments one of the great tragicomedic truths marking the human condition:

⁴⁴ For a foundational discussion on the iterative nature of biological reality, see John Maynard Smith, *The Problems of Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). In *Darwinian Neurodynamics*, Szathmáry et al. parrot Maynard Smith with the straightforward assertion that “units of evolution must multiply, show heredity, and variability (meaning that heredity is not exact),” 5–6.

Gary Flake parses important relationships between recursion, iteration, parallelism, feedback mechanisms, and adaptive living systems in *The Computational Beauty of Nature: Computer Explorations of Fractals, Chaos, Complex Systems, and Adaptations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998): e.g. “For living things, iteration corresponds to iteration. Parallelism involves multiplicity in a space, iteration involves multiplicity in time. Similarly, recursion is responsible for the varying types of self-similarity seen in nature. Almost all biological systems contain self-similar structures that are made through recurrent processes, while many physical systems contain a form of functional self-similarity that owes its richness to recursion. We will also see that systems are often recurrently coupled to their environment through feedback mechanisms. While animals must react according to their surroundings, they can also change the environment, which means that future events by an animal must take these environmental changes into account. Adaption can be viewed as a consequence of parallelism and iteration in a competitive environment with finite resources. [...] With feedback mechanisms in place between the agent and an environment, adaption can be seen as forming a loop in the cause and effect of changes in both agents and environment.

⁴⁵ O'Reilly comments on the apparent fractalization patterns of neurological architectonics:

We argue that information processing in the brain has a fractal quality, where the same basic properties apply across disparate physical scales. These basic properties are those of individual neurons, which “show through” even at higher levels, and are thus relevant to understanding even the large-scale behavior of the brain. [...]

We don't imagine that the brain is constructed from populations of identical neurons, but we do think that the brain employs overlapping distributed representations.[...]

We believe that the brain has a fractal character for two reasons: First, it is likely that, at least in the cortex, the effective properties of long-range connectivity are similar to that of local, short-range connectivity. For example, both short and long-range connectivity produce a balance between excitation and inhibition by virtue of connecting to both excitatory and inhibitory neurons. Thus, a model based on the properties of short-range connectivity within a localized cortical area could also describe a larger-scale model containing many such cortical areas simulated at a coarser level. The second reason [concerns] averaging over populations of neurons: if on average the population behaves roughly the same as the individual neuron, then the two levels of description are self-similar, which is what it means to be fractal.

“Scaling Issues,” <http://psych.colorado.edu/~oreilly/cecn/node12.html#SECTION01424000000000000000>:

that we are truly, through and through, different and yet the same.

The intellectually seductive if philosophically fraught dialectic between unity and difference is poignantly captured, and in certain regards convincingly resolved, by the eminent geneticist and evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky in his essay “Biology, Molecular and Organismic,” which was published, incidentally, eleven years after Berlin’s). To wit, Dobzhansky states:

The world of life can be studied from two points of view—that of its unity and that of its diversity. All living things, from viruses to men, have basic similarities. And yet there is an apparently endless variety of living beings. Knowledge and understanding of both the unity and the diversity are useful to man. I like, however, to stress here not the pragmatic aspect, not the applied biology, but the aesthetic appeal. Both the unity and the diversity of life are fascinating. Some biologists find the unity more inspiring, others are enthralled by the diversity. This is evidently a matter of personal taste, and a classical adage counsels that tastes are not fit subjects for disputation (although this is what most disputations are about). The consequence of the polymorphism of tastes is that there always will be different kinds of biologists and different subdivisions of biology.⁴⁶

His emphasis on a thinker’s taste preference is as compelling to note here as his axiom that unity and difference are not mutually exclusive properties of the world, but complementary—and real. Dobzhansky elaborates this idea on the next page of his essay, introducing his now-famous dictum, “Nothing makes sense in biology except in the light of

⁴⁶ Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Biology, Molecular and Organismic,” *American Zoologist* 4, no. 4 (Nov. 1964):m 448.

evolution,” which would become the title of a later and more-cited essay:

I venture another, and perhaps equally reckless, generalization—nothing makes sense in biology except in the light of evolution, *sub specie evolutionis*. If the living world has not arisen from common ancestors by means of an evolutionary process, then the fundamental unity of living things is a hoax and their diversity is a joke. The unity is understandable as a consequence of common descent and of universal necessities imposed by common materials. The diversity is intelligible as the outcome of adaptation of life to different environments, or, if I may use this unfortunately ambiguous and yet indispensable concept, to different ecological niches.

If one could imagine a universe in which the environment would be completely uniform in space and in time, then in such a universe a single kind of living inhabitant could conceivably be all that an evolutionary process might produce. The real universe is certainly not uniform. The living matter has responded to the diversity of physical environments by evolving a diversity of genotypes able to survive and to reproduce in a variety of environments. Organic diversity is necessary because no single genotype can possess a superior adaptedness in all physical environments. This is, if anything, even more true with respect to the biotic environments. The more different organisms inhabit a territory, the greater becomes the variety of ecological niches. In a sense, the growth of the organic diversity is a self-accelerating process.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Dobzhansky, “Biology,” 449–450.

The basic axiom that nothing in biology makes sense without the light of evolution is equally applicable to our cultural practices, including representational arts like literature and film. Biology begot culture, at least in the long, phylogenetic view. Biology arrived first. Culture was secondary in sequence, and even if it can shape and feed into the environments that our biological bodies live in and react to, it has never been nor ever could be sheered away from the evolutionary and biological processes that drove it into existence in the first place. Thus, nothing in culture makes sense without the light of evolution either—evolution might not be *sufficient* to produce legitimate and deep understandings of our cultural surroundings and products, but it certainly must be seen as *necessary*.

The Other Side of the Bridge: Hedging the Foxes of a Biopoetic Theory of Symbol

The complex of behaviors this dissertation intends to investigate is a turbid one. Ideally it calls for nothing less than a synthetic, synoptic accounting of several phenomena that are themselves inherently turbid and complex: art-making and art-experiencing, story-making and story-interpreting, symbol-making and symbol-interpreting. Additionally, to do intellectual justice to such a complex—which consists of these six overarching sets of nested complex systems and their emergent outputs, themselves made up of other subsets of complex systems—all three diachronic levels of the nature of the mind-brain ought to be considered: its cultural/daily plasticity, its ontogenetics, and its phylogenetics. A double sensibility for absorbing variation and sameness in patterns of human behavior and cultural products will also be marshaled. More local issues—which we might consider synchronic on an evolutionary scale, diachronic on a human-life-history scale—that influence the interpretation of art objects are equally crucial to integrate: i.e. cultural and sociopolitical

histories, artistic traditions, and biographical contexts of artists' and readers' lives.

This dissertation's explorations into these intellectual spaces, however, are just an opening gambit. They do not fulfill the synoptic ambitions I call for. Other, smarter people must bring to bear their own expertise, additions, and emendations to improve the legitimacy of the following arguments and integrations of mind, symbolism, and art. Within this gambit, I hope my fox/hedgehog approach proves not too terribly muddled. For like Berlin's fox, I sometimes move centrifugally away from the evolutionary-cognitive centers in my propositional and evidentiary content. And like his hedgehog, I also centripetally return to the deeper organizing principles and more abstract insights of evolution and cognitive science. Similarly, for textual support, I move freely between several modes, genres, and periods of art, while homing in on American short story and cinema and a few of my favorite pieces of "symbolic realism" as my primary pump for textual support.

Along the way, the reader will probably catch me stuffing my assorted foxy findings too eagerly at times into a neatly wrapped hedgehoggy box of evolutionary or cognitive regularities. Such an approach will likely come off as too schematic and "just-so" for some, too scattershot for others. But for that I hesitate to apologize, even when the process bears out certain missteps or errors in judgment. After all, one scholar's trash is often another's treasure, and you can't please all the people, and insert your favorite platitude here. To borrow one of Northrup Frye's prefatory remarks in *Anatomy of Criticism*, "Whenever schematization appears in the following pages, no importance is attached to the schematic form itself, which may be only the result of my own lack of ingenuity. Much of it, I expect, and in fact hope, may be mere scaffolding, to be knocked away when the building is in better shape. The rest of it belongs to the systematic study of the formal causes of art." I can only

hope the same for this work.

By the end of the project, I hope to have contributed a few original ideas about certain features of a selection of historically situated individual artworks and their makers, as well as their interpretations and interpreters. Through such foxy aspirations, I strive to pay proper respect to the singular, unpredictable, emergent structures born of complex inter-nested mental systems, of which artworks and their critical commentaries are prime examples. At the same time, I hem tightly to an Ur-narrative of evolved cognition, with its broader constraining principles for cultural formations, individuals within those cultures, and the cultural products fabricated by those individuals. As such, the constraints of our biological predispositions and the evolved cognitive architecture of the human mind-brain constantly hum in the background when they aren't crooning brashly in the foreground. In another sense, I will be constantly hedging my foxes and foxing my hedges.

CHAPTER 1

Preparing the Symbolic Meal: Key Terms and Guideposts

Allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses, makes its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant appositeness.

— Edgar Allan Poe

An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.

—Ezra Pound

Instead of defining man as animal rationale, we should define him as animal symbolicum.

— Ernst Cassirer

Symbolism is a primary characteristic of the mind, displayed in every aspect of our thought and culture.

— Israel Scheffler

Man is a symbol-making and -using animal. The great writers all used symbol as a means of controlling the form of their fiction.

— Ralph Ellison

I'm sure that there's something in the human personality which resents things that are clear, and, conversely, something which is attracted to puzzles, enigmas, and allegories.

— Stanley Kubrick

Our ancestors found a way to create and reproduce a simple system of symbols, and once available these symbolic tools quickly became indispensable...The incessant demands of efficiently reconstituting a symbolic system in each generation would have created selection pressures to reshape our lineage's ape brain.

— Terrence Deacon

Setting the Symbolic Table

The nineteenth-century architect of the American short story, the poet-priest of EuroAmerican High Modernism, two luminaries of twentieth-century Western philosophy, the author of the most influential African American novel in post-war America, a grandmaster of the modern cinema, a leading twenty-first century psycholinguist and biological anthropologist. All weigh in from their distinct intellectual-historical vantage points on the salience and potentiality of symbol, or symbol's close literary cousins, allegory and image. Despite surface variances in usage, context, and purpose, what these thinkers share in is a vital sense of symbolic mechanisms chugging away in human life: in art, in story, in the evolution of the human mind-brain. Standing on the shoulders of these and like-minded artists, scholars, and scientists, I launch a bid to re-theorize and re-invigorate the critical discourse on symbolism in the narrative arts. The aim is to establish a more robust, scientifically informed, philosophically nuanced, consilient view of how symbolic devices operate in aesthetic-narrative texts and inside the minds of artists and audiences alike: to establish, in short, a biopoetics⁴⁸ of symbol.

More precisely, this project motions toward a systematic if exploratory biocultural treatment of the nature, function, and value of *indirect referential complexes* precipitated by the techniques and modes of *second-order symbolism* within the aesthetic-narrative arts. As

⁴⁸ Use of "poetics" here tracks largely with film scholar David Bordwell's definitions and deployment of the term in *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Elaborations are presented later, but citation of Bordwell's quick-and-dirty historical encapsulation of the term should suffice here: Aristotle's fragmentary lecture notes, the *Poetics*, addressed what we nowadays recognize as drama and literature. Since his day, we have had Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music*, Todorov's *Poetics of Prose*, a study of the poetics of architecture, and of course the Russian formalists' *Poetics of the Cinema*. Such extensions of the concept are plausible, because it need not be restricted to any particular medium. Poetics derives from the Greek word *poiesis*, or active-making. Poetics of any artistic medium studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction—a process that includes a craft component (such as rules of thumb), the more general principles according to which the work is composed, and its functions, effects, and uses. Any inquiry into the fundamental principles by which artifacts in any representational medium are constructed, and the effects that how from those principles, can fall within the domain of poetics. (12)

shorthand, the broad sweep of these creative-cognitive processes, their study, and their interpretation can be labeled as *second-order symbolics*. It posits further that a great many canonical artists working in literary and audiovisual media have interiorized, intuitively or through more formalized training, ways to configure the prompts and patterns of their texts to tap into a dynamic web of species-typical cognitive impulses and interpretational strategies within their audiences. These impulses, which engage every level of the mind-brain's PECMA (perception-emotion-cognition-motor action) flow⁴⁹ serially or in parallel, also tap at least five core mental systems: the symbolic-semantic-associational, the indexical-analogical-metaphorical, the narrative-causal-agency, and the sensory-aesthetic-play. This peculiar cognitive orientation—wherein specialized mental routines must cope with simultaneous multimodal “brain tappings”—has shaped a fuzzily bounded mode of meaning-making in the modern narrative arts: that of *second-order symbolism* within a *replete aesthetic environment*.

While the mode of second-order symbol can trace certain roots and adumbrations to human prehistory, protolanguages, oral storytelling, iconographic/visual codes such as heraldry, and early print culture, it has blossomed most exquisitely in our modern storytelling arts, reaching a more mature formalized phase over the last 200 years. Certain cultural energies and artistic traditions of the modern West⁵⁰—transmitted through increasingly interconnected webs of standardized educational systems and cultural institutions, and

⁴⁹ Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ I use the term “modern” loosely to refer to the era and arts of a post-Enlightenment Industrial Age modernity, beginning around the time of European Romanticism and increasing exponentially in its “modernity” from there. Of course, demarcation lines remain fuzzy at best: certain modern sensibilities, traditions, and institutions that will shape the more recent strains of symbolic realisms I am interested in here bleed far back into human cultural history—to the visual and poetic arts of early-print culture, and further back to the arts of Classical Greece and Rome and the myths, fables, and allegories of all ancient world cultures. Fuzziness notwithstanding, my rule-of-thumb is simply: as the twentieth-century approaches, the idea-proper of “modern” gains in purchase.

amplified through sophisticated and widely distributable external-memory technologies—have enabled artists and their interpretive communities to expand, modify, and refine the possibilities and conventions of second-order meaning-making; to the extent that a recognizable, if highly variable and gradated, generic mode of *symbolic realism* has evolved in narrative art.

A further (but much more provisional) contention is that this mode of symbolic realism has been resonant within, though by no means predominant or exclusive to, the American canon of narrative art in some non-trivial ways. Non-American texts will be referenced, but more anecdotally than systemically, in order to establish the cross-cultural, cross-temporal, species-typical profile of second-order symbolics; and traditional boundaries demarcating poetry, fiction, and visual art will be crossed liberally to reckon second-order symbolism as a multimedia, multimodal platform of artistic technique. However, to ground its theoretical principles in a more coherent regional-historical moment, a select group of American short-fiction and motion-picture texts are used as paradigmatic instances of symbolic realism. These texts will form the central nexus of explanation and illustration. Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" and Hemingway's *In Our Time* cycle are featured on the literary side, bolstered with peripheral references to the symbolics of Kate Chopin, L. Frank Baum, Eudora Welty, Ray Carver, Jhumpa Lahiri, Tim O'Brien, Robert Olen Butler, and Louise Erdrich. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and Stanley Kubrick's oeuvre form the foundations of the symbolic-realist cinema, with nods to Atom Egoyan, Jim Jarmusch, Alex Garland, and television showrunner Nic Pizzolatto. These artists and their works represent exemplary instances of second-order symbolism and the symbolic-realist mode. They also align, admittedly, with some of my personal sensibilities. But any number

of combinations of textmakers (writers, poets, filmmakers, visual artists, etc.) could have been selected and devised to demonstrate, with equal probative power, the potentials, ranges, commonalities, and variations of the symbolic-realist mode. The hope is that this mode might be of some assistance in demarcating between so-called literary/artistic modes of text and non-literary/non-artistic texts.

A final contention will be that competence for second-order symbol interpretation is a high-level cognitive skill that must be learned and progressively mastered over the course of one's life history, and thus formally transmitted by cultural institutions or other external pedagogical mechanisms. Such competence seems more akin to a calculus that must build on previously learned arithmetic and algebra, not a natural language that will arise through mere exposure to English teachers talking vaguely about symbol, myth, and motif to 8th graders, who are still very much novices in high-skilled symbol management. Theories such as Howard Gardner's developmental levels of symbolic proficiency will lend psychological backing to this notion, which could bear some importance on high school, college, even graduate-level course curricula in the arts and humanities.

Placing the Definitional Flatware: Key Terms

Certain key terms in the thesis above (namely, *second-order symbolism* and *indirect referential complex*) bear parsing out right from the gate. Second-order symbolism pays a nod to Roland Barthes and the terminological scaffolding he builds in *Mythologies* (1957).⁵¹ Despite the many problematic aspects of Barthes' body of work and writing style—from his early structuralist approach based on a now-outmoded Saussurian theory of linguistic autonomy, to his later post-structuralism that becomes fatally bogged down by muddled

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1972).

divagations, anchorless conceptual mappings, and unsatisfying interpretations of “de-originated” “already-written”⁵² texts that vacate the possibility of any controlling authorial presence—his nomenclature, inelegant as it might strike some, is technically quite sound and fitting in this case. While the following chapters are devoted in some part to sorting out a best-practice vocabulary, separating the terminological wheat from the chaff, and making choices about which definitional schemes are most useful, a brief introduction of these central terms is appropriate.

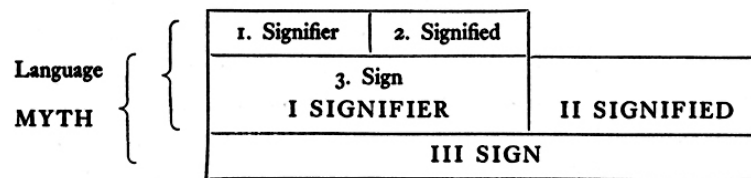
Addressing some of the more mind-twisting variables of language, art, and representation in his chapter “Myth as a Semiological System,” Barthes draws some incisive schematic distinctions about the literal/mythic and denotative/connotative dimensions of texts. He thus productively complicated some of the more conventional literary scholarship being produced on symbol and myth by his contemporaries—a scholarship that by the late 1950s was showing signs of becoming stale, unchallenged, and short on critical rigor. At times maddeningly opaque, Barthes’ theoretical gestures and linguistically informed taxonomies are nonetheless fruitful, directed toward some of the most interesting and extraordinary operational features of representational texts: symbol, myth, and connotation; and, by extension, implicit metaphor, intratextual motif, intertextual allusions, and virtually all other forms of transtextuality.⁵³ Together, these aesthetic-rhetorical devices constitute, in biopoetic terms, a special suite of PECMA-stimulating textual cues, which our modern representational arts (from literature, poetry, and film to painting, opera, and others) have at their disposal to speak to us, work on our imaginations, and create meaning.

⁵² Barthes, *S/Z*, 1974, trans. Richard Miller, (London: Blackwell, 1974), 21, 33.

⁵³ See Gérard Genette’s quite exhaustive classifications of transtextual schemas in *Palimpsests*, 1982, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Barthes's semiological system theorizes a classic sign-signifier-signified triad. And this tripartite mental dynamic takes on a peculiar resonance, one of recursion and possible infinite regress, within Barthes's compelling if at times unsteady reconceptualization of myth:

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified, and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign [...] in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material [...]. Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain. And it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. Everything happens as if myth shifted the formal system of the first significations sideways. As this lateral shift is essential for the analysis of myth, I shall represent it in the following way, it being understood, of course, that the spatialization of the pattern is here only a metaphor:



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Bracketing the urge to dissect and diagnose the schematics of Barthes' model, I want to spotlight the unstated process of recursion underpinning Barthes's notion of a lateralization of meaning-making: i.e. the dynamical self-looping feedback structures that emerge when one foundational sign becomes itself a sign of something else, creating one or more chains of recursive self-transforming meanings, all attached to a single original signifier.⁵⁵ The end-product of this recursive lateralization essentially constitutes Barthes's mythic mode of second-order symbolism.

In Barthes's conceptual topography, the movement envisioned between polyvalent signs and meanings is lateralized: multiple-meaning associations reside in a neighborly side-by-side configuration. Common parlance and most critical discourse, on the other hand, tend to couch these meanings as residing "below the surface" or operating as "deeper," "hidden," "subtextual" "undercurrents" of significance. Thus, Barthes' second-order signs exist in more of a flattened parataxical plane, rather than in the more familiar verticalized geometry of

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 223–4.

⁵⁵ For a recent compelling neurolinguistic theory on the role recursion plays in human language, associative memory, and higher-level symbolic thinking, see Eleonora Russo and Alessandro Treves, "An Uncouth Approach to Language Recursivity" *Biolinguistics* 5, no. 1–2 (2011): 133–150. Russo and Treves look to their research and recent discoveries in gross brain anatomy, neuro-topography, paleoanthropology, and complex-systems theory to speculate on the possible existence of phase transitions, attractor states, and latching dynamics within the functions of the human neocortex. According to the authors, it could be the sheer quantity of neurons and dendritic connections evident in the neocortex—a gross number they argue that, if calculated properly, surpasses all other primates and larger mammals on earth by a longshot—which enabled a layered, distributed, connection-rich environment to develop toward the recursive cascades that are ultimately needed to give rise to the evolution of combinatorial grammars in human language, our associational inference mechanisms, and human symbolic consciousness in general. See <http://www.biolinguistics.eu/index.php/biolinguistics/article/viewFile/186/204>.

layered surfaces and unobservable interiority. Quibbling over which spatio-metaphorical map has the most epistemic purchase is mostly parlor-game academics. Barthes himself vacillates: contextualizing his ideas with psychoanalytic theory just a few pages later, he writes, “Freud does remark that the second-order meaning of behavior is its real meaning, that which is appropriate to a complete situation, including its *deeper* level.”⁵⁶ I treat both mapping transformations as equally legitimate and use both sets of terms interchangeably when depicting second-order symbolic processes, letting rhetorical contexts guide.

A few other modifications and clarifications of Barthes’ critical vocabulary are in order. What Barthes calls myth or mythic, I am disposed to call symbol or symbolic. Visual semiotician Daniel Chandler susses out a few more pertinent ideas in his clear-sighted interpretations of Barthes. Summarizing how the elusive concepts of connotation and denotation are related to second-order signification, Chandler writes,

Connotation is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework connotation is a sign which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a *chain of connotations*). This tends to suggest that denotation is an underlying and primary meaning—a notion which many other commentators have challenged. Barthes himself later gave priority to connotation, and in 1971 noted that it was no longer easy to separate the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the “literal” (Barthes 1977, 166). In passing, we may note that this formulation underlines the point that “what is a signifier or a signified depends entirely on the level at which the analysis operates: a signified on one level can become a signifier on

⁵⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 118. Emphasis mine.

another level” (Willemsen 1994, 105). This is the mechanism by which signs may seem to signify one thing but are *loaded* with *multiple meanings*.⁵⁷

Second-order symbolism, then, manifests through a process wherein first-order cues of a particular representational text are doubly or multiply charged to produce additive signifiers: i.e. second-order meaning structures that reach beyond the principal, denotative, imitative, or exemplificational levels on which the text is more prosaically and intuitively interpreted. And, significantly, these meanings seem to reside *elsewhere*, swimming in more peripheral pockets connected to but apart from the text’s dominant representational currents. The end result: “chains” of “multiple meanings” that ramify and cognitively “load” a particular formal element of a text with semantic weight and density. The overarching biopoetic question we are left with is this: In an organic world of limited time, energy, and cognitive resources, why would members of our species, at any point in time, choose to promote these ostensibly superfluous, certainly inefficient, semantically ambiguous loadings and chainings of open signification?

Two central presumptions of my own model of recursive second-order signification—which might conflict with that of Barthes, who tended to vacate the presence of any controlling authorial intensions in textual objects—should be brought to light at this point.

⁵⁷ Daniel Chandler, “Denotation, Connotation, and Myth,” *Semiotics for Beginners*, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem06.html>. Italics mine.

That is, textmakers⁵⁸ will be assumed to play *intentional*, vital roles in configuring their second-order textual cues and patterns. And text-interpreters are thus *gently* or *obliquely* prompted to draw any additive associational meanings (which could refer back to objects internal or external to the text-world) from the more immediately accessible, PECMA-automatized, surface-level cues and contexts of conventionalized meanings. Crucially, the decoder key (for lack of a better term) for second-order symbols is kept mystified by the textmaker. Meanings are thus palpable yet obscured. Accessible but residing on the margins of consciousness. Present but invisible. There but not there. In the story arts in particular, these symbolic *notes* often prompt interpretive *knots*—narratively, thematically, aesthetically. But narrative (k)nots can also, upon their untying, release compressed nuclear chains of meaning, super-heated fields of cognitive throughput, and dim-to-radiant explosions of aesthetic energy. This release is, ultimately, the emotional-intellectual payoff of the second-order system.

“Second-order” is certainly not without its share of weaknesses. Problems of ambiguity and fuzzy demarcation will be encountered when considering the “order” or level of meaning for any representational artwork, particularly when the object under examination is written text. Since the letters of our phonetic alphabet are visual stand-ins (i.e. symbols themselves) for the oral/auditory symbolic mechanisms of our natural spoken language,

⁵⁸ The “textmaker” is a catch-all reference for any author, filmmaker, artist, etc., paying tribute to Seymour Chatman (*Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990]) and Gerald Prince (“Reviewing Narratology,” *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 4 [Autumn 1992]: 409–414). In this case, one can consider it as entailing either the concept of the implied author or (if one so dares) the actual flesh-in-blood human being who “willed” that implied locus of invention into being, or perhaps some combination of both. Chatman effectively unpacks and revises some of Wayne Booth’s unsteady notions of the implied author concept in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1983). While the implied author remains a necessary and useful construct, perplexing problems and unsatisfactory answers dog both theorists’ versions and the refinements of others who have entered the discussion after them. Ev-cog film theorist Torban Grodall has more recently found some serviceable reconciliations between Booth and Chatman in his works.

trying to sort out the layers of perception and cognition involved in meaning-making can become confused. One could reasonably argue that for written systems, the verbal-language signals, which are ultimately referred to by a set of inscribed alphabetical characters on paper or screen, should in this case be considered the first-order system; the inscribed letters denoting those verbal sounds would, accordingly, constitute the true second-order symbol system; and any meanings derived *after* the visual-to-auditory transcription processing has taken place would be most aptly described as tertiary third-order symbols. True enough. But for simplicity's sake, I submit the following workaround: after a person, equipped with a normally developing brain and its attendant cognitive faculties, has learned to read, any differentials in time and mental-content structures between the outputs of these unidirectional symbolic systems—phonetic/visual writing leading to oral/aural language processing leading to higher cognitive processing streams—can be considered mostly inconsequential, at least for my purposes here. (That does not mean time and content differentials between system outputs of spoken and written language are unimportant or uninteresting research questions to pursue. Surely they are.) Thus, let us assume that sequences of written words are—for all intents and purposes and so long as they are inscribed using standard conventions of font reproduction that reduce noise for clear input—are so seamlessly absorbed and processed by our reading brains⁵⁹ that we can legitimately consider these written words and their conventional denotative meanings as the first-order reference system. Let us also assume that these first-order cues will construct a reasonably predictable, effortlessly rendered representation of a narrative world within the typical reader's mind (“effortless” on a macroscale at least). In short, second-order can still be usefully deployed here. A brief

⁵⁹ For an exhaustive look at how our evolutionary, developmental, and cultural histories have combined with our neural, psychological, and technological/typographical mechanisms to enable our brains to read, see Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (Penguin, New York: 2009).

interlude (and preview of later sections that feature Stanley Kubrick) will offer rough illustration of how these orders of meaning sort themselves out.

Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) presents, among its many narrative and textual enigmas, the mysterious case of the moving mailbox. What appears to be the same graffiti-strewn mailbox appears within the *mise-en-scène* of several different locales and New York street scenes throughout the film (see screenshots below for a sample). On a first-order level, the mailbox in each respective shot should be construed effortlessly as simply a mailbox, a prop that helps establish scene, verisimilitude, and the illusion that we are viewing a typical street and typical mailbox just as we might be walking around real-life New York. Upon closer inspection, and perhaps only after multiple viewings, it becomes clear that the same mailbox appears to be traversing the streets of New York. This odd choice of redundant prop placement should raise some interpretative flags and prompt a viewer to interrogate its narrative or artistic motivation. Even without the repetition across different scenic geographies, the mailbox's graffiti seems to call out for deciphering: graffiti is a leitmotif across many scenes of *Eyes Wide Shut*, plus Kubrick's camera and deep-focus framing draw out the mailbox from background to foreground in unusual ways.

A spectator fixed on first-order levels of representation might motivate the moving mailbox as an unintended or insignificant detail: perhaps just collateral effect of an accident in the prop-gathering process, used carelessly over and over again, tagged with a random abstract design. More attentive, imaginative spectators, especially those who have been initiated into the fastidious Kubrickian world of filmmaking and meaning-making, will be prompted toward some second-order associational play. Spectators who are even anecdotally aware of Kubrick's perfectionist formal tendencies, and the filmmaker's highly literate,

highly conceptual mind, will be motivated to look for some parcel of poetic meaning. Granting ourselves such poetic-readerly license, we might recognize, despite the graffiti's ambiguity (perhaps deliberate ambiguity), that in several angles the design seems to be spelling out a rough-hewn "BABY." It may also be taken, polysemously, to resemble a bird or eagle wings, which are overlaid upon the USPS's own iconic eagle. From here, the second-order reader is compelled to draw together thematic threads from other formal and narrative elements from this film, or others in the Kubrick oeuvre, to corroborate these hypotheses. The interpretative potential of this open signifier becomes too charged to ignore: "BABY," tagged on a piece of property of the U.S. federal government, within this sexually charged marriage/conspiracy film (which happens to end abruptly with the rather telling word "fuck"), on an object that functions as a literal repository of messages waiting to be delivered, in a film whose formal compositions and narrative elements brim over with messages and signifying processes themselves. A fissile chain of "not-there" signifieds is thus sparked in the spectator properly keyed into second-order symbolologies, and networks of meanings can start to be construed with proper evidentiary supports. Proper in that this should not be an exercise of free association or grist for the spectator's own imaginative mill to run wild: rather, such interpretations are best pegged to and constrained by other pertinent intratextual cues, intertextual-oeuvre connections, and extratextually derived authorial intentions. Other second-order possibilities include the vague bird outline, which could match up with the doubled eagles we see on the US Postal Service insignia (doubled images and eagles appear often in Kubrick's works). The mailbox's mysterious movements could also be motivated by a dream logic, which underpins many Kubrick films and *Eyes Wide Shut* in particular. Barring the hoary director rising from the grave and lecturing us outright

and without any diabolical misdirection that *this* was absolutely his intended meaning and *that* is not, we are left to reconstruct our decoder keys from the clues and cues of his enigmatic cinematic universes (exactly what Kubrick probably wanted).





Figures 1–3. Stills of the moving “baby” mailbox from Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).⁶⁰

Circling back to operative terms in the thesis, *indirect referential complex* invites further discrimination as well. This derives from a repurposing of phrases and concepts used by Nelson Goodman to enunciate his theories of symbol and aesthetics across his major works: *Languages of Art* (1968), *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984), and *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (1988).⁶¹ Goodman’s rigorous analytical philosophy is marked by unparalleled conceptual and terminological finesse, and many profound insights into art and the nature of symbolic world-making result. More regrettably, it is also based on an epistemology of radical nominalism and strong cognitive constructivism. Nonetheless, Goodman builds a very strong case claiming that the very definition of what art is—or rather *when* art is⁶²—depends in many respects upon how weighted an object becomes (through context, purpose, intention, interpretation) in its symbolic density, repleteness, and complexity. These features of Goodman’s schemas and symptomatics of the aesthetic—symbolic density, repleteness, and complexity—are in many ways coextensive with my more inclusive concept of second-order symbolism, while also lending the concept of a *replete aesthetic* field in which an artist works.

Goodman’s aesthetic philosophy was trailblazing in its time, and it remains formidable in its categorical segmentations, generic and topical coverage, and wide

⁶⁰ Stills courtesy of *Welcome to Somerton: Kubrick Connections and the Mystery of Eyes Wide Shut*, “Abstract Graffiti,” blog, <http://somerton.tumblr.com/post/74925864867/abstract-graffiti>.

⁶¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1968); *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978); *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); with Catherine Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁶² Goodman, Ch. IV, “When Is Art?” *Worldmaking*, 57–70.

application.⁶³ There are echoes of Barthes at certain junctures, but Goodman's taxonomies are generally more finely graded than the French theorist's. They can also feel turbid or haphazardly organized at times, however, due to the sheer scope and inevitable conceptual overlaps that come with his philosophical ambition: sorting out and synthesizing the elusive, interlocking phenomena of art-making, aesthetics, and human systems of representation and symbolism. A few of the most relevant and operative terms of Goodman's schemas are summarized well by *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (direct citations of Goodman are used for Chapter 2):

The fundamental notion which is at the core of Goodman's theory of symbols is that of *reference*—the primitive relation of “standing for”—seen as articulated in different modes, of which denotation is one, and as obtaining not just directly but indirectly as well, sometimes across long chains of reference.
[...]

The “paths or “routes” of reference can be of many different sorts, and indeed symbols may combine in “chains of reference” to give rise to instances of *complex reference*.
[...]

Of course, the same item may perform several referential functions at the same time, denoting certain things while exemplifying certain features, and do so literally or metaphorically. Furthermore, sometimes reference is *indirect* or *mediate* brought about by the combination of different forms of reference into

⁶³ In “Nelson Goodman's Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives a summary assessment: “As in his works in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of language, Goodman's approach is often unorthodox and groundbreaking, and yet never in a way that fails to be refreshing and suggestive of future developments.” See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/>.

instances of *complex reference*. Reference may, so to speak, *travel* along “chains of reference” made of symbols that refer to, or are referred by, other symbols.⁶⁴

The complex, indirect, combinatorial chains of reference emphasized here reverberate with the same chords of Barthes’s second-order symbols and recursive networks of sign/signifier/signified. Also crucial: noting how the same perceptual/referential item can potentiate many routes toward multiple referents. Symbols are capable of combining with other symbols under various contexts or circumstances to lead interpreters toward different nodes of meaning using the same original unit. Indeed, the personalized flexibility of the modern symbolic arts relies on this unique set of traits of symbolic units: symbols can be arbitrary, conventionalized, contextualized, yet readily learned.

For such chains to gain currency, they must occur within an implicitly agreed upon⁶⁵ field that permits multi-leveled, multi-directional, nested sign play. In a nod to Goodman—as well as Steven Pinker, who briefly spotlights Goodman’s concept of replete art in *How the Mind Works*⁶⁶—I posit this as the *replete aesthetic field* (RAF). RAFs trade coding transparency and semantic constraint for nested formal impacts and semantic⁶⁷ abundance. The aim of artists investing in RAFs is not achieving Aristotelian *claritas* as straightforwardly and efficiently as possible. Without a binding commitment to transparent rhetoric and one-to-one meaning correspondences, this zone of aesthetic transaction licenses

⁶⁴ “Nelson Goodman’s Aesthetics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3.1, “Modes of Reference,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/#ModRef>. All italics and quotes in original.

⁶⁵ Basically, an author/reader contract of mutual understanding that this is how things are going to occur in this text.

⁶⁶ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), 544. For further discussion (and some defense) of Pinker’s infamous Cheesecake Theory of Art, see the following chapter.

⁶⁷ I use “semantic” here and throughout in the broader sense of the study of meaning generally, be it meaning derived through language, logic, or other means; and not in the narrower linguistic sense of word meanings only.

the use of virtually any sensory stimuli, which can reliably emerge from the formal cues of a text, to negotiate meaning. These cues, independently or in virtually any conceivable combination, can work to generate, reinforce, contradict, or comment upon the artwork's more automatically registered semantic structures: i.e. those generated through more explicit first-order levels of linguistic, mimetic, narrativistic, or thematic cues. As Pinker puts it, in a replete work of art,

none of the features can be ignored or casually altered; any insight might have been deliberately crafted by the artist. Goodman calls this property of art "repleteness."

A good artist takes advantage of repleteness and puts every aspect of the medium to good use. She might as well do so. She already has the eye and ear of the audience, and the work, having no practical function, does not have to meet any demanding mechanical specifications; every part is up for grabs. [...]

A skillful use of repleteness impresses us not only by evoking a pleasurable feeling through several channels at once. Some of the parts are anomalous at first, and in resolving the anomaly we discover for ourselves the clever ways the artist shaped the different parts of the medium to do the same things. [...] In solving the puzzles, the audience is led to pay attention to an ordinarily inconspicuous part of the medium, and the desired effect is reinforced. This insight comes from Arthur Koestler's tour de force on creativity *The Act of Creation*.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Pinker, *Mind*, 544–5.

Granted, Pinker's insinuations about the "clever" artisan crafting an ingenious puzzle-artifact, which is otherwise devoid of all practical utility, should strike artists and critics alike as flippant if not dismissive. Brusque remarks like this oversimplify the rich, recursive, PECMA processes that must unfold on both sides of the creative equation—in the minds of textmaker and text-interpreter—when a replete aesthetic is being delivered or accessed. Forgiving this, the remainder of his remarks are discerning.

Pinker shines good light on the operational functions, and potential values, of the RAF. Freed of meeting mechanical specifications or relying on a rigidly fixed decryption method for meaning-making, artists can furnish their RAFs with stimulus-rich designs of meaning-making. Inside such a zone, any or all of an artwork's formal features can become hypercharged with semantic significance, *in addition to* supplying first-order semantics, *in addition to* supplying purely sensory values. Thus, the RAF accommodates a meaning-making process that could unfold through multiple, possibly parallel channels of sense data. This unfolding could be in sync with more automatic, natural, serial reading/viewing rhythms, or out of sync with them. Exploring the full implications of an RAF usually demands close attention to, and possibly multiple contacts with, an artwork.

Pinker's puzzle-solving analogy is also noteworthy. While it can sound trivializing at first blush, the human mind-brain's capacity for puzzling through problem-solution scenarios is no trifling matter—in art or the real world. This puzzle-solution/hidden-surprise dynamic of second-order symbolic art will be taken up at some length in the "peekaboo" component in the biopoetics chapter. What can be said here is that all this componentry of the RAF makes for a unique zone of human experience and meaning-making. A zone that can be once intoxicating and insatiably creative, challenging and problematic.

Goodman would probably agree that the skillful exploitation of the RAF is, in fact, one path to “good” art. If we don’t want to go that far, we might venture that the more replete the aesthetic field, the more complex, cognitively demanding, and thus “richer” an artwork might become. At least in terms of its formal-aesthetic or semantic values. The presence of a replete aesthetic seems to signal, if nothing else, that we are decisively within the zones of *art* experience, as opposed to some other kind of experience or mode of information processing. It also seems fair to conjecture that many canonical works of poetry, literature, film, and other media exploit and innovate the parameters of the RAF and the meaning potentials that can derive from it.

Crucially, it is only by virtue of what we might call *the safety of the simulacrum* that such a zone of communication and aesthetic experience could possibly emerge within the grander dramas of evolution, in the winner-take-all games of nature, so proverbially red in tooth and claw. The dynamics of second-order symbolism and RAFs, after all, do not seem to readily promote an organism’s inclusive fitness. At least not in any straightforward way. Their processes are slow to unfold, their products deliberately ambiguated. They commandeer a mind-brain’s finite cognitive-emotional resources to grapple with worlds, minds, and ideas that are aggressively *not there* in any ontic biological sense of spacetime. They ask us to draw sense from multi-channel data streams loaded with semantic units which may (or may not) be polyvalent, not to mention deliberately obscured. Such a dynamic commands a peculiar kind of mental acrobatics and thus a special mental architecture. It also demands certain conditions of material reality and socioeconomic security.

That mental architecture must allow our bodies and brains to bracket certain practical realities of survival for a set amount of time, to delay the biological imperatives of body

maintenance and genetic reproduction that impinge on daily life—all in order to indulge in elaborate simulations and symbolic play. Such an architecture probably involves multilevel recruitment of the human mind-brain's sophisticated memory systems, its mastering of M-representations, its specialties for enabling play behavior, and other neurocognitive and physical specifications. Materially and socioeconomically, human societies must also achieve a minimum level of safety and leisure time to properly indulge, formalize, or propagate second-order symbolic art in the RAF. In short, we must be *safe enough* in the real world before we can confect, and fully enjoy, simulations that incur such a heavy cognitive tax.

It is quite possible that the faculties enabling such mental acrobatics are essential to *any* art act, *any* speech act, *any* act of mental imagining. However, second-order symbolic art in the RAF, it seems, calls for a special or intense deployment of such faculties.

Under the terminological apparatus set forth at this point, we might consider Kubrick's mysterious moving mailbox a good candidate for a second-order symbol, or an indirect referential complex. It is a formal element that in this case *literally* crisscrosses through the director's replete aesthetic fields, giving rise to chains of implicit associational meanings. Aesthetic repleteness arises through Kubrick's distinctive style and mode of filmmaking: his exacting framing compositions and lighting that stress a rich *mise-en-scène*, pacing and camerawork that invite spectators to pay close attention to those compositions, and dialogue and acting that are charged with enigmatic doubled significance. Critically, it is an implied contract between textmaker and text-interpreter that sanctions the existence of a replete aesthetic and authorizes any second-order readings of indirect referential complexes planted within those aesthetic fields. Such contracts are enforced upon a (mostly tacit) agreement that a text presented is a fiction or, perhaps more importantly, an "art" text. We

would not, to take an extreme counterexample, enter into such a contract upon viewing a real-world altercation recorded by the dashboard camera of a police car. No replete aesthetic there.

In further consideration of this notion of aesthetic repleteness in art texts, the work of film scholar David Bordwell bears some relevance. In his now-canonical article “Art Film as a Mode of Film Practice” (1979),⁶⁹ Bordwell provides further theoretical terrain for getting at the bones of what second-order signification entails and how it operates in a replete aesthetic, specifically within the narrative “art film.” Bordwell’s theories are delivered with admirable clarity, concrete language, and a less abstruse conceptual apparatus. They are less technically overbearing than Barthes’ semiotics, less pedantic and circuitously organized than Goodman’s philosophically hairsplitting theories of reference and symbol, and more pragmatic in his film-centric interpretive impulse (what Bordwell himself calls a mid-level analytical criticism that sits between theory and explication). He effectively brings the stilted world of “second-order implicit reference complexes” back down to earth. And, significantly, Bordwell theorizes an “art” cinema constituted by simultaneous “realism” and “expressive” authorial intrusions, a configuration that tracks closely with my notion of symbolic realism. The main difference, in fact, might come down to my wider scoping of the mode to fit any medium useful for creating an aesthetically minded narrative: i.e. not just film, but print,

⁶⁹ David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism* 4, no.1 (Fall 1979): 56–64. Reprinted (among other places) in Bordwell, *Poetics*, 151–170, with afterword; page numbers refer to this print.

painting, other visual media, opera, gaming narratives, etc.⁷⁰ A principal aim of Bordwell's article is to direct attention to a filmmaker's signatures—be they overt or covert—and other formal markers that should press audiences to sit up and take note. Most of these signals are transmitted via strategic deviations from or violations of a narrative mode's learned conventions of realism. In the Afterword he appends to the article's 2008 reprinting in *Poetics of Cinema*, Bordwell bemoans his lack of nuance and overambitious totalizing in some of his original writing: e.g. he second-guesses his use of “deviations” and “violations” as proper descriptors for the art cinema's distinctive formal traits and methods of authorial marking, lest these art-cinema techniques get construed only as comparative, reactive, marginal, non-normative, and transgressive. Nonetheless, his core ideas are sustained by their cogency and lucid presentation, and they are worth quoting at some length here:

The art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. On the one hand, the art cinema defines itself as a realistic cinema. It will show us real locations [...] and real problems [...] and “realistic”—that is, psychologically complex—characters. Yet at the same time, the art cinema foregrounds the author as a structure in the film's system. Not that the author is represented as a biographical individual (although some art films [...] solicit confessional readings), but rather the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our

⁷⁰ The modes and genres of discourse that pertain most readily to my questions, though widely distributed, are more circumscribed than what falls under some larger umbrellas of narrative studies. The Ohio State University's Project Narrative, for instance, “focuses on narrative in all of its guises, from everyday storytelling in face-to-face interaction, to oral history and autobiography, to films, graphic novels, and narratives associated with digital environments, to the complex narratives found in modern and postmodern fiction and poetry” (<https://projectnarrative.osu.edu/about/pn-mission>). Literal/informational genres like journalism or face-to-face interactions, aside from deliberate joke-making involving puns and double entendres perhaps, are not suited to my questions. However, these discourse traditions can by comparison offer useful parameters for thinking through how literary or aesthetically-minded narratives accommodate second-order symbolism, whereas non-literary, non-aesthetic modes of discourse patently do not.

comprehension. Over this hovers a notion that the art-film director has a creative freedom denied to her/his Hollywood counterpart. Within this frame of reference, the author is the textual force “who” communicates (what is the film saying?) and “who” expresses (what is the artist’s personal vision?). [...] The art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text.

[...]

Several conventions operate here. The competent viewer watches the film expecting not order in the narrative but stylistic signatures in the narration: technical touches (Truffaut’s freeze frames, Antonioni’s pans) and obsessive motifs (Bunuel’s anticlericalism, Fellini’s shows, Bergman’s character names). The film also offers itself as a chapter in an oeuvre. This strategy becomes especially apparent in the convention of the multi-film work.

[...]

A small industry is devoted to informing viewers of such authorial marks. International film festivals, reviews and essays in the press, published scripts, film series, career retrospectives, and film education all introduce viewers to authorial codes. What is essential is that the art film be read as the work of an expressive individual. It is no accident, then, that the *politique de auteurs* arose in the wake of the art cinema.

[...]

How does the author come forward in the film? [...] Narrational marks can betray the authorial code in the classical text, chiefly through gaps in

motivation. In the art-cinema text, the authorial code manifests itself as recurrent violations of the classical norm. Deviations from the classical canon—an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement, an unrealistic shift in lighting or setting—in short any breakdown of the motivation of cinematic space and time by cause-effect logic—can be read as “authorial commentary.”

[...]

Realism and authorial expressivity, then, will be the means whereby the art film unifies itself. Yet these means now seem contradictory. Verisimilitude, objective or subjective, is inconsistent with an intrusive author. The surest signs of authorial intelligibility [e.g. the flashforward, the doubled scene, color filters] are the least capable of realistic justification. Contrariwise, to push the realism of psychological uncertainty to its limit is to invite a haphazard text in which the author’s shaping hand would not be visible. In short, a realist aesthetic and an expressionist aesthetic are hard to merge.⁷¹

Bordwell enunciates several key terms and observations I will revisit throughout this project: e.g. the authorial codes, commentaries, intrusions, personal visions, and shaping hands that emerge within an otherwise mimetic linear world of representational verisimilitude; the cottage industries and critical communities that grow up around these texts and that remain essential for explicating their codes and visions to uninitiated audiences; and the tensions created by a mode of art that strives for both transparency and opaqueness, that seeks appeal

⁷¹ Bordwell, “Art Cinema,” 151–55.

to its audience through a double-forked approach of realism and imaginative personal expression.

Following these passages, Bordwell identifies “the device of ambiguity” as the art cinema’s solution for merging the contradictory poetic impulses of realism and expressivity. He stresses how art cinema presents the spectator with deviations from classical norms—i.e. stylistic conventions forged throughout the history of mainstream Hollywood continuity narratives—leaving audiences to puzzle over gaps and problems not readily motivated by a straightforward, linear, mimetic realism. These ambiguous deviations must then be “resituated” by the spectator as either: “realism (in life things happen this way) or authorial commentary (the ambiguity is symbolic).”⁷² Of primary interest to me is the second kind of reconciling or “resituating” of a text’s ambiguous cues: the symbolic authorial intrusion. Applying this simple algorithm to the case of Kubrick’s moving mailbox, we are liable to conclude that its odd perambulations around New York and its seductive graffiti are not solely motivated by a strict realism; in turn, symbolic authorial commentary gains justification.

Posing concrete interpretative procedures like this sets Bordwell apart from other hermeneutical theorists who might shy away from programmatic prescriptions for reading art texts. And while there is some danger in promoting procedural routines, of sliding down a slippery slope and inculcating students with some monolithic Right Recipe for Reading, Bordwell’s motives are pure and his heuristics broad yet productive. Audiences and students who long for some practical guidance in making sense and meaning out of ambiguous art texts, in working out the invisible decoder keys for enigmatic art narratives, will find Bordwell’s patterns of inquiry and interpretational tactics invaluable. While trained toward

⁷² Bordwell, “Art Cinema,” 156.

works of cinema, his templates are easily applicable to any narrative created in a symbolic-realist mode, film or otherwise:

The art film solicits a particular reading procedure: Whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation. (Is a character's mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we're thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being "said" here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision. Whatever is excessive in one category must belong to another. Uncertainties persist but are understood as such, as obvious uncertainties, so to speak. Put crudely, the slogan of the art cinema might be, "When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity."

[For instance], we can read any scene's color scheme in two registers simultaneously: as psychological verisimilitude (Giulietta sees her life as a desert) or as authorial commentary (Antonioni-as-narrator says that this industrial landscape is a desert.)⁷³

The aside on how an art text should "ideally" hesitate between his tri-poles of meaning (character psychology, life in general, and authorial vision) may strike some as a bit doctrinaire. Considering his retrospective regrets about some aspects of this article, it is easy to imagine Bordwell deleting or rephrasing this line in a new draft. Despite this or any other minor points of contention, Bordwell's interpretational staircase here is an effective vehicle for carrying text-interpreters from the ground floors of first-order apprehension of texts toward the golden penthouses of deep second-order understanding. (This is shameless

⁷³Bordwell, "Art Cinema," 156.

hyperbole and mawkish metaphor. Keats's realms of gold were clearly circling in my mind—but these stairs lead to at least a nice four-star mezzanine level.)

Filtered through my terminological lenses, Bordwell's *simultaneous registers* of meaning demonstrate how texts created within the art-cinema mode (and by extension similar modes of written narrative) compel their interpreters to construe those texts concurrently at first- and second-order levels of signification. The second-order level operates above and beyond what is more informally, automatically, or intuitively registered at the first-order, denotative, obvious levels. It is a level that can leave a text-interpreter in flux, hesitant and uncertain, and yet vaguely cognizant of an intellectual potentiality, an interpretative richness, a poetic horizon not yet reached. Interpreters are left to interrogate these kinds of texts using their wits about how life and the world itself operates, but also how this “artified” text might be communicating in some special or unorthodox ways. They might be compelled to consult external sources (criticism and commentary, series and retrospectives, oeuvres) as well as internal formal cues (recalling parts of the text that could give indication how we are supposed to get at its meaning, possibly using norms and methods of decoding that are outside of, and possibly contrary to, conventional praxes of construing texts created in the classical realist or more straightforward vernacular modes). Rereading or re-watching, sometimes at a slower pace, may also be obliged: “second-order signs demand second reads” could be a useful apothegm here.

In another keystone of film theory, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Bordwell plants himself deeper in the soils of the implied, subtextual, second-order registers of meaning invoked by art-mode texts. By way of introduction, he profitably recalls the “classic hermeneutic division between *ars intellegendi*,

the art of understanding, and *ars explicandi*, the art of explaining,” a conceptual distinction also parsed as “comprehending” versus “interpreting” a text.⁷⁴ Bordwell then begins to sow the hermeneutic soil in which I wish to grow my biopoetics of symbol. He cites a resonant definition by Paul Ricoeur, who designates interpretation as “the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.”⁷⁵ From here, Bordwell posits that “comprehension is concerned with apparent, manifest, or direct meanings, while interpretation is concerned with revealing hidden, nonobvious meanings.”⁷⁶ Another resonant invocation comes via citation of Dudley Andrew’s “contrast between a film’s structured and ‘grammatical’ transmission of a message (literal meaning) and the transgressive ‘derailing’ of clear meaning (figuration).”⁷⁷ Bordwell’s subsequent passage is, again, worth quoting in full:

To speak of *hidden* meanings, *levels* of meaning, and *revealing* meanings evokes the dominant framework within which critics understand interpretation. The artwork or text is taken to be a container into which the artist has stuffed meanings for the perceiver to pull out. Alternatively, an archeological analogy treats the text as having strata, with layers or deposits of meaning that must be excavated. In either case, comprehension and interpretation are assumed to open up the text, penetrate its surfaces, and bring meanings to light. As Frank Kermode puts it: “The modern critical tradition,

⁷⁴ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 2.

⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Joseph Bleicher (London: Routledge, 1980), 245. Cited in Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 2.

⁷⁶ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 2.

⁷⁷ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 277. Bordwell is referencing Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

for all its variety, has one continuous element, the search for occulted sense in texts of whatever period.⁷⁸

This impulse to “search for the occulted sense in texts” by uncovering hidden levels of meaning commands some special attention, historicizing, and explanation. In my view, any such history and explanation today remains incomplete without some deference to the most recent scientific findings and speculations at our disposal regarding how the human mind-brain has evolved to learn and manage symbolic structures, narrative structures, imaginative-aesthetic structures, and meaning more generally. The following chapters are mostly attempts to do this.

In addition to stabilizing some of this technical vocabulary, citing the aforementioned passages from Barthes, Goodman, and Bordwell at such length I hope begins to demonstrate a foundational premise this project assumes: any biopoetics of the symbol cannot be framed without recourse to some dialectic of the literal and figurative, denotative and connotative, implicit and explicit, hidden and revealed, masked and unmasked; or to some other metaphor of layered strata, surface versus subterranean levels of meaning, or multiple registers of polysemous signification. As coarsely imprecise and analogical as these conceptual frames might be, they remain compulsory to understanding any narrative perched within a symbolic-realist mode, and possibly to any modern narrative at all. Bordwell, like so many critics before and contemporaneous with him, does not hesitate to use them.

Another pivotal element of Bordwell’s hermeneutics that should receive mention here is his emphasis on the audience’s role in the triangulated dynamic of textmaker, text, and text-receiver: “comprehending and interpreting a literary text, a painting, a play, or a film constitutes an activity in which the perceiver plays a central role.” Citing what art historian

⁷⁸Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 2. Author’s italics.

E.H. Gombrich calls the “beholder’s share” in construing a text’s meaning, Bordwell integrates some basic concepts of cognitive psychology to stress the mutually reinforcing, interpenetrating mental processing attendant upon comprehending and interpreting a text:

Understanding is mediated by transformative acts, both “bottom-up”—mandatory, automatic psychological processes—and “top-down”—conceptual, strategic ones. The sensory data of the film [or text] at hand furnish the materials out of which inferential processes of perception and cognition build meanings. Meanings are not found but made.

Comprehension and interpretation thus involve the *construction* of meaning out of textual cues. [...] The perceiver is not a passive receiver of data but an active mobilizer of structures and processes (either “hard-wired” or learned) which enable her to search for information relevant to the task and data at hand.⁷⁹

The bottom-up/top-down cognitive mechanics that drive meaning-making are incidentally an echo of the fox-hedgehog schema presented in the Preface.⁸⁰ More important to note are the top-down structures and processes Bordwell postulates for enabling a text-interpreter to identify relevant data and cues for mining deeper meaning in art texts. These structures and processes amount to schematics and procedures that, for Bordwell, might be hard-wired/natural or learned/enculturated. Whether afforded by nature or nurture, without them in place, text-interpreters are quarantined to the more automatized, passive, first-order precincts of meaning construction. With them in place, a text-interpreter is empowered to climb toward our proverbial second-level mezzanines of meaning.

⁷⁹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 3.

⁸⁰ Various sections of the Preface present my own conceptual integrations of top-down/bottom-up processes as related to higher-order cognition, text apprehension, and disciplinary epistemologies.

Furthermore, the recursive bottom-up/top-down pattern of mind Bordwell posits is recognized as fundamental in driving each tier of the theorist's four-tiered interpretative taxonomy: 1) referential, 2) explicit, 3) implicit, and 4) symptomatic/repressed/involuntary. The foci of my inquiries circulate within the third orbit of Bordwell's hermeneutic solar system: the implicit. To construct such implicit meanings, the following interpretative procedures are prompted:

The spectator may seek to construct implicit meanings when she cannot find a way to reconcile an anomalous element with a referential or explicit aspect of the work; or the "symbolic impulse" may be brought in to warrant the hypothesis that any element, anomalous or not, may serve as the basis of implicit meanings. Furthermore, the critic may take implicit meaning to be consistently, at some level, with the referential and explicit meanings assigned to the work.⁸¹

It is precisely this "symbolic impulse" which invites deeper biocultural explanations. From where does that impulse derive? How and why do art texts put that impulse on high display? What is the ultimate use or good of it?

However one slices it, then, the realm of the symbolic impulse—and the density of effect and meaning afforded by narratives that tap into that impulse—will remain the focus of my gaze. For it is within this space where particularly interesting things happen: where complex chains of signifieds are derivable through some originary formal material of the text, which constitutes a fixed first-level signaling system that transmits a more intuitively derivable symbolic code on one level; but where authoritative directives for helping us to assign further points of correspondence are withheld or suppressed, where second-order

⁸¹ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 9.

connotative meanings cannot be confidently triangulated through formal dictionaries or explicit decoding reference manuals that could help us to firmly close up such open signifiers. In these cases, we witness an artist-encoder who provides little to no guidance to his audience of decoders, outside of what is provided through the formal structures of the encoded text itself. If guidance is provided, it is usually cloaked, indirect, surreptitious, held close to the vest. Methods for proper second-order decoding might have to be intuited, “taught” to us by the work itself, or indicated by the artist in channels outside the text. The interpreter is left to invent *ad hoc* on-the-fly inferential engines for interpreting salient cues from the textual environment, in order to tease out possible meanings that reside within indirect referential complexes. Why and how all this unfolds inside our brains and our culture is curious and complex. Its results are among the most compelling, distinctive, challenging, and pleasurable ways narrative art can create meaning, work on our imaginations, and engage us intellectually. Such questions, in my estimate, have not yet been satisfactorily answered or parsed out in the critical literature.

It should be stated that this realm of second-order complex reference is meant to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Rhetorical devices, formal patterns, tropes, figures of speech, and semantic structures of many kinds can initiate our entry into the kingdom of artistic symbol, since virtually any material unit of any text could be recruited for symbolic resonance. Thus, second-order symbols can be prompted through polysemy, homonymy, double entendre (by very definition), deliberate intended instances of ambiguity (whether disjunctive [either/or] or conjunctive [both/and]), filmic elements of *mise-en-scène*, soundscapes, techniques of lighting or cutting, and many more. Not inclusive of this realm would be unintended vagueness (due to sloppiness or errors on the part of the textmaker), as

well as completely unresolvable ambiguity (which begets no meaning at all). *Unless* such unresolvable vagueness is an *exemplification* (à la Goodman) of vagueness itself: that is, its presence functions intentionally as an embodiment of the concept itself, emerging from a premeditated formal construction that works on an audience to signify that vagueness is part of our world or human experience.

As many others before me have understood and articulated, one of the distinguishing features of representational art seems to be its fluid meaning parameters, which allow for, and indeed invite, polysemy and ambiguation to unfold its meanings. In contradistinction, the descriptive, informational, propositional, mind-to-fit-world⁸² symbolic discourses that we digest as “non-art” for lack of a better term—history, science, journalism (print, photo, and televisual), philosophy, criticism, applied mathematics, street maps, topological maps, engineering specs, reference materials and databases, instructional manuals, food recipes, to-do lists, etc.—while sharing certain family resemblances with their “artistic” brethren, are by nature oriented toward *disambiguation* of meaning. The overarching function of most of these first-order symbolic texts is to pin down, with efficient Aristotelian clarity, a map of tightly tethered one-to-one correspondences, usually by hewing to some strict codes of denotational conventions. Such symbolic structures, in other words, are made for and strive toward widely approved meanings that reside exclusively on those first-order levels of denotative meaning.⁸³

⁸² John Searle’s directions-of-fit (“mind-to-fit-world” and “world-to-fit-mind”) for linguistic propositions and mental representations are useful conceptual tools for thinking through some of the questions presented in this project. The capacity that imaginative narrative art has for going in both directions within the same text, and for creating multiple arrows of directions due its modeled world-making, is unusual; thus, these directions must sometimes be fussily sorted out if we wish to derive valid intended meanings from a text.

⁸³ In her work *Defending Science—Within Reason*, Susan Haack presents incisive distinctions between explicit, efficient, “putatively truth-stating” texts and implicit, aesthetic-associational, literary texts. Haack’s distinctions and ideas are cited and brought to bear later sections.

To elaborate this a bit further: if one is authoring medical reports, engineering specs for buildings, bureau reports for the AP, or docudramas of a real historical events, it will probably be in everyone's best interest to abstain from deploying a second-order symbologies. To insert an implicitly coded set of personalized symbols, to indulge in leisurely wordplays like double entendres or polysemous homographs, to pepper the text with un-notated intertextual allusions, to mythologize the text with a strategic overlay of allegorical correspondences, to inject any covertly placed symbolic overtures into one's text world—these would not just be odd or undesirable rhetorical choices. They could prove harmful, even lethal to people who come into direct contact with the real-world objects and event potentials these symbolic discourses refer back to. Would anyone choose to visit a neurologist who might intend an MRI scan in his lab report to act polysemously, as an elaboration of an gloriously imagined mythic world cooked up while on lunch break, perhaps photoshopped to better capture a color-coding system formulated by covert design: the reds signal the passion of Aphrodite, the yellows the lightning bolts of Zeus, the blues the water of Poseidon, the black the underworld of Hades. Sounds amusing, but I will take the literal-minded doctor who points me directly and unambiguously to any tumors, thank you.

On the other hand, one of the properties that can make the representational arts so endlessly fascinating, intently evocative, and often quite challenging is its allowance for those second-order meaning layers to shape the more imitative, informational, or conventionally representational layers of meanings that these art modes share with their discursive cousins. In order to make the right interpretive moves that adequately account for indirect referential complexes, interpreters of second-order signifying texts are asked to plug into the idiosyncratic frames of reference and decoder keys of an individual artist/text-maker:

to enlist our faculties for mind-melding with a specific author, in conjunction with our knowledge of the art-critical histories and meaning-making conventions of the artform at hand. These dynamics and standards of second-order meaning production/reception, in relation to the standards of other kinds of communicative activities and aesthetic experience, are distinct and special.

Moreover, they are not exactly “natural” in the way we might think of our natively learned oral languages. They can take some getting used to. They are advanced by skills that can be trained and developed, or at least interiorized through experience. And they occupy a realm that is lofty if one really thinks about it—“lofty” not in an elitist sense, but in the sense of indicating that there are some higher-order affective-cognitive functions and circuits at work. Efforts expended toward training our own interpretive eyes, toward developing interpretative skills in others, toward exposing students to the interpretative potentials of second-order symbologies will be highly repaid: the meanings of many modern artistic texts can turn on second-order signs and interpretative confirmers; and without knowledge and experience managing them, audiences can struggle to formulate strong valid interpretations of these intentionally created art products. To put it more severely, without a finely tuned

sensitivity to and awareness of these possibilities, and without a set of useful interpretative strategies to cope with them, gross miscarriages of interpretive justice can result.⁸⁴

Whether or not *second-order symbol* and *indirect referential complex* are in the end the very best terms for denoting the scope and object of my study will be a matter of debate. Sometimes they feel perfectly approachable and precise, other times stilted and woolly. The nomenclatures and their boundaries might be too exacting or pedantic for some, dismally fuzzy or incomprehensive to others. To clarify those bounds further, in addition to the appropriations and fusions of Barthes' semiotics, Goodman's symbolistics, and Bordwell's interpretative schemas, I will borrow liberally from thinkers in a variety of fields to build out the semiological and narratological dimensions of this universe of second-order symbolistics: e.g. Terrence Deacon's reappraisals of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, Seymour Chatman's narratologies of film and literary art, Gérard Genette's taxonomies of transtextuality. I coin or hybridize terms when necessary in attempt to connect up the complex interwoven architectonics of symbolism, narrative, interpretation, aesthetics, and our evolved mind-brains.

⁸⁴ Vying for interpretive justice of symbolic art might strike some as trivial in a world of social injustices, of global warming, terrorism, environmental degradation, political corruption, dangerous levels of socioeconomic inequality, etc. But it is certainly important to the art world, most consumers of that art, not to mention the cottage industries of critical commentary built upon our art products. That would also be to argue that art is trivial, in and of itself and in obtaining little to no influential relationship whatsoever with the conditions and problems of our current, past, or future worlds. Aside from the multiple functions of art and how it can make us think about and interact in the real world in real ways, the more specific skills and practices one needs to conduct deep, well-refined, valid interpretations (at any level of text, first-order or otherwise) can certainly be applied to other textual practices, besides art creation and interpretation, which can in turn have direct bearings on social practices, with some potential to change those practices incrementally or otherwise. In short, the "lofty" concerns of second-order symbolic art interpretation are not just matters of intellectual Onanism or English-class B.S. or a soft-psych therapeutic technique for nurturing one's inner creative child. They can, if one wishes, be connected back up to "real problems" of humanity—although doing so certainly risks sapping, or giving short shrift to, the many other pleasurable syrups of the second-order cognitive-aesthetic experience.

Shortcomings conceded, *second-order symbolism* and the *indirect referential complex* form the terminological platform I use to erect an evolutionary-cognitive conceptual framework for exploring the following foundational questions:

- Why and to what ends would some textmakers, specifically narrative artists, choose to deploy devices of second-order symbolism and indirect referential complexes?
- What are the cognitive advantages and disadvantages of engaging in an open-ended, or at least elusive and obliquely decodable, signification process whose combinatorial possibilities for meaning could remain theoretically unlimited?
- How do the cognitive mechanisms of the evolved human mind-brain enable, constrain, or otherwise contribute to second-order symbolic processes of meaning-making?
- How are these symbol-producing/symbol-reading ev-cog mechanisms implicated in the larger replete aesthetics of meaning-exchange ecologies that emerge in the artistic transaction between textmaker, text, and text-interpreter—an ecology that must account for: an artist’s intentions and intended effects, biographical life history, and cultural capital; a text’s embodied structure and that structure’s capacity for enacting the artist’s intended effects through its configurations of meaning-making conventions and cues; and a reader’s expectations, life history, interpretative skillsets, and cultural capital?

A fresh, scientifically inflected approach to such questions is overdue. New insights are developing at breakneck pace across the cognitive sciences, evolutionary social science, psycholinguistics, bioanthropology, complex-systems studies, decision-making science,

neurophilosophy, neuroaesthetics, and other border fields that investigate relations between the human brain, behavior, and our behavioral ecologies. Recent positive developments within the humanities—evidenced by burgeoning (though still marginalized) evolutionary and cognitive niches in literature, film, philosophy, and religious studies—signal that these fields are becoming incrementally if falteringly more open to combining, in more rigorous and intellectually honest ways, the best of Jerome Kagan’s three cultures: the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.⁸⁵ Thus, the time seems ripe for a biopoetics of symbolism to be synthesized, or at least reconnaissanced. This project gestures toward that end, setting out on an interdisciplinary, ev-cog, biocultural sortie for thinking through how and why some aesthetic narrative texts can impart meaning through second-order symbolic devices.

Whetting the Symbolic Appetite: An Interpretive Amuse-Bouche

In the following section, a few partial explications are performed as quick-and-dirty illustrations of second-order symbologies at work. Texts are drawn from fiction, film, visual art, popular entertainment, and personal experience.

In Ernest Hemingway’s “The Three Day Blow,” written in 1924 and published as part of his 1925 *In Our Time* cycle, a pre-war teenage Nick Adams hunkers down in a cabin in the Michigan woods to wait out a fall storm with his friend Bill. Among the topics broached during the young men’s desultory, whiskey-fueled, fireside chats are favorite books. Bill asks

⁸⁵ Jerome Kagan, *The Three Cultures: Natural Science, Social Science, and the Humanities in the 21st Century—Revisiting C.P. Snow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). As his subtitle indicates, Kagan revisits and revises the usual two-dimensional divide we inherited from C.P. Snow with some useful updates and advisories.

Nick (aka Wemedge) if he has read Maurice Hewlitt's *The Forest Lovers*, a turn-of-the-century courtly romance set in medieval times, prompting the following exchange:

"Did you read the *Forest Lovers*?"

"Yup, that's the one where they go to bed every night with the naked sword between them."

"That's a good book, Wemedge."

"It's a swell book. What I couldn't ever understand was what good the sword would do. It would have to stay edge up all the time because if it went over flat you could roll right over it and it wouldn't make any trouble."

"It's a symbol," Bill said.

"Sure," said Nick. "But it isn't practical."

"Did you ever read *Fortitude*?"⁸⁶

Readers, especially those uninitiated into the stylistic and thematic worlds of Hemingway and his High Modernist contemporaries, might be tempted to skate over this detail of intertextual allusion as breezily as Nick and Bill do. A perfunctory piece of dialogue, one could surmise. Just a private autobiographical reference to one of Hemingway's own favorite boyhood reads perhaps. Or a detail of scene that functions straightforwardly to paint out the drunken literary ramblings of two novice readers, sketching out "real" identifiable characters and moving the plot-action along. But ultimately a throwaway line.

These suppositions might all prove true of Hemingway's creative process and intentions, and they yield legitimate reader responses that precipitate an adequate first-impression grasp of the story's first-order narrative structures. But stopping there is not

⁸⁶ Ernest Hemingway, "The Three Day Blow," *In Our Time*, 1925 (New York: Scribner, 2003), 43. Page references here forward are for the 2003 printing of the first Scribner trade paperback edition.

enough. Copping too cavalier an interpretative stance risks overlooking skeins of latent signifying energies. It ignores, for instance, this crucial literary-historical fact: *In Our Time* is a short-story collection that, as Linda Wagner-Martin reminds, was “influenced by Joyce’s *Dubliners*”⁸⁷ and written by a young author being mentored by Ezra Pound.⁸⁸ Like Joyce’s own breakthrough work, and like much of Pound’s compressive Imagism and intensely allusionistic poetry, Hemingway’s cycle resonates with a numinous charge of submerged implicit meanings, derivable only from the most muted, minimalized surface action and dialogue. Referring to the cycle’s culminating story, “Big Two-Hearted River,” Wagner-Martin properly observes that “almost nothing happens on the surface but palpable subsurface tensions keep the reader riveted.”⁸⁹ The same could be said for nearly every story and vignette of *In Our Time* to some degree or another. “Three Day Blow” is no exception.

Under light of even a few limited extratextual and intertextual observations such as these, Nick’s ostensibly throwaway remark about the impractical symbolic sword looks very different. Its coils start to glow red, charged with a sly self-reflexivity. It transforms into a metafictional aside that commentates on literary symbolism itself. Having Nick, Hemingway’s fictional surrogate, say this, the author seems to grant us license to construe the passage as a shibboleth keying us in to Nick’s (and thus Hemingway’s own) developing sense of what a viable modern symbolic technique looks like in narrative fiction. Nick’s seemingly intuitive preference for the “practical” symbol undoubtedly echoes Hemingway’s own intentions⁹⁰ at the time he was writing the *In Our Time* stories: to shape a distinct, sophisticated yet deceptively simple, prose style that would integrate the most innovative principles and best

⁸⁷ *A Historical Guide to Hemingway*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin, Introduction by Wagner-Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29.

⁸⁸ *A Historical Guide to Hemingway*, 4.

⁸⁹ *A Historical Guide to Hemingway*, 29. Note the author’s choices of metaphoric descriptors here: “subsurface,” “palpable,” etc.

⁹⁰ The elusive concept of intention is taken up periodically in later sections of this dissertation.

qualities of his generation's literary avant-garde. In readerly retrospect—and perhaps only after multiple close readings of this passage, this story, and the collection itself—we sense how this evanescent exchange of dialogue might be intended to work as more than mere scene development or autobiographical nostalgia. It works as: 1) a literary manifesto writ small, a metafictional credo stipulating and justifying Hemingway's preference for the practical symbol; and 2) as a gloss that can teach us how to read the *In Our Time* cycle in the most profitable way possible. In a compelling performance of *meta-symbolics*, Nick's rejoinder obliquely yet crisply *symbolizes the symbolic principles* of Hemingway, or at least Hemingway's implied author.⁹¹

As for the living breathing Hemingway, in a 1954 interview with *Time* magazine, well after the heady days of expatriate Paris and the Roaring Twenties when *In Our Time* was first circulating, he quipped about his attitudes toward proper symbolic technique: "No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in. That kind of symbol sticks out like raisins in raisin bread. Raisin bread is all right, but plain bread is better."⁹² At first blush, this kind of unmediated, organic, found-object method of arriving at second-order symbolic devices, which Hemingway advocates here, seems less like deliberate strategy and more like unconscious serendipitous happenstance: an aesthetically lucrative but unintended consequence at best, an afterthought at worst. But there are a number of reasons to not press the panic button and eject the hypothesis of early-Hemingway's symbology of the practical. First, it is always possible that an artist's philosophies and attitudes about certain craft techniques can transform over a career: perhaps

⁹¹ I use *implied author* in the sense of Chatman, Chapter 5, "In Defense of the Implied Author" *Coming to Terms*.

⁹² "An American Storyteller," *Time* 64, no. 24, Dec. 13, 1951, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,27803-1,00.html>.

Hemingway's views of symbolism had changed in the thirty-year interval since the publication of *In Our Time*. Second, it is equally plausible that, under interview duress, Hemingway was simply doing his best to skirt the topic: reticent to tip his hand or reveal proprietary tricks of the writerly trade, he was creating interference through a handy if rather anemic analogy. (One wonders if he was looking at a loaf of bread behind the interviewer at the time, à la Keyser Söze in *The Usual Suspects*.) In a letter also written in 1954, Hemingway confesses and justifies that very reluctance. After surviving a double plane crash in Uganda earlier that year, here he is explaining his reasons for initially declining an interview with George Plimpton:

My temper is a little bad from a slight surfeit of pain. I truly never mean to be rude ever but...I cannot talk like Forster, nor Graham Greene, nor [Irwin] Shaw and I might say fuck the Art of Fiction [though] what I would really mean was fuck talking about it. Let us practice it and shut up.... My experience has been that when a writer talks about himself and his work except with his girl or other writers or to try to straighten kids out with whatever you know that can help them he is usually through, or a poseur or more or less a pompous ass.⁹³

His raisin-bread comment might just be another way of saying, "How about we shut the fuck up about writing and just write. Let me alone so I can bake my literary breads however I choose, with raisins or without."

But even bracketing these plausible scenarios, the author's late-life observation still connects up reasonably well with the practical-symbol model the younger Hemingway seems

⁹³ Joel Whitney, "George Plimpton and Papa in Cuba," *Guernica: A Magazine of Global Arts and Politics*, online, Jan. 2, 2017, <https://www.guernicamag.com/george-plimpton-and-papa-in-cuba/>. Brackets not mine.

to espouse through Nick's proxy. No matter how, when, or where symbols might emerge during the writing process, they still do emerge. And importantly they must never "stick out." That is fundamentally another way of saying that second-order symbols should be *practical*: they should originate directly out of, or at least blend seamlessly into, the narrative fabric's primary warps and woofs of imitative action, authentic dialogue, and emotional-psychological verisimilitude. Hemingway's iceberg analogy provides some further testimony here: "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story."⁹⁴ This now well-rehearsed analogy was articulated, incidentally, during his late-life intercourses with Plimpton, whom Hemingway would eventually befriend and grant interview access. It is not clear whether the "underwater" elements Hemingway was thinking about here are narratological, psychological, historical, symbolical, some or all of the above. But what they absolutely indicate is the author's conscious, principled awareness of the submerged properties in his fiction.

This hypothesis, of Hemingway's practical symbolisms, gains further force within the broader literary heritage of the short story and its social/formal functions as a generic form. As short-fiction theorists like Graham Good, Robert Marler, and Charles May have pointed out, "the whole history of the development of the short story can be seen as the constant interplay between the exemplary nature of the story and its 'realistic' presentation of

⁹⁴ Whitney, "Plimpton and Papa in Cuba."

characters in time with a consciousness of their own.”⁹⁵ The historical trajectory of the short-story form can be roughly traced as moving from its overtly universal/typological traditions of myth and fable; to a more mimetic form cataloguing ordinary events and sometimes ephiphanic psycho-social realities, focalized through more individualized authorial or narrational perspectives; and further toward the surrealisms, magical realisms, and other kinds of experimental hybrid forms seen in contemporary short fiction. High watermarks in the important transition from the myth/fable tradition to the worldly/realist program of modern literature happened in figures like Boccaccio, Poe, Melville, Chekhov, and Joyce, to name a few. Changing material-economic conditions were, to be sure, also influential vectors of these generic transformations. Despite these shifting landscapes, however, the form never entirely rejected its affinity for and responsiveness to prompting meaning through universalism, conceptualism, tokenism, allegorism, and (wait for it) symbolism.

An interesting hermeneutic twist emerges from these diverging yet re-converging poetic energies, energies that were particularly active in the artistic ferment of Hemingway’s early career. As May asserts, “when the form eschews supernaturalism and rejects symbols not at first functional in the story’s natural order, these two forces conspire to push meaning beneath the surface where because of its indistinctness, it gives the impression of being inexplicable.”⁹⁶ Here again we meet our motifs of the inexplicable, the indistinct, the conceptual impression submerged beneath a story’s more naturalized order. The upshot is that the short story remains today more than ever “a paradoxical form which cuts off a fragment of reality in such a way that the fragment acts like an explosion that opens up a

⁹⁵ *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles May, Introduction, Charles May (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), xxiii.

⁹⁶ May, *The New Short Story Theories*, xxiii.

more ample reality.”⁹⁷ Here again we also have our motifs of explosion, of ampleness, of partial fragmented realities opening up toward greater realities. Symbolism like that found in much of Hemingway’s best short fiction played lead roles in effecting and promoting this compression-explosion dynamic. Such notions further underwrite the principles at work in the blended generic mode I call symbolic realism (and that, in the cinema, Bordwell calls “art film”).

Circling back to “Three-Day Blow,” a reader sufficiently convinced of Hemingway’s practical symbologies, as per the self-reflexive symbolic swordplay of Nick and Bill, can now entertain other second-order implications that might be waiting discovery in its passages. For instance, what is the potential intertextual significance, if any, of Hewlitt’s *The Forest Lovers*, to say nothing of *Fortitude* and the works of Walpole and Chesterton, who Nick and Bill reference in a later exchange? Glimpsing only the first line of the Hewlitt novel, we see this intertext may indeed shimmer with some apposite thematic resonances: “My story will take you into times and spaces alike rude and uncivil. Blood will be spilt, virgins suffer distresses; the horn will sound through woodland glades; dogs, wolves, deer, and men, Beauty and the Beasts, will tumble each other, seeking life or death with their proper tools. There should be mad work, not devoid of entertainment.”⁹⁸ Parallels between Hewlitt’s world and Hemingway’s are not hard to see. The rude and uncivil times and spaces of *In Our Time* are those of WWI, of Nick’s experiences maturing before and after the war, of characters lost and groping for meaning and love and identity within their unforgiving environments. Beauty and beasts tumble into and out of each other in profound ways throughout these stories, narratively and symbolically. Sexual distress, blood, woods, and

⁹⁷ May, *The New Short Story Theories*, xvii.

⁹⁸ Maurice Hewlitt, *The Forest Lovers*, 1898, The Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8934>, accessed via iBook, page 6.

animals are all literal recurring motifs in Hemingway's worlds, both fictional and nonfictional.

Hewlitt's style, of course, is too expositional in narrative and on-the-nose in implication for the taste of a fast-maturing Hemingway, the eventual dean of the "iceberg school" of writing. It is apparently too overwrought even for the adolescent Nick. And yet, by virtue of its paradoxical remoteness from and connectedness to Hemingway's text and the worlds he constructs across *In Our Time*, Hewlitt's passage is a clear "value add" and reinforcer of meaning. The content of this intertext serves as another submerged shibboleth: this one a key into the themes and subject matters of *In Our Time*, and of many future Hemingway works and worlds.

Symbol skeptics who subscribe to interpretative parsimony might ask (legitimately) whether Hemingway designed his text to potentiate all this symbolic/interpretative energy. Was this deliberate and strategic? Was the writer consciously, even subconsciously, aware of constructing such cues? Was he knowingly inviting readers to partake of such interpretative "games" of second-order symbolism? Or did they simply arise out of nowhere? Perhaps this is all just a figment of the unrestrained, solipsistic reader's imagination—a reader who has presumably drunk the Symbol-Hunting Kool-Aid, which now compels them to whimsically and recklessly build exotic tissues of meaning on very thin bones of an otherwise stark, minimalist text. These questions are important ones, and they are addressed at greater length in a later section. A perfunctory answer would be this: surely we can presume at this point that even a young Hemingway had enough control over his craft and intentions, enough hermeneutic vision, enough artistic gravitas, to imagine these kinds of interpretative possibilities were available to a writer working within the precincts of AngloEuropean

Modernism. Moreover, if the explications hew reasonably well to intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual evidence, the onus of (dis)proof gets shifted toward the skeptic to argue otherwise.

Moving forward in time (1980) and laterally in expressive medium (film), we can look to another consummate craftsman and narrative artist (Stanley Kubrick) for a second brief illustration of second-order symbolisms in action. Contrary to the just-emerging Hemingway, Kubrick, with his cinematic rendering of Stephen King's sci-fi novel *The Shining*, was reaching one of the mature artistic pinnacles of his career. At first pass, *The Shining* might look like your typical horror-genre flick. It depicts a struggling writer/sadistic father/alcoholic lunatic who tries to kill his wife and telepathic son because he has been cooped up in a creepy haunted hotel in the Colorado mountains for too long. You will be pretty safe hitching your critical wagon to this kind of unassuming plot summary and *prima facie* explanatory framework. Few will challenge this proposition, question your viewing acumen, accuse you of critical overreach. And it does punch-up a useful synoptic accounting of the film's fabula, not to mention the fabula of King's novel upon which the film is (loosely) based. This kind of summation would fall somewhere in Bordwell's referential/explicit class of explication, or what I consider a first-order level of interpretation. Either way, it can, if nothing else, effectively index a spectator's baseline comprehension of the film's surface elements and narrative throughline.

But what if you were to posit that, on a more covert (and arguably much more important) level, this is really a film about trauma. Specifically, traumas resulting from 1) cycles of male-dominant interfamilial domestic abuse; 2) the enduring horrors of imperialism and hereditary EuroAmerican patriarchal social orders, which are incessantly fed and

propagated by evolved sex-specific human desires and behavioral strategies acting in conspiracy (often literally) with our modern capitalist/plutocratic political economies; and 3) the reiterative genocidal impulses of humanity and the psychological hauntings, cultural cannibalisms, and ethical decay left in the wake of several historically specific genocides: from the gradual near-total extermination of Native Americans, to the more intensive programmatic killings of the Jewish Holocaust, to the slow-burn and still-smoldering gestures of enslaving, subordinating, or deleting African Americans from U.S. soil. Yes, this is quite a mouth full. And quite abstracted from the presumably escapist slasher/scream flick we started with. But upon repeated viewings, closer formal inspections, and good-faith intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual evidence-mounting, a spectator becomes hard-pressed to deny the strength of these provocative and in some sense surprising implicit meanings—meanings that are due in no small part to Kubrick’s carefully organized formal strategies and deployments of subtextual second-order symbolic devices.

A quick illustration will suffice. There are no Native American characters or actors in the film. However, several elements of the *mise-en-scène* at the Overlook Hotel refer, sometimes subtly sometimes obviously, to American Indians and their cultural heritages. The Calumet baking powder cans lining a shelf in the hotel’s expansive kitchen refrigerator display a profile of a Native American in prominent headdress; and with Kubrick’s deep-focus lensing techniques, they can easily switch into foreground position rather than receding into the background as more typical “realistic” prop work might (*if* and only if a spectator is properly attuned to surveying the full-framed canvas of the filmmaker’s notoriously fastidious shots). In the hotel, there are various architectural elements, carpets, a black statuary, and several tapestries (which a frustrated Jack at one point cavalierly, and

symbolically, rockets his tennis ball at) that call out to the styles and content of Navajo art. There is, moreover, a decisive “decoder” line planted in the dialogue during the Torrance family’s orientation tour of the Overlook: in this line, crucially never written in King’s book, the hotel manager, Ullman, explains that the hotel was built on an Indian burial ground and had to repel Indian attacks during construction.⁹⁹ Not unlike the exchange between Nick and Bill, the line is delivered in such offhand manner, the dialogue almost *de-emphasized* through a medium-wide shot and dolly camera, a spectator could easily miss it, especially upon initial viewing. Even if it does register, it could just as easily be chalked up to a throwaway genre line. But once a spectator gets keyed into Kubrick’s second-order sensibilities, cues like these begin to accrete with charged significance, giving license to explore the potential implications afoot.

Bill Blakemore, who is often credited as being the first to introduce this route of interpretation in a 1987 article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*,¹⁰⁰ calls such cues “confirmers,” comparing them to the well-placed clues “puzzle-makers often use to tell you you’re on the right track.” Tying together his own interpretative strands, in fact, Blakemore posits that the hotel’s name, which swells with polysemous potentiality, is another confirmer: this one indicating the persistent negligence of the collective American consciousness to “overlook” the holocaust of its first inhabitants. In my own theoretical model, Blakemore’s confirmers inhabit Kubrick’s rich ecosystem of second-order symbolic gestures; they are indirect referential complexes; and they absolutely can function to ratify certain hypotheses a receptive spectator can generate about the film’s implicit meanings—meanings that Kubrick

⁹⁹ Ullman’s line: “The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground, and I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it.” Stanley Kubrick, dir., *The Shining* (Warner Bros., 1980).

¹⁰⁰ Bill Blakemore, “The Family Man,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 29, 1987. Reprint at <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0052.html>.

films can spool out in large quantities and rapid sequence. Only with the help of such confirmers and decoder keys will a spectator be empowered to, not unlike Danny and Wendy from the Overlook's multiple oppressive mazes, escape the controller-artist's hermeneutic hedgemaze.

Serious Kubrick scholars—along with a growing group of intelligent, creative commentators in the fan worlds of the internet, who seem to be among our most dedicated close readers of Kubrick's shots, sequences, and motifs—have woven similar explications out of *The Shining*'s conceptual-symbolic webs of textual cues, formal patterns, narrative structures, and extratextual materials. These prompts emerge through Kubrick's mise-en-scene, his cinematography and lensing choices, shot sequence and editing strategies, the content and delivery of character dialogue, set designs, music and sound design, deviations from King's novel, adverts and poster art, and more. These analyses are all highly plausible. They can lead any open, conscientious viewer to arrive at similar conclusions, and persuade the most skeptical of viewers to at least entertain them.

Making claims of implicit interpretation, especially when backed by the “invisible” codes of second-order symbolologies, can be more art than science. And it can make the claimant vulnerable to opposing arguments advanced by naysayers. Such claims can fetch you your fair share of those dreaded critical-overreach indictments and smug stares of incredulity from friend and foe alike: from your most jaded or rigidly literal-minded students, to your quarrelsome colleague down the hall; from your mainstream moviegoer at the multiplex, to the sneering cynical cinephile at the art-house theater; from beloved well-respected reviewers, to artists who might wish their works to remain singular and enigmatic (for the “elites” and aesthetes) yet not too cognitively taxing or aesthetically highfalutin (for

the popular markets). Interpretative extrapolations like these may incite prickly disputations with even your most open-minded of critical brethren. Like all critics, those with symbol-friendly sensibilities are obliged to justify all their claims with concrete evidence and intellectual bona fides, and this should be their first concession to skeptics. But they might also produce an added rejoinder: that the pleasures and historical realities of second-order symbolologies are too manifest, too universal, to be denied.

Another related point about second-order interpretative procedures should be made here. When a text-construer becomes receptive to the symbolic-mythic-allegorical potentials residing in a text like *The Shining*, when their eyes have been opened to this kind of artistic mode of communication, first-order levels of significations may begin to fall away. They might lose some of their prestige and stature in one's interpretative fields and evaluative responses. (Such artistic and mental "awakenings" happen to be an idea Kubrick himself explores and pays some self-reflexive tribute to in films like *2001* and *Eyes Wide Shut*.) Thus, a curious reversal can occur: "first" levels of meaning, which are sine qua non for any interpretation to ensue, may cease to be the "primary" focus in our hermeneutic loops; whereas "secondary" levels shift forward into more centralized, dominant positions. And for ill or for good, it will be a practical impossibility to go backwards, to return to a place of unquestioned interpretative straightforwardness and the familiar ease we might have with a text uncomplicated by "deeper" meanings. Granted, it might not be fair to characterize this altered hermeneutic dynamic as a clearcut dominance/subordination reversal; however, our reading/viewing routines must, if nothing else, graduate toward a procedure of oscillating attention. To properly apprehend and interpret the second-order symbolic arts, we are compelled to toggle between several interconnected levels of meanings and critical

judgments. The mind's working memory and serial processing mechanisms are recruited to cope with parallel, unstable streams of meaning structures, structures that are packaged within the steadier streams of sensory percepts delivered by the art object at hand. This toggling dynamic certainly demands non-trivial amounts of time and mental-processing energy, and cognitive dissonance is a native byproduct of such processing. And yet there are delayed payoffs of pleasure and insight waiting in the wings for this kind of readerly dedication.

Moving on, to demonstrate that second-order symbolics is by no means the exclusive property of sequentially unfolding narrative arts like fiction and film, a brief excursion into the visual arts will help illustrate the mode's ubiquity. First, a quick primer on the traditions of symbolism in art (particularly religious paintings) will prove useful. Francoise Barbe-Gall, joining Bordwell and other visual-art scholars who have inherited the critical sensibilities and iconographic traditions of E.H. Gombrich, addresses her work *How to Understand a Painting: Decoding Symbols in Art* to a mainstream audience, writing,

To understand symbols in painting, one must immediately rid oneself of a misconception: the idea that the apparent simplicity of an object means that it carries a simple meaning.

[...]

Religious painting, with its primary aim being to instruct, makes abundant use of forms and objects which aim to convey such abstract notions as love, fidelity, hope for eternal life, loyalty, or betrayal. When attached as attributes to holy figures, symbols offered a convenient way of identifying them, or acted as a reminder of some important episode in their lives. These recurring

motifs, which were familiar to many in the past, have mostly become mysterious to the audiences of today. Today's art lover will have to learn to look out for the small things that can so easily seem like unimportant details, or simply decoration, there just to please the eye. But a flower, a reflection in a mirror or a bird in flight nearly always mean more than they first appear to. [...]

Of course, many centuries have passed since painting was entirely religious. But it is nonetheless true that art continues to retain a memory of religion, if only to distance itself from that tradition. Echoes of symbolic meanings, depicted in non-conventional forms, are another way of validating such traditions. Examples of this would be Manet's cat lying at the feet of Olympia, or Magritte's comical candles. The poetic metaphor, the cunning allusion, the agonized question—these all add something to the original symbolic language. And it is this bundle of references which enables each new painting to present itself to the world as something fresh and original.¹⁰¹

Much of the author's language calls out to my own. Her "bundle of references" reverberates with my "implicit referential complexes." She points out "recurring motifs" of artworks that can strike an interpreter as "mysterious," but can "instruct" upon decoding. Other phrases—"cunning allusion," "poetic metaphor," "forms and objects [that] convey abstract notions"—strike at the bedrock of second-order symbolologies. And just as her "art lover" must do, any practitioner of second-order hermeneutics must "learn to look out for the small things that

¹⁰¹ Francoise Barbe-Gall, *How to Understand a Painting: Decoding Symbols in Art* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2010), 4–5.

can so easily seem like unimportant details, or simply decoration, there just to please the eye.”

Keeping the long art-historical tradition of religious iconography in mind, I want to fast-forward to a work of contemporary visual art that will offer another intriguing instance of the power, endurance, inescapability, and inextricability of art’s symbolic infrastructures and inspirations. In 2010, French architect Françoise Roche—whose studio is known, among its several aliases, as Mindmachinemakingmyths—created *What Could Happen* in a mode that might be called the kinetic-architectural-relational happening. Roche’s work was constituted by an invite-only expedition staged from a train that traveled out of St. Mortiz into the Swiss Alps. Passengers were obliged to role-play as asylum patients before witnessing/participating in the aesthetic experience of what basically amounted to this: observing a naked man walk out of the snow into an igloo and scream bloody murder. Whether the concept and execution could be considered a success is really of no consequence for my purposes here. What is relevant, is what its orchestrator had to say about it afterwards. According to a *New York Times* reporter who was among the train’s passengers of mostly artists, architects, art critics, and collectors, Roche was vocal about the work’s allusive, allegorical intent:

On the way back, Roche employed a dizzying array of references to explain the work, from the myth of the Diavolezza glacier, which involves a she-devil who used to lure male hunters to their death, to Thomas Mann’s “Tristan,” to Dignitas, the assisted-suicide clinic in Zurich, and climate change. The structure itself was made out of biodegradable plastic. “It was

supposed to dissolve,” he said, “but the Swiss refuse the dissolving so now we will take it back.”¹⁰²

The most skeptical of symbol-skeptics—those artists, critics, and audiences who like to claim that art, particularly contemporary art, particularly ephemeral happenings, are or should be devoid of symbolic meaning; those who might sneer at symbolism as an overhyped bourgeois convention while promoting the immediate surface effects and first-order representations as the proper aspects and values of art—must contend with such authorial statements. Those skeptics, engaging their irony detectors, might prefer to read such comments as being tongue-in-cheek, or even misleading. But Roche’s “dizzying array of references” in this context seems calculated and sincere. In short, a second-order indirect representational complex has become *direct*, manifested by the textmaker’s verbalizations of several potential decoder keys. Roche’s attending audience—no matter how cynical or uncomfortable they might have felt in the presence and “effrontery” of symbolism and (gasp!) direct authorial commentary—would not have been able to ignore the artist’s words, or the living breathing flesh-and-blood presence of a textmaker emerging from behind the curtains of Oz. To dismiss the rich symbolic implications Roche gestures at in his speech would be, at least in my hermeneutic model, a critical crime of the highest order.

Rerouting now to the precincts of mass entertainment, namely popular fiction and moviegoing, we can find further evidence of the power of the symbolic impulse in The Dan

¹⁰² Irina Aleksander, “Going Places: François Roche and Pierre Huyghe’s Train to Nowhere,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, May 13, 2015, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/13/francois-roche-pierre-huyghes-train-to-nowhere/?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=Mothers-Visible&module=inside-nyt-region&region=inside-nyt-region&WT.nav=inside-nyt-region>.

Brown Phenomenon¹⁰³ and the Fan Cult of Robert Langdon. Brown's mystery-thriller novels (*Angels and Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, and *Inferno*) and their respective film adaptations have been blockbusters on both fronts, in bookstores and theaters, despite critical receptions that ranged from tepid to scathing. It was *The Da Vinci Code* that first took the reading public by storm in 2003 (and again in 2006 after the film version was released) with its tale of murder and intrigue, religious cults and secret societies, institutional conspiracy theories, and archaeological code-breaking. But it was *Angels and Demons* that first introduced Brown's protagonist, Harvard Professor of Symbology Robert Langdon, three years earlier in 2000. In 2009, *The Da Vinci Code*'s sequel, *The Lost Symbol*, also topped best-seller lists and broke publishing sales records: according to *The New York Times*, Knopf Doubleday reported selling one million copies of *The Lost Symbol* in hardcover and e-books in the United States, Britain, and Canada; and it "set records for the best-selling adult fiction title on the first day of sale" on both Amazon and Barnes and Noble.¹⁰⁴ *Inferno*, whose premise revolves around deciphering the hidden codes buried within Dante's epic poem, was similarly successful, topping all book sales in 2013. This also meant that "for the third time since 2004, Dan Brown [wrote] the best-selling book of the year."¹⁰⁵

Thrillers and detective yarns are a dime-a-dozen in today's ever-expanding media landscape. And because television, film, print, and the web can cross-pollinate to spawn fictional multiverses across different platforms, these narratives are positioned to generate

¹⁰³ I surmised I might be coining a new phrase here, but at least one author in the cyber-universe has landed on the same notion. Philip Coppens refers to "the Dan Brown Phenomenon" in his review of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, which he considers the inspiration for Brown's own books: <http://www.philipcoppens.com/foucault.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Motoko Rich, "Dan Brown's 'Lost Symbol' Sells 1 Million Copies in the First Day," *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2009, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/16/dan-browns-lost-symbol-sells-1-million-copies-in-the-first-day/>.

¹⁰⁵ Bob Minzesheimer and Christopher Schnaars, "Dan Brown's 'Inferno' Tops All Book Sales in 2013," *USA Today*, Jan. 16, 2014. See <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2014/01/15/usa-today-best-selling-books-of-2013/4451561/>.

more buzz and more fans than ever before. So what is it about Brown's work that has reliably captured such massive audiences? What makes his take on these rather well-worn genres so enthralling to so many people? My answer would be, in a word: symbol. Brown's protagonist is after all a "symbolologist," who also happens to be cut from the same cloth as Indiana Jones: an Ivy League professorial swashbuckler who hunts symbolic treasures by way of wits and investigative tenacity alone, rather than archeological artifacts by way of wit, whips, and physical contest. As a tactic in their own cross-platform PR strategy, Random House hosts a simulated webpage for the Langdon avatar. Subtitled "The Official Website of Harvard Symbolologist Robert Langdon," the site lists Langdon's specialties as "classical iconology, symbols of pre-Christian culture, goddess art, and the decryption of ancient ciphers."¹⁰⁶ So here we have a Hollywood hero who trades in symbols rather than gunplay, car chases, action setpieces, and heteronormative romance—not too shabby, even if the narrative products themselves leave much to be desired.

I would be remiss not to note here that the inspiration for Brown's narrative cycle was almost certainly Umberto Eco's 1988 novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. Eco's heavily allusive, philosophically dense, stylistically experimental work is also about conspiratorial symbol-makers and symbol-hunters—though its author's multiply ironic stance about such business differs sharply from Brown's. Brown's narrative world shares much in the way of settings and plot devices with its more-literary-minded forebear. But Eco, the Italian philosopher and semiotician whom *Library Journal* calls a "great polymathic fabulist in the tradition of Swift, Voltaire, Joyce, and Borges," would probably be quick to point out their many divergences in tone, purpose, thematic range, stylistic complexity, and guiding philosophical visions. Eco's work predictably received critical acclaim within highbrow literary circles, while Brown won

¹⁰⁶ Robert Langdon.com, Random House, <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/davinci/robertlangdon/>.

the popular vote. In terms of literary-artistic merit, as one reviewer points out, “Sometimes, the prototype is far superior to the actual product. And this may apply to the prototype of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*: Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*.”¹⁰⁷ While Eco’s novel differs markedly from Brown’s in its aesthetic aims and intellectual scope, it nonetheless offers another formidable weigh-point in the heritage of second-order symbolotics and the double-edged consequences of humanity’s symbol-use more generally.

No matter how we judge the literary-aesthetic quality of Dan Brown’s writing and the value of their spin-off films, what cannot be denied is their mass appeal and cumulative excitatory effect on contemporary audiences. And this much seems clear: the Langdon narratives are deriving much of their popularity, originality, and audience anticipation from Brown’s straightforward appeal to the deeply embedded universal spirit of the symbolic impulse—an impulse stirred by his hero’s quests for and masterful decoding of cryptic signs left by ancient, unseen figures. While we might be tempted to understand Brown’s work as just another successful instantiation of the modern pulp genre of the thriller/detective story, there is a difference: the mysteries that energize Brown’s plotlines are atypical of today’s more conventional who-dunnits; these are narratives that turn on the performance and outcomes of a character in the act of concentrated deciphering *about* deciphering. The star of this narrative cycle is not Robert Langdon, nor Dan Brown the writer-creator of the Langdon fictional universe. It is not the director of the films, nor America’s most likeable (or at least most uncontroversial) Everyman actor Tom Hanks. The real co-stars here are The Symbol writ large and the very act of interpretation itself.

The size and magnitude of The Dan Brown Phenomenon and Cult of Langdon are really quite astonishing. More astonishing is that this pop-cultural juggernaut seems

¹⁰⁷ Coppens, <http://www.philipcoppens.com/foucault.html>.

attributable to one author's shrewd notion to shape a classic generic narrative around our species-wide cognitive affinities for the mysteries and power of symbol—around our collective fascination with the ubiquitous symbols we celebrate (due apologies to Frost). But Brown is of course not the only recent popular-media artist to tap into the rich reservoirs of symbolism, of both the first- and second-order. In 2014, for instance, we saw Nic Pizzolatto, writer and showrunner of the HBO series *True Detective*, engage some similar kinds of strategies and appeals employed by Brown, albeit taking his cues from Lovecraft and Ligotti and applying a more nuanced, aesthetically assured hand. This led unquestionably to a product showing greater philosophical depth, aesthetic range, and stylistic sophistication. And interestingly one that did not sacrifice much in terms of viewer popularity and buzz. (More on Pizzolatto's *True Detective* later).

Finally, before setting out further into denser theoretical thickets (i.e. the historically and scientifically informed landscapes of a biopoetics of second-order symbolism), a brief personal anecdote will bring this section of textual explication to a close. In my junior-year high school English class (Dayton, Ohio, circa 1991), the curriculum was devoted chiefly to reading critically and widely across the canon of American literature. Most writing assignments had been analytical in nature. Workload was intense and discussions were fairly advanced. In modest effort to switch gears about halfway through the year, the teacher assigned an impromptu in-class creative-writing project. We were asked to reconfigure and complete the ending to a short story we had read the night before and discussed earlier in class. I no longer recall the story's author, title, nor most of its major plotpoints. All I know is that it was a story with a zero ending and major loose ends, something akin to Truffaut's

freeze-frame in *400 Blows*. But the ultimate outcome of this exercise, and the creative solution I arrived at—these I remember vividly.

In the epilogue sequel I constructed, I basically wanted to re-orient the story's protagonist, a young male figure, away from the confinements and settled social structures of his small provincial hometown, which the author had left him in. In my planning, I never developed much action beyond that. It was just going to be a young man driving his pickup out of the town to somewhere else, prefaced by some dialogue taking place between him and his girlfriend, plus some simple internal dialogue as he was driving. I also felt I wanted to execute something more complex, formally and in terms of the protagonist's psychology, yet I didn't want to "just say it." My solution: into this little tableaux, I simply inserted a horse running alongside the pickup in a field adjacent to the farm road the young man was driving on. If memory serves, I believe I conjured the image of a horse first, and the thought for using it as a symbol after. But whichever came first, I began focusing on depicting the movements and physical characteristics of the horse more than the human character. He kept up beautifully but was stopped abruptly at the fence, receding into the distance as the boy looked into the rear-view mirror. I offered no direct "connectors" between the protagonist and horse, and the paragraphs were juxtaposed more as parataxis: just two descriptions of the local setting in a realistic, imitative style. But I most certainly wanted this to suggest, to obliquely hint at, a doubling and a differential: the rather clichéd implication being the young man could have become a caged thoroughbred of sorts, had it not been for his decision to accept the challenge of leaving the safety of home and familiar surroundings at a pivotal moment in his life.

The following class day, our passages were circulated anonymously so classmates could read and workshop them. The teacher asked which ones we liked the best and why. At risk of sounding immodest, mine seemed to win the People's Choice Award. Of course, I shudder to think of how grotesquely sophomoric the piece probably would sound were I to read it now. But it evidently did the trick for my classmates back then. And here's what I found interesting about my classmates' reactions: they all seemed to pick out the passages about the horse as striking, likeable, noteworthy. But no one made any guesses or leaps at meaning, no one mentioned the—what I thought of as quite obvious—symbolism I had seeded. This was both frustrating and satisfying: I wanted them to *get it* because that aspect signaled what I thought of as the real heart of my ending, a conceptual/thematic note I wanted to convey without exactly conveying it. At the same time I also didn't want to seem like I was trying to hammer anyone over the head with some didactic "message." I was strategic in my design, consciously aware of trying to shape this effect. And I think it was fairly successful—despite my apparently vulgar tactic of putting the raisin before the bread, contrary to Hemingway's caveats (and Goethe's proverbial admonitions to poets to always begin with the particulars of life and allow symbols of general concepts to arise organically from there). So I refrained from chiming in during the workshop. I never pointed out the oh-so-brilliant hidden message I had delivered under everyone's radar. I thought doing so would ruin the game and the charm. The charm of what, I was not entirely sure.

Among the formative ideas I had gleaned, rightly or wrongly, from all the literature we had read and discussed that school year, and from all my other accumulated experiences with literature up to that point, was this: that *good* writing, or *literary* writing, or at least the most *memorable* writing, writing that was *complex and rich* for commentary, seemed to

share in a set of vague yet universal qualities. Namely, the qualities of *going beyond* (i.e. going beyond the language of denotation and/or the intuitively received mimetic representations of people and things in the world as they are); of *subtly yet profoundly* conveying a point of view or concept; of saying or depicting one thing that had *compounds of meaning* attached to it. I was learning many other things about books and authors and literary history as well, but this was sticky. Ineffably sexy. And it seemed, at least within my inchoate literary sensibilities, to be a big part of what separated works of the literary domain from the expository prose of history and the scientific texts of physics and mathematical formulas I was studying in other classes. Twenty-five years later, I continue to return to the power of these worlds of second-order symbols and aesthetic repleteness. In my view, they still comprise some of art's central defining attributes. And I have learned that these attributes still charm, satisfy, challenge, and frustrate the very best critic-readers and artist-creators alike.

In review, these select examples have been merely to prime the symbolic pump. Some will be carried through in later chapters. Others are presented as one-off illustrations of the ubiquity and diversity of modes and forms of symbolic art and its hermeneutic possibilities.

The Remaining Menu: Organizational Principles

This project is intentionally crafted as an organizational chimera of sorts. It coheres under some basic chronological, paradigmatic, and generic schemes. But it ranges over ideas in less schematic, more hyperlinked ways. It lays conceptual bricks (in the best sense

possible!) and builds upon itself to reach crescendos within each chapter and, hopefully, at its terminus.

Chapter 2 sketches out a hermeneutic framework essential for building any plausible theory of second-order symbolism, biopoetic or otherwise; and addresses further epistemological and pedagogical concerns. Chapter 3 supplies a brief historical survey of symbol theory, focusing on keystone works; then unfolds the fuller biopoetics of second-order symbolism. Chapter 4 filters literary exemplars of symbolic realism through that theory. Chapter 5 does the same with works of film. The Conclusion poses further questions and research coordinates.

Reasons for choosing the primary and critical materials I do should become clear as the chapters themselves unfold. I confess to being guided by familiarity as well as personal interest, my favorite flavors of artists and their works. And while I make only slight apologies here, this means some propositions and theoretical speculations are vulnerable to evidence-to-the-contrary arguments as well as arguments of incompleteness. A motivated skeptic could easily point to artists or texts that will defy my theoretical gestures, or enumerate the many texts, periods, modes, and genres that I have not considered fully here. Yet in the end, no one work can account for every instance of written literature, every instance of cinema, every possible counter-strain. Even if we try with good faith to choose the most paradigmatic instances out of our ever-expanding canons of literature and film, we are prone to embarrassing oversight. This can lead not just to prickly academic disagreements but to the potential unhinging of well-apportioned systematic reason chains. I try to acknowledge gaps where they arise, qualify and hedge myself with the hope of making my

theories as viable, accommodating, and inclusive as possible. But there will be times when certain choices should be taken with a grain of salt, as I confess to playing favorites.

CHAPTER 2

Against Against Interpretation: A Hermeneutic Synthesis

Reading better means reading slower.

— David Mikics¹⁰⁸

Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd.

— Thomas Foster¹⁰⁹

Learning how to be a literary critic is, among other things, a matter of learning how to deploy certain techniques. These are more easily picked up in practice than in theory. All of them involve closer attention to language than one would usually lavish on a recipe or laundry list.

— Terry Eagleton¹¹⁰

Homer gave implicit and tacit notice that poetry is light and clarity (claritas); and that though it may also be difficult, it must always be profoundly clear.

— Benedetto Croce¹¹¹

This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves. It was all a nothing. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. The light is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished.

— Ernest Hemingway¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ David Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas C. Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), xxvii.

¹¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 7.

¹¹¹ Benedetto Croce, "Homer: A Modern Interpretation of Some Classical Judgments," in *Benedetto Croce: Essays on Literature and Literary Criticism*, annotated, translated, and edited by M.E. Moss (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 30.

¹¹² Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *Scribners Magazine* 93, no. 3 (March 1933): 149–50. For concision and rhetorical effect, I elide certain lines from the Hemingway and Eagleton epigraphs without elliptical markers. This seems particularly permissible for Hemingway's short story, renowned itself for its

The following chapter unfolds a provisional hermeneutic framework for reading art texts generally, and reading narrative art texts that capitalize on second-order symbolics more specifically. It presents brief introduction to and justifications for the evolutionary-cognitive (ev-cog) theory that inform the subsequent biopoetics of second-order symbolism and symbolic realism. And it specifies some deeper epistemological foundations that undergird this project.

A transparent hermeneutics is crucial for proper conceptual placement of text, textmaker, and text-interpreter within any critical equation that aims for this output: a better understanding of our art texts and the experiences their aesthetic transactions deliver. It is, in many ways, crucial for art education and practice more generally. Staking out ev-cog tentpoles will position my thinking within the emergent and energetic fields of biocultural studies in the arts and humanities today. And a transparent epistemics is needed to tie everything together at the deeper levels of thought, to obviate potential philosophical objections to certain knowledge claims, and to offer a possible way out of those pesky logical traps—the infinite regresses, axiomatic dogmatisms, and circular tautologies of Münchhausen’s Trilemma—that arise within any sustained critical-theoretical discourse.

Against Against Interpretation: A Hermeneutic Orientation

Most of what follows cuts against the grain of radically anti-hermeneutic works like Sontag’s “Against Interpretation.” In that essay, which became a high watermark of 1960s counter-authoritarian culture, Sontag is a whirling polemical dervish of erudition and barely

ambiguous dialogue markers, character elisions/superimpositions, and controversies surrounding authorial intention and editorial emendation (see, e.g., Ken Ryan, “The Contentious Emendation of Hemingway’s ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,’” *The Hemingway Review* 18 no. 1 [Fall 1998]): <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/THE+CONTENTIOUS+EMENDATION+OF+HEMINGWAY%27S+%22A+CLEAN,+WELL-LIGHTED...-a053409313>.

contained condescension, exuberant originality and logical liquidity, anti-establishment contrarianism and simple contradictions. Many of Sontag's premises are seductive; others, legitimately perceptive: e.g. "Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness."¹¹³ Indeed, we must always feel obliged to vet our hermeneutic models and procedures, trace their causal forces and effects, pinpoint their weaknesses (but also their strengths), and better identify which circumstances demand which methods of interpretation. This chapter largely partakes in such vetting. Sontag's "historical view of human consciousness," meanwhile, could be happily updated to a more ev-cog friendly phrasing and model: e.g. "Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within the longer biological view of the evolved human mind and consciousness, coupled with the shorter cultural-historical view of human text-reading practices." So Sontag does open up avenues of insight.

Insights and intellectual muscle aside, the overambitious scoping of Sontag's arguments here, and her ultimate conclusions, do not withstand much pragmatic or cognitive scrutiny. Examining a few of her most forceful yet problematic statements can illustrate this:

The project of interpretation is largely reaction, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile [...], the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. [...]

It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings."
[...]

The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.

¹¹³ Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 1964, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966).

[...]

In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.¹¹⁴

Claims like these are clearly *meant* to be as subversive as they are intellectually scrupulous. As more than a handful of critics have pointed out, perhaps Sontag simply *intended* us to bathe in the ecstasy and pleasures of her rhetorical-linguistic erotics—thus, ignoring the dastardly complications and attendant accountabilities that come with soundness of thought, empirical validity, and intentional grounding. Yet, there is certainly something to be said about the potential toxicity of a profusion of commentating voices. Excessive critical chatter can pose real threats by heavily mediating if not supplanting the aesthetic object and the observer's experience. Even if it doesn't completely alienate the art observer from their primary experiential connection to the art object, interpretation at some point will probably produce diminishing returns. These threats have become even more resonant in today's Digital Age than they were in Sontag's Age of Hot and Cool Media. Being aware of these hermeneutic pitfalls is, thus, intelligent counsel.

However, the radical idea that we should, or even can, circumvent all such habits of interpretation is far-fetched. Eliminating the interpretative faculties of mind would result in a wholesale dismantling of communication at the most basic of levels, not to mention rending human language dead-on-arrival. Other faculties of mind even more fundamental than language would fall apart. Sensory perception and the basic cognitive judgments that result from their processing are all based on certain information-transforming procedures of mind; this means that the most simple day-to-day activities required for a motile living body to move and operate properly within its world are, at root, interpretative. Moving up the ladders of evolution and human civilization into the orbits of the highly systematized, highly

¹¹⁴ Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 7, 14.

sophisticated textual experiences of our advanced modern arts, interpretative skills become more, not less, important. Thus, Sontag's line of thinking and her titular conclusion—advocating against interpretation—are roundly disputed in the arguments that follow.

In the Billy Collins poem "Introduction to Poetry," the poem's speaker (a very thinly veiled autobiographical Collins) evokes a jaded but ultimately romantic attitude not too far afield from Sontag's more politically minded essay-narrator. A poetry teacher envisions his students, enrapt in their interpretative frames of mind, as hunting down their poetic prey and torturing meanings out of them. The unfolding of this image is quintessential Collins: poignant, sweet, clever, slyly profound, ultimately hilarious.

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," *Sailing Alone around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2001).

There are times when the speaker's arguments and analogies here are perfectly apt. Times when we must jettison or at least suspend our interpretative impulses—and with it any symbolic impulse—when experiencing art objects. Times to allow art to wash over us, intuitively, emotionally, erotically. But surely there must be equal times and reasons for tying our art to chairs (the art that “consents” to such activities anyway) in hopes of arousing those extra jolts of meaning from them. After all, to some, chair-tying can be an exquisitely erotic act: for artist and audience alike.

Thus, it will be my position that a transparent hermeneutic model is indispensable for any intellectually honest art praxis and its criticism. Indispensable for any text-centric event more generally. The philosophy and mechanics of interpretation are so self-evidently crucial for negotiating packages of text, it is rather puzzling why our educational institutions seem remiss to assign hermeneutic studies to more central programmatic positions (or any position) within their core-curricula structures.¹¹⁶ A transparent hermeneutics is also particularly vital for devising a cohesive biopoetic theory of second-order symbolism. To establish any plausible account of encoding/decoding second-order symbolic devices in art

¹¹⁶ With a mission-objective of articulating the deep operations and methods human beings deploy to translate and negotiate thoughts, intensions, values, and meanings from mind-to-text-to-mind, hermeneutics cuts deep and wide across academic, professional, and social fields. In today's symbol-/text-laden societies, acts of interpretation are relentless, inter-nested, and nowadays often heated in a pressure-cooker that prepares them for rapid global transmission in which long meaning-chains become increasingly vulnerable to errors and corruptions. Interpretation is praxis-paydirt in fields of art and art criticism. But it also undergirds virtually any text-centric field or endeavor: from statistics to scientific reports, advertising, social policy, and legal philosophy: e.g. today's heated debates between Constitutional originalists and constructionists are mined with hermeneutic boobytraps and flashpoints. The burgeoning textual hybrids we confront on the internet today, audio-visual-alphabetic-mathematical chimeras, pose new problems for theories of interpretation. Considering the seismic shifting of our media landscapes due to digital-age information technologies (particularly in light of recent sociopolitical events related to bogus news websites and tactics of informational interference), there is urgent need for educators to promote hermeneutics to a higher position within the core curricula of American high schools and universities. Proponents would have strong arguments that favor hermeneutics as essential for effectively teaching media literacy to future generations. Furthermore, hermeneutics as a field is ripe for innovative interdisciplinary interventions and new insights gained through neurophilosophy, neurolinguistics, cognitive social psychology, and more. One could imagine, for instance, how Stanislas Dehaene's microscale work with cognitive neuroimaging, reading, and the brain could be integrated with macroscale work in theory of mind, neurophilosophy, and cognitive-evolutionary social psychology, possibly under a hyphenated banner of neuro-cognitive-hermeneutics.

texts, staking out some clear coordinates within this territory is a prerequisite. If second-order symbols exist in any objectively definable way, they must be thought of as inhabiting the interpretative landscapes of their native works. In terms of the traditional hermeneutic circle, second-order symbols are among the varied “parts” of a work that inform our understanding of the “whole.” Reciprocally, our interpretations of the whole can have recursive power to inflect our understandings, and further discoveries, of second-order symbols.

Authors and Urauthors: A Hermeneutics of Commonsense Intentionalism

The hermeneutic attitude I wish to strike for construing understandings and interpreting meanings of art texts derives from a commonsense if rigorously evidentiary school of intentionalism. This attitude allows for the possibility that audience members can construe more or less accurate understandings of artworks, and that we can in turn derive valid and mutually compatible interpretations of an artist’s intentional meanings through a probabilistic narrowing of a work’s space of meaning potentials.¹¹⁷ The resulting model borrows hermeneutic ground and tactics from the Goethe-Carlyle-Croce lineage; various strains of literary formalisms (Russian, New Critical, Chicago); “traditional” literary-hermeneutic scholars such as William Empson, E.D. Hirsch, and John Reichert; ev-cog critics such as Patrick Colm Hogan, Nancy Easterlin, Joseph Carroll, and Torban Grodal; and intentionalist-minded artists and their philosopher-boosters like William Irwin. Critical

¹¹⁷ My “probabilistic narrowing of meaning-space potential” is a nod to both Bayesian inference theory and the epistemological schematics set forth by Jon Gottschall in much of his Darwinian lit crit. Gottschall, who identifies general cognitive-epistemological processes and disciplinary routines we must engage in to arrive at a more-or-less objective knowledge, suggests that efforts to “shrink the possibility space” and “shrink the scope of possible explanation” should be common currency among humanist and scientist alike. See, for instance, *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2008), Introduction, 79–80. Here, it is useful conceptual fodder for thinking through an intentionalist hermeneutics.

heritage aside, it is mostly, I hope, an interpretive model of commonsense measured caution, but one that also avoids any radical hermeneutics of suspicion.

This is, first, a model that invests some good confidence in the possibility of determining authorial horizons and value positions. Despite the inherent challenges with such a project, it remains perfectly reasonable to think we might arrive at some plausible reconstruction of those horizons and values through good-faith investigations of extratextual materials: e.g. an author's letters, interviews, speeches, biographies, manuscripts drafts, editorial correspondences, and oeuvres; coupled with the best information available on the wider cultural ecologies the author was ensconced in. By triangulating these horizons and value positions as corroborating evidence, as supplemental yet essential verifiers, alongside close analysis of an artwork's textual cues, we should feel emboldened to wage cases for the intentional meanings of many artworks—canonical, non-canonical, popular, or otherwise. This procedure requires heavy-lifting at times, to be sure. But its payoffs are considerable. If nothing else, a firm commitment to evidence accretion, aimed toward shrinking a text's potential meaning space, can orient audiences in productive interpretative directions. Particularly when we are confronted with works of philosophical complexity, idiosyncratic style, unorthodox genre-defying conventions, or enigmatic formal structures (second-order symbols being prime candidates here).

Goethe's dialectic of destructive/constructive criticism from his ~1820 essay "On Criticism" provides a good jumping-off point:

Criticism is either destructive or constructive. The former is very easy; for one need only set up some imaginary standard, some model or other, however foolish this may be, and then boldly assert that the work of art under

consideration does not measure up to that standard, and therefore is of no value. That settles the matter, and one can without any more ado declare that the poet has not come up to one's requirements. In this way *the critic frees himself of all obligations of gratitude toward the artist*.

Constructive criticism is much harder. It asks: What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible, and how far did he succeed in carrying it out? If these questions are answered with discernment and sympathy, we may be of real assistance to the author in his later works.

Perhaps we should call attention to another point which is altogether too frequently overlooked, namely that the critics must judge a work more for the sake of the author than the public. Every day we see how, without the least regard for the opinions of reviewers, some drama or novel is received by men and women in the most diverse individual ways, is praised, found fault with, given or refused a place in the heart, merely as it happens to appeal to the personal idiosyncrasy of each reader.

[...]

If you read a book and let it work upon you, and *yield yourself up entirely to its influence*, then, and only then, will you arrive at a correct judgment of it.¹¹⁸

Representing foundational ideas of what later scholars would group as the Goethe-Carlyle-Croce-Spangarn complex of criticism, this passage enunciates some of Goethe's most influential and enduring hermeneutic principles. Particularly resonant are his author-centric

¹¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "On Criticism (1821–24)," *Goethe's Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), 140–141. Italics mine.

notions of yielding oneself to an artist's guidance and presence, and his concomitant judgments that this happens to be the more *constructive* as well as more *difficult* stance to take (compared to the alternative critic-centric stance). The British Carlyle, Italian Croce, and American Springarn would piggyback upon Goethe's observations here and in his larger body of critical work, modifying some and elaborating upon others. Their artist-centric positions would represent only one early swing of the literary-critical pendulum, which has oscillated with regularity between points of amplitude privileging artist, audience, or text.¹¹⁹ Such positions would sit most unkindly, of course, with contemporary brands of poststructuralist and reader-response criticisms, which lean toward evacuating authors from the equations of explication completely or displacing them with the "true" creator of the artwork: the reader-critic. While those critical schools are no longer the departmental juggernauts they once were in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, they continue to hold sway in certain precincts of critical discourse and the humanities today. Thus, Goethe's original ideas might bear some revisitation, if not resurrection, within academic climes that promote hyper-suspicious author-averse discourse, where artists can still get sloughed off as so much critical dead weight. A second-order symbolics demands no such sloughing. The artist, if not privileged in a heremenetics of second-order meaning-making, is held in at least equal regard to the reader-critic.

Fast-forwarding to the twentieth century, another poet-critic calls for some quick revival. William Empson, particularly in his last work *Using Biography* (1984), provides unashamed defenses for marshaling biographical evidence to help determine artistic

¹¹⁹ Here I imagine a new impossible pendulum that swings in three dimensions. Trademark.

intention, or at least the life horizons¹²⁰ that might inform intention. Endorsing biography and author-centric intentionalism is, strangely enough, a critical attitude that some humanities scholars today still find necessary to resist—in theory if not in their actual critical praxes. Opponents characterize it as a slippery slope or radical regression to past critical crimes. While their skepticism is justifiable to a degree, it becomes outlandish if taken to theoretical extremes. Some background rehearsal first.

As philological approaches gained ascendancy during the formative days of literature departments in the early twentieth century, the competing biographical tradition began to lose critical favor. And for good reason, as early author-centric crit could lean toward insipid, simplistic, or romanticized commentary: either programmatic reports of an author's creative processes, or the spinning out of correlations and explanations about how biographical details or an author's presumed personality fell out of a text. Curiously, though, the biographical artist continued to have to dodge critical fire over the years. The author came to be treated as a mostly inconsequential if not potentially duplicitous afterthought in several schools of criticism, slowly drawn-and-quartered by the likes of Foucault, Barthes, and other postmodern reader-first/language-first critical practices. But even before the strong-structuralist and poststructuralist movements, poets and artists were receiving short shrift. They tended to be bracketed if not discounted in the critical equations of the New Criticism—a movement Empson both inspired and argued against vociferously throughout his career. Among Empson's disagreements with practitioners of the New Criticism (which he monikered The New Rigor) was their eschewing of artistic intentionality, their admonishments that explicitly invoking an authorial presence could leave a reader awash in a

¹²⁰ I confess indebtedness here to Hans-Georg Gadamer's terminology here, although perhaps not his full conceptual apparatus accounting for the dialectical fusion of authorial and readerly horizons.

poisonous critical fallacy. This did not align well with the creative experiences of Empson, who was himself a successful poet for many years before devoting his remaining professional life to criticism, teaching, and traveling. Empson had things to say in his poems. And he presumed most other poets did as well.

Of course, matters of taste and preference play their roles, and Empson had his affinities. “I like poetry that argues,” Empson said. As Harvard critic-poet Stephen Burt notes, reflecting on Empson’s legacy and preferences, “neither his poems nor his prose shrank from a mental fight.”¹²¹ Argument poems are obvious contenders for being logically informed by biographical background research. Not all poems can or should be construed as arguments emanating from a reified personality with a fully determinable, fixed point of view. But Empson’s basic principle stands: that critic-readers ought to honor, within reason, any relevant well-documented biographical evidence; and ought to acknowledge the artist’s rather obvious controlling presence in the aesthetic transaction between text, textmaker, and text-interpreter. Nor can we but honor Empson’s own polemical mettle to publish such a work as *Using Biography* in the mid-1980s—a time when the prevailing poststructuralisms and other iterations of Grand Theory had swung the critical pendulum toward another high watermark advocating near-total eradication of authorial presence.

Despite Empson’s persistent and often legitimate quarrels with New Criticism and its practitioners, dismissing The New Critics with blunt force would be a miscalculation. It seems unwise to downgrade their influential standing and generally positive influence within contemporary hermeneutics, critical praxis, and the institutional development of both literature and media-studies programs. The New Critics are nowadays too often hung out to

¹²¹ Stephen Burt, “Adventures in Ambiguity,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/10/books/Burt3.t.html>.

dry, caricatured and vilified as easy straw men in our more “enlightened” critical moment of deep historiography and disciplinary self-reflection. To be sure, students of literary history need to be reminded of their retrospectively undesirable tendencies: overly programmatic explications, devotions to certain features of literature at the expense of others, some vulgar social and political agendas. But the New Critics taught us much about how we can read and interpret texts with skill, ingenuity, and intellectual scrupulousness.

Additionally, beyond their universally recognized contributions of tools, methods, and performances of close textual analysis—their grand endowment to the critical tradition—the New Critics were probably never as antagonistic toward authorial presence as conventionally assumed. To be sure there are many nuanced differences and in-fights between the individual “members” of the New Critical school, so lumping them together inevitably rounds off some vital and interesting edges of their ideas. But on the whole, New Critics routinely presumed the default presence of a controlling consciousness (an embodied real-life human author) who has created a work that is to be read by another consciousness (an embodied real-life human reader). Their more careful readers emphasize this. Indeed, a mini-trend of contemporary critics have been systemically revisiting and reassessing the source materials of Ransom, Tate, Penn, Wimsatt, Beardsley, and Brooks. And they shine light on the gradations of thought and carefully qualified ideas of these thinkers and poets.¹²² As far back as 1967, even E.D. Hirsch, whose unabashed intentionalism was in many ways a reaction against New Critical practices, recognized the impoverished misrepresentations of essays like “The Intentional Fallacy” that were already afoot: “Although Wimsatt and

¹²² See, for instance, Don Childs, *The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I.A. Richards, Robert Graves, and Laura Riding* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014); Michael Fischer and William J. Spurlin, eds., *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); and Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre, eds., *Rereading the New Criticism* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012).

Beardsley carefully distinguished between three types of intentional evidence, acknowledging that two of them are proper and admissible, their careful distinctions and qualifications have now vanished in the popular version, which consists in the false and facile dogma that what an author intended is irrelevant to the meaning of his text.”¹²³

Two brief illustrations can suffice. In his 1939 essay “The Teaching of Poetry,” John Crowe Ransom acclaims Robert Penn Warren as “one of the really superlative poets of our time,” and goes on to contend that “an understanding of poetry must be considered as beyond dispute only when it is referred to the possession of the poet himself; only then if ever.”¹²⁴

While the syntax is a bit convoluted, Ransom is clearly investing the poet with substantive originary power, suggesting that a readers’s understanding of a poetic work crystallizes only after we admit the creator as the true custodian of that work and its effects. Ransom follows with this unflinching observation about university training programs: “Our graduate schools of English that prepare the teachers of poetry for their vocation display contumacy at its sublimest level when they resolutely refuse to provide courses in the actual operation of the art, as composition.” Thus, we have a founding father of New Criticism leaning very heavily on the authority of the artist and the artistic process from the start.¹²⁵ Later, we see Wimsatt himself hedging his original position set down in “The Intentional Fallacy.” In “Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited” (1968), he reimagines the artwork as

¹²³ E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 11–12.

¹²⁴ John Crowe Ransom, “The Teaching of Poetry,” *Kenyon Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1939). Reprinted and quoted in Spurlin and Fischer, *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4. Authors are referring to the credentials of the authors of *Understanding Poetry*.

¹²⁵ Ransom’s choice of the word “contumacy” is revealing. Derived from the Latin for inflexibility, it is used today to indicate obdurate refusal to obey or comply with authority, especially court orders or summons. Thus, if we fail to teach the process and power of creative composition, we are in some sense disobeying the “author”ity of the poetic work, transgressing some *de facto* poetic law governing the tacit contract of our aesthetic transactions.

something that emerges from the private, individual, dynamic, and intentionalistic realm of its maker's mind and personality; it is in a sense (and this is especially true of the verbal work of art) made from intentionalist or intentionalistic material. But at the same time, in the moment it emerges, it enters a public and in a certain sense clear objective realm; it claims and gets attention from an audience; it invites and receives discussion, about its meaning and value, in an idiom of inter-subjectivity and conceptualization.¹²⁶

Wimsatt's admittance of both a private author and a public sense of objectivity into his critical viewpoint is a rather remarkable, and in my opinion intelligent, revision.

Moving to a more contemporary and expressly hermeneutic work, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (1999), philosopher William Irwin offers a broad yet highly digestible critical-historical survey of intentionalist paradigms. Irwin navigates the dense, choppy waters of the hermeneutic tradition, with its variety of thinkers across philosophy and literary criticism, using a mix of commonsense and philosophical sophistication; he arrives at port anchored by enthusiastic but well-measured arguments in favor of an intentionalist stance. Among Irwin's useful contributions to these debates is his concept of the *urauthor*, which encapsulates many of the ideas above while adding some finer philosophical brushstrokes. The urauthor is a worthwhile concept to have on hand when considering the dynamics of second-order symbolisms in particular.

Negotiating between Hirsch, Wayne Booth, and P.D. Juhl, Irwin wants to "articulate an author construct suitable for intentionalism," which he finds conspicuously lacking, or at least unconvincing, in prior hermeneutic theories. Irwin's urauthor designates a "mental

¹²⁶ W.K. Wimsatt, "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited," 1968, in David Newton-de Molina, *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976).

construct,” an “intentionalist author construct.” This is to be differentiated from “the author,” which in Irwin’s model is the living breathing historical agent: the real-life, flesh-and-blood writer, filmmaker, or artist. To conjure the urauthor figure, the text-interpreter commits to a mental journey of seeking out the “origins” of the text and textmaker (thus the “ur”). Irwin admits to “practical limitations as to how accurately we reproduce the original, and in some cases the restrictions will be greater than others.” For interpreters to arrive at any reasonable formulation of this urauthor, they must “restrict” themselves by “taking into account only what is relevant for interpretation.” While it remains “impossible to say in advance and in precise terms what is relevant in a particular case,” we are obliged to consider “whatever information is at our disposal” on a case-by-case basis.¹²⁷

Among these materials at our disposal, “relevant biographical information will be very important,” as are “likely intentions, use of language in the text itself, information concerning the author’s context and audience, and other texts of the author.” Irwin circles familiar territory here, spotlighting the need for inquiries into “likely” (aka probabilistic) intentions, historical and artistic language conventions, oeuvre appraisals, and mental immersion into relevant cultural contexts. More pragmatically, to construct those case-by-case parameters, Irwin poses a series of questions, which I collect below. I envision these as comprising a practical heuristic for aspiring critics, students of the arts, and readers of many species of texts (not just art texts).

Irwin’s Hermeneutic Heuristic

- Who was the author and how did she think?
- What likely were her intentions in composing the text?

¹²⁷ William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 29–30.

- How is language used in the text itself?
- What was her historical context, and who was her audience?
- What attitudes and knowledge did the author presuppose of her readers?
- What other texts of the author do we have at our disposal?¹²⁸

Speaking to the always pressing issue of intellectual-resource allocation, Irwin points out, “How much effort we put into constructing the urauthor is a function of how much evidence we have, how clear the text as indicator seems to be, and how concerned we are that our interpretation be faithful.” For example, minimal effort might be exerted toward constructing the urauthor of a newspaper article, whereas vast amounts might be expended in configuring the urauthor of a philosophical or literary text. In either case, the resulting urinterpretation is contingent upon some “rigorous process of validation, assuming we are sufficiently concerned with achieving the correct interpretation.”¹²⁹ A valid second-order symbolics should assume such a goal. Thus, a rigorous validation process is crucial to deciphering an urauthor’s second-order symbolic meanings in any intellectually honest way.

The urauthor that emerges from diligent attempts to answer such questions, with an aim of arriving at “correct” interpretation, is “just the sort of figure that elicits cries of repression from some theorists.” But as Irwin rightly counter-argues, this figure is actually “not repressive but enabling”: enabling in the sense of building a more reliable, psychological bridge between the minds of textmaker and text-interpreter, of giving the interpreter some fighting chance to access the author’s intentions and produce some jointly shared public meaning. Irwin punctuates these remarks with perhaps one of the most incisive inferences drawn throughout in his book: “Interpretation must first involve historical

¹²⁸ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 30.

¹²⁹ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 62.

understanding and only later creativity.”¹³⁰ This is a crucial claim about the right cognitive and intellectual orientation to assume when in the interpretive mode: historical first, creative later. Couple this claim with Irwin’s practical heuristics and his emphasis on the case-by-case nature of urauthor reconstruction (which obliges a critic to be flexible and tactical in enforcing those heuristics), and Irwin establishes a reliable set of home coordinates for launching any reader’s interpretative trajectories. A second-order symbolics must operate within that trajectory.

Having admitted the artist-textmaker as *sine qua non* of the aesthetic transaction—as primary originary consciousness in the process of creative expression and, thus, as ultimate point of reference for establishing one’s constructs of urauthors and urinterpretations—I now want to put into play the technical apparatus Hirsch erects in *The Validity of Interpretation*. Published in 1967, Hirsch’s work introduces concepts and terms that still stand strong against the test of time. And they will constitute the hermeneutic staging ground upon which I build my biopoetics of the second-order symbol. Hirsch’s opening chapter “In Defense of the Author” reinforces many of the ideas articulated above, while the remainder of the work draws out his hermeneutic taxonomies, distinctions, and vocabularies, which I borrow freely. Those terms and their logical terminations bear glossing here.

A Hirschian Hermeneutic Scaffolding

- First, *meaning* shall be considered “that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence.”¹³¹ Denotative meanings can also carry layers of *implications*, which can be most reliably sussed out through communities of interpreters with sensibilities for detecting

¹³⁰ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 30.

¹³¹ Hirsch, *Validity*, 8.

connotative potentials. These meanings and implications are drawn out through the process of explication or *interpretation*, which, if backed by enough *probabilistic evidence* and judicious *consensus*, can be considered more or less *objective* and *valid*.

- On the other side of the critical coin, *significance* “names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.”¹³² Significance is the aim and result of the praxis of *criticism*. Significance and criticism, then, fall out of meanings and interpretations. In other words, criticism spins off from interpretation: it relates the world of the text, and all its intended valences and authorial visions attendant upon that text, to external concerns and visions of the world. These external visions could derive from the critic-reader’s personal experience, or from other knowledge domains about how the world, human nature, or the arts in general operate.
- So, while meaning/significance circuits of the hermeneutic loop remain open to recursive updates and revisions between these quasi-independent processes of interpretation and criticism, it can still be thought in some sense as a properly unidirectional transaction. A critic-reader cannot produce a valid piece of criticism—no matter how sound its external knowledge domains might be, no matter how creative or life-affirming its ultimate insights are—based on weak, invalid interpretations of the primary text at hand. That said, a critic is also susceptible to producing questionable, vapid, or intellectually dishonest criticism based upon a perfectly good set of textual interpretations.

¹³² Hirsch, *Validity*, 8.

- The foremost responsibility of critics, then, is at some bedrock level to construct (or at least identify, borrow, and redistribute) the most valid interpretations of primary texts available. From there, good criticism can follow. Interpretation can, thus, also be regarded as the bedrock skill to be mastered by students of literature, film, visual art, and most text-centric studies (even those revolving around nonfictional expository texts like law, philosophy, or historiography, albeit with different aims/emphases than art texts.)

Within the schemas of Hirschian hermeneutics, second-order symbolics function in the twinned universe of author-centric intentional meaning and reader-centric interpretation. Significance and the external sources upon which criticism relies, including life experience and other knowledge domains, can certainly aid in sussing out a text's second-order meaning potentials: that is, one's critical framings might guide one—in reverse direction—to identify previously overlooked textual cues or potent second-order symbols. Multiple readings or viewings of a text, mixed with consultations of other critical responses and relevant extratextual materials, would seem to be a respectable recipe for priming our symbol-detection mechanisms, for discerning where symbolic structures might dwell and where they might not. No matter the sequence or direction one takes to get there, however, this hermeneutic “hard fact” stands: a critic must arrive at valid exegetical interpretations before good criticism can take root. That means, within my model, if we ignore reasonably verifiable patterns of second-order symbols, our interpretations could be misfire. Misinterpretation begets invalid, unsound criticism. For instance, if we miss or choose to ignore the Native American confirmers of *The Shining*, our construals of Kubrick's vision

and the film's fullest intentional meanings are probably going to suffer irredeemably—as will any criticism that grows out of that root explication.

In a final bow to Hirsch, the passage below represents a passable summation of his larger epistemological framework, within which his hermeneutic theory gets situated. And it reflects foundational tenets of the critical-methodological stance I set for myself:

Since all humane studies, as Dilthey observed, are founded upon the interpretation of texts, valid interpretation is crucial to the validity of all subsequent inferences in those studies. The theoretical aim of a genuine discipline, scientific or humanistic, is the attainment of truth, and its practical aim is agreement that truth has probably been achieved. Thus the practical goal of every discipline is consensus—the winning of firmly grounded agreement that one set of conclusions is more probable than others—and this is precisely the goal of valid interpretation. It must not be dismissed as a futile goal simply because the subject matter of interpretation is often ambiguous and its conclusions uncertain. Certainty is not the same thing as validity, and knowledge of ambiguity is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge.¹³³

Of all the notable topics Hirsch ranges over (probabilistic truth, disciplinary consensus, chains of inference, the practical aims of knowledge), the last sentence deserves special attention and bears repeating: “Certainty is not the same thing as validity, and knowledge of ambiguity is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge.” To grasp the hermeneutic wisdom in this maxim, we don't need to be acquainted with the painstaking taxonomies of Empson's seven kinds of ambiguity—ambiguities which can present themselves in any speech act, but remain especially resonant in literary texts. Hirsch suggests, first, that absolute certainty in

¹³³ Hirsch, *Validity*, ix.

knowledge, which in some philosophical sense is never achievable, is not required for valid knowledge to be possessed: this echoes the basic thrust of shrinking possibility spaces and relying on probabilities to establish any operational truth status.

The second half of the clause is even more directly pertinent to the practice of art criticism, and the role second-order symbolics can play in that praxis. That is, recognizing an artist's intended aim to *be* ambiguous, or to design a text to *embody* ambiguity, is very different from ambiguous unresolvable knowledge about some object in the world, textual or otherwise. Simply put, if an artist is trying to exemplify or say something about the ambiguities inherent in the world or in our minds, we can establish a valid interpretation to accommodate that. If an author is unknowingly or carelessly ambiguous, or if the reader fails to register all the cues intended to orient interpretation toward proper meaning of the text, these are different matters entirely: the former is failure of vagueness or artistic delivery; the latter results in invalid interpretations.

Resetting Bill Blakemore's concept of "confirmers" in *The Shining* here, we might better grasp how second-order symbols can actually work to *cystallize* and *firm up* one's knowledge about an author's intention, rather than simply mystifying or ambiguating that intention. Second-order, indirect referential complexes may ignite a plurality of signifieds, a seemingly chaotic multiplication of meaning—and if that was the artist's intention to do so, then we accept that as a valid response. And they can work to confirm an artist's vision of how ambiguous the world or human perception can be. But they can also work just as well to lead us to *firmer* interpretative ground. If we assume artists have control over their symbolic forms, then by interpreting them responsibly, the reader's mind gets more fully plugged into the artist's mind. This seems a particularly important point to teach students who are learning

how to think and write about literature or film: that there *are* valid interpretations to be constructed from intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual cues; and that second-order symbolic cues can be essential factors in that collection of textual evidence, plugging us further into the aesthetic circuits of meaning, affect, and effect generated by the artwork.

Published ten years after *Validity*, John Reichert's *Making Sense of Literature* spins several threads that interlace with Hirsh but that also enrich the hermeneutic fabric I want to weave here. More practical in style and approach but no less theoretical than Hirsch, Reichert is a progeny of the Chicago School. But Reichert modifies and qualifies those critics' ideas in some productive ways. Published by Chicago Press, the book opens with Reichert responding to a passage from *Critics and Criticism* by R.S. Crane: "the only satisfactory approach to the existing diversities of criticism must be one that recognizes a plurality of distinct critical methods—each of them valid or partially valid within its proper sphere—and that insists, consequently, upon ascertaining, in methodological terms, what a given critic is doing, and why, before attempting either to state the meaning or judge the truth or falsity of his conclusions." Reichert's more discerning rejoinder follows:

As Crane was wont to remind us, however, there is a great difference between pluralism and a "merely amiable tolerance of half-truth, bad reasonings, and preposterous interpretations." And since pluralism is often transmuted into the flabby philosophy of "anything goes if it's interesting," I have taken pains to stress the ways we have of sorting out right readings from wrong ones, better from worse, whatever "approach" to literature they may embody. I have not hesitated to speak freely of how a reader *ought* to respond to a passage in a literary text, however intolerant the idiom may sound. And I

try to show in the last chapter that discovering what is *good* about a particular work is not only possible but desirable, however strong the current tendency to confuse evaluation with the exhibition of taste.¹³⁴

Not unlike Hirsch, both Crane and Reichert acknowledge the inevitable pluralism and cacophony of voices that artistic texts invite to the critical forum. Where Hirsch and Reichert (and myself) start to diverge from Crane is in their more epistemologically positive, and I would add more rigorous, attitude that allows for valid interpretations to be constructed from art texts. If critical discourse is powered by concerted good-faith efforts to shrink possibility spaces and construct evidence-based knowledge, then valid interpretations, and sound critical judgments that follow from there, are not hard to imagine. Crane's flabby plurality that declares "everyone's a winner" can thus be avoided.

Interestingly, Reichert feels he must confess to striking an occasionally normative, deontic tone in his hermeneutics. Evidently, propositions of *goods* and *shoulds* had become so anathema to literary studies in the late 70s, that entertaining such ideas warranted some apologist explanations. Similar kinds of suspicion linger in critical and pedagogical circles today. The practice of holding students and critics (and even artists themselves to a certain extent) accountable to identifiable standards of validity or good performance can slip too easily into an easier-to-teach, soft-psych approach to appreciating art texts, however. Promote the "anything goes" / "everyone's a winner" critical method, and suddenly valid correctable interpretation reverts to self-entitled opinion-making. As Hirsch might chime in, "The ethics of language hold good in all uses of language, oral and written, poetry as well as in philosophy. All are ethically governed by the intentions of the author. To treat an author's words as merely grist for one's own mill is ethically analogous to using another man merely

¹³⁴ John Reichert, *Making Sense of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), xi.

for one's own purposes."¹³⁵ That is, loosely bound "democratic" approaches to interpretation can encourage treating an author's text as grist for the reader's proverbial mill. This can do a grave disservice to serious students, teachers, and practitioners of the arts, who invest precious reserves of intellectual-imaginative energy into their praxes and engagements with artistic texts. Nor do these approaches constitute a rigorous pedagogical model to pass down to teachers of art and art criticism. With so much at stake today in delivering good information and reliable truth-claims to our reading publics, and in trusting those publics to interpret that information properly, the habit of encouraging free-roaming op-ed approaches to thinking through texts can perpetuate a dangerous paradigm—with serious sociopolitical as well as intellectual repercussions.¹³⁶

This stance is not meant to stifle an audience's imaginative, emotional responses to art texts. And of course our proverbial experiential-imaginative-emotional mills do, and should, play major roles along various points in our reading procedures. This happens most markedly, for instance, during our initial phases of comprehension, when we are simply trying to orient ourselves in the author's world, identifying with characters, settings, genres, or other basic structures of a narrative or poem; and also when we start stepping more formally into the hermeneutic zones of significance and true criticism, relating our interpretations of the texts more consciously back to our knowledge and experiences of the real world. To be sure, there will and *must* be input from our mills of episodic memory and emotional imagination for any interpretation to begin, let alone conclude. A recursive feedback circuit again presents itself as the most fitting conceptual model here. And Hirsch

¹³⁵ E.D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 90–91. Italics mine.

¹³⁶ This is especially resonant in the present moment of politics and media, where a fierce battle is being waged among global media outlets and the public for who has claim to valid, truthful information. While news and informational texts demand a different set of standards for validity than artistic texts, the critical texts that respond to and evaluate those artistic texts certainly share many overlapping standards with texts of journalism, history, etc.

and most other careful hermeneutic thinkers manifestly acknowledge as much. Proverbial mills aside, valid interpretation is governed by a willful genuflection to artists and their intentions. And that genuflection should be viewed not as readerly naiveté or subservience or disenfranchisement, but as both a remarkable gift *and* a teachable skill of the human mind and imagination.

Continuing this line of argument, Reichert addresses the question “How *ought* the reader respond to the text?” with a frank commonsense response: “Since the word ‘ought’ sticks in some throats, I will offer the further assumption, or bias, that a reader ought to respond to a work on the basis of correct understanding of it.”¹³⁷ With correct understanding comes the real prospect of misinterpretation. To mitigate against misreading, Reichert provides four broad criteria for assessing the quality of critical response and adjudicating between differing literary judgments:

I will argue, as I think most readers would, that it is possible to misunderstand something; I will also argue that it is usually possible, when two interpretations are actually in conflict, to adjudicate between them (when it is not possible, the work or passage in question is ambiguous); and that of two conflicting interpretations, the better is the one that accounts for the words of the text more completely, simply, consistently, and coherently. [...] At the same time, E.D. Hirsch is surely right when he says that in interpretation “certainty is always unattainable.” We can never be sure that new facts won’t turn up to invalidate our interpretation, or that someone won’t conceive of a new and better interpretation, of the facts at hand.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Reichert, *Making Sense of Literature*, 77.

¹³⁸ Reichert, *Making Sense of Literature*, 97.

Reichert walks this tricky part of the hermeneutic tightrope with agility. He allows for the reality that misunderstandings can and do occur, and for the possibility that, with proper critical agility, we can rectify those misunderstandings. At the same time, he stresses our epistemological duty to update or revise what we once thought were correct understandings whenever new evidence comes to light. There are vital positions to assume—at least if our aim is to accrete bodies of knowledge that show real gains in provisionally objective knowledge, as opposed to more random “democratic” fields of unchecked opinion-responses, which may yield nothing more than a Leaning Tower of Critical Babel. Additionally, Reichert’s four categories for judging the quality of interpretative performances are not only worthy of any student-paper grading rubric, they also amount to an effective set of standards for academic peer assessment. His interlocking criteria of completeness, consistency, coherence, and simplicity (what scientists might prefer to call elegance or parsimony) afford a memorable and broadly reliable scale for weighing out the most intellectually durable interpretative criticisms, which can then be propagated with some good confidence through the critical heritage.

Irwin provides an additional line of connection here: supplying further insight into the ever-present hermeneutic problems of variable artistic intention and reader misinterpretation. Citing Hirsch and his explication of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 54, Irwin reminds us that communicating effectively *into the future*¹³⁹ is one of the most definitive traits of texts in literature, law, and religion. This “underscores the point that authors of literary texts may have intentions of various types.” And Irwin rightly emphasizes that misinterpretations result

¹³⁹ This future-orientation of many artists and their objects might be viewed as an intensified extrapolation of *homo sapiens*’ higher cognitive faculties for long-term planning, mortality consciousness, and communicating with conspecifics dead or alive; perhaps mixed in with lower cognitive urges to leave our animal marks where we tread.

from not properly grasping these intentions. He points, for instance, to “the case of Hermann Hesse, who makes clear that his *Steppenwolf* has been widely misinterpreted as a pessimistic book.” He argues that “an author’s intention may be specific or vague, firmly grounded in the present or open to future applications, productive of logical reasoning or of aesthetic experience. The possibilities are nearly endless. [...] Whatever the author intended to communicate is, as we have argued, the meaning of the text.”¹⁴⁰ The reader is thus tasked with divining, to some reasonable degree, what an author’s intentional attitudes and aims of are/were. Am I, the reader, being asked to comprehend and enjoy this work on pure sensory-aesthetic grounds? As an exercise in logic? An exercise in morality? In history? In reportage? In narrative? All of the above? None of the above? Some of the above? Depending on the text and available contextual materials, answering these questions might be intuitive and uncomplicated, or complex and cognitively burdensome. Neither of these dipoles is preferred or normative. Although, I think we might find that our most canonical works of art lean in the latter direction: toward intentional complexity and a heavier cognitive tax that must be paid by the reader to apprehend that intention.

Irwin offers some cursory impressions of an author’s designs for intentional vagueness here. Such notions are important to consider in any second-order symbolologies. It is entirely possible that an artist can set out to create a very vague field of formal features, then grant license to the audience (tacitly or explicitly) to spin symbolic meanings out of the thin air of the artwork and the thicker air of their own symbol-creating minds: “Here’s my art. Have a go at it! Create as many meanings—second-order, third-order, tenth-order—as you want!” Alternatively, an artist might disown all such intentions but, after the fact, defer to the power of their audience: “Sure, whatever the audience wants.” For my biopoetics of

¹⁴⁰ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 117.

symbol, however, such cases are less interesting than works created by artists who seem to be deploying their second-order symbols with more premeditated strategic intentions—and who expect their readers to benefit from these deployments. If the aim is to interpret narratives of symbolic realism with some probabilistic validity or correctness (a quixotic goal perhaps, but mine nonetheless) then we must presume, axiomatically, that any second-order symbolic coding device is part of some intentional plan of the artist. No matter how mystified or hidden or fluid such devices might be, regrounding them back to the author's intentional schemes is key.

Circling back to Herman Hesse's expressed desire to correct his audience's responses to *Steppenwolf*, two additional examples can shed further light on this crucial idea: namely, that artistic intentions, while variable and best determined on a case-by-case basis, *can* be misconstrued and thus propagate textual misinterpretations. First, we turn to one of the most (in)famously misunderstood poems in the American collective consciousness: Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."¹⁴¹ This staple of the American poetic imagination is popularly construed as a profound statement about the heroism of individuality, the courage needed to travel the (alleged) road less-taken. As such, it gets relentlessly quoted at high school graduations, coopted by self-styled rebels everywhere as their platitudinous clarion call: Forge your own path in life! Buck tradition! March to your own drummer! This will take you to the Promised Land of properly American self-actualization! But a modicum of biographical research, a willingness to listen to the poet himself, and closer inspection of the text will securely attest that this was neither the poet's nor the poem's proper intention. In various

¹⁴¹ See, for instance, David Orr's book-length study on this very topic, *The Road Not Taken: Finding America In The Poem Everyone Loves And Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 2015); and Orr, "The Most Misread Poem in America," *The Paris Review* (Sept. 11, 2015): <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/11/the-most-misread-poem-in-america/>.

correspondences, Frost alludes to composing the poem with his friend Edward Thomas in mind. Though close compatriots, Frost expressed no uncertain agitation at Thomas's (in)decision-making processes: his habits of hemming-and-hawing, his second-guessing, his belated *sighs* of regret over what could have transpired down the road *not* taken. Frost scholar David Orr refers to the poet's crowing in his letters about the public's misconstruals and slipperiness of the poem: "I'll bet not half a dozen people can tell who was hit and where he was hit by my 'Road Not Taken.'"¹⁴² Even cursory attention to the poem's title will indicate this is a work more about a road *not taken* than a road that heroically *was* taken.¹⁴³

Like most of Frost's poetry, the full meaning and intention of "The Road Not Taken" are complex, impacted, far from black-and-white. As Orr posits, "The poem both is and isn't about individualism, and it both is and isn't about rationalization. It isn't a wolf in sheep's clothing so much as a wolf that is somehow also a sheep, or a sheep that is also a wolf."¹⁴⁴ It is a poem that both dramatizes and comments on the inescapability of making choices, the eternal returns to crossroads in life, and the potentially paralytic if unavoidable realities of regret. However ambiguous and subtle the poem might be, as responsible readers we cannot ignore the fact that we have some reliable evidence of the poet himself decoding and unraveling its layers for us. Sensible critics have picked this up. To discount these extratextual clues, which are mostly corroborated by the poem's intratextual cues, would be an odd choice indeed. If not borderline unethical. Within a Hirschian code of language

¹⁴² Orr, "The Most Misread Poem," citing Frost letter written to friend Louis Untermeyer.

¹⁴³ Titles are incidentally categorized as "paratexts" in Genette's taxonomies of transtexts. They function as "side" confirmers or complicators to a text proper. As such, they can be ripe spaces for triggering second-order modes of meaning-making. In the case of "The Road Not Taken," the title clearly resonates with first-order significance, but one that might slip by a first-time reader. Perhaps just being compelled to look *again*, to take a literal *second* look, to train harder than normal on a work's title, the reader becomes engaged in a mode of second-order meaning-making.

¹⁴⁴ Orr, "The Most Misread Poem."

ethics,¹⁴⁵ for instance, to take a person's words out of their full context, and to hijack them for one's own purpose—as casual readers of Frost's poem have reliably done—would be a great miscarriage of communication itself, no less a startling corruption of the poetic transaction. Perhaps Frost's misinterpreters are merely taking “the road less traveled” as they see it, by using his words as grist for their own individual mills.

For a more contemporary illustration of the importance of construing correct authorial intentions, we can think about how to read the deep twisting ironies of Stephen Colbert's satirical alter-ego on his television news parody show *The Colbert Report*. Could a viewer watch this show effectively, or construct valid interpretations of its content, without knowing the show's and creator's intentions? Without knowing *some* backstory on the real-life Stephen Colbert, his values, his intentions, his strategies to his art, would we be able to “get” the jokes or follow the sociopolitical arguments hidden inside his labyrinths of irony? The answer has to be “no” on both. And with this simple thought experiment, suddenly authorial intentions stemming from the psychologies and bodies of real-life people precipitate. We are tied back to a *terra firma* ground of reference: an autonomous human being we call Stephen Colbert. For stark example of this, in 2014, Colbert felt compelled to defend himself on-air to a specific set of viewers who expressed offense at a heavily ironized joke deploying a stereotyped Asian character. This was a flesh-and-blood man trying to clear up what he saw as a misconstrual of his intentions. Whether the joke was crafted in poor taste or misread by hyper-sensitive or satirically illiterate viewers unfamiliar with the show, is neither here nor there. The takeaway is that intentions are onic and deeply consequential aspects of both art and life. As ethically responsible readers/viewers/listeners, we must honor them as such.

¹⁴⁵ See prior pages for this code of ethics.

Before transitioning into a sampling of ev-cog–inflected hermeneutics, a final point is in order. If we are to assume some premeditative strategizing on the part of the artist, as I suggest we do above, this also presumes that *conscious* awareness is the thing doing most of the driving and heavy-lifting in artistic composition. Meanwhile, calculating the role that *unconscious intention* plays in art—and whether it is even logically sustainable to identify any unitary force as both unconscious *and* intentional—is an interminably sticky topic of debate. Hirsch, Reichert, and Irwin all make attempts at tackling it, with varying degrees of success. A few citations can bring the major points of contention to light, but any satisfactory resolution demands a full-length study of its own. Reichert begins his section “Unconscious Intentions” with the following:

To say that our understanding of a work relies upon a conception of the author’s intention is not to say that interpretation reconstructs some private thought process that the author engaged in while writing; nor is it to say that all the qualities, relationships, and meaning that we may correctly attribute to a work were intended.

[...] The reader is not trying to recover a mental event; he’s after, rather, the reason for the author’s having written what he wrote.

[...] There is no question that we often do things unintentionally, and that not everything in a work can be explained by reference to the author’s reason for putting it there. A work may have a design which we decide did not come about as a result of the author’s intentions. And we would base our conclusion that certain designs or effects were unintended on evidence suggesting that the author didn’t do what he did for some reason. [...] Such

unintended effects may be the result of any number of factors, from ignorance or prejudice or ineptness to habits of verbal or conceptual association of which the author was unaware and which were therefore not in his control.

But at my back I always hear several well-intentioned colleagues begging some allowance among these factors for the author's "unconscious intentions." Perhaps the previous paragraphs make for sufficient allowances for them. But for me the phrase "unconscious intention" has at least the appearance if not the reality of paradox about it.¹⁴⁶

This is a fair appraisal. Irwin for his part reflects on how the acts and processes of artistic creation itself can percolate out new meanings while modifying older meanings, conscious or otherwise:

It can often be in the process of producing the text itself that the author's intended communication becomes most clear to him. Even then, however, the meaning itself is still prior to the text. It is only that the author's conscious awareness of his meaning comes to light in the text's production. Indeed even this may not happen. It is possible and in fact common, for an author to produce a text, have a meaning in mind, and not be consciously aware of that meaning. Some meanings, i.e. intended communication, as Hirsch had shown, are unconscious. Some of these can be brought to the author's awareness by interpreters of his text, and some meanings may resist being brought to awareness in this way. In the end, though, the author did

¹⁴⁶ Reichert, *Making Sense of Literature*, 74–5.

have a meaning, his text serves to indicate that meaning, and it is the task of the urinterpreter to find and articulate that meaning.¹⁴⁷

Endlessly fascinating, the conundrums of unconscious intention may continue to evade clear resolution. More interesting for this project's purposes, however, are the opportunities afforded artists for exploiting a reader/spectator's unconscious perceptions and cognitions using well-designed formal strategies in their text. The consequences of this, and whether that design process happens more intuitively or is very consciously strategized, will be a matter addressed in the following chapter on biopoetics of second-order symbolotics.

In this next passage, Reichert can be seen tying together several tissues of thought elaborated above, with his usual succinct and supple clarity. This practical-minded summation of his theories and procedures for reading literature is worthy of adoption by anyone interested in hermeneutics, symbolism, or art texts generally:

What we interpret when we read, then, is a composition of words arranged by an author. We assume that he arranged them as he did for some purpose, though we acknowledge that his reasons may not always be apparent or recoverable, nor his aims achieved. We test our interpretations of parts of the composition against our developing understanding of the whole, and we prefer an over-all hypothesis that explains the whole as consistently, completely, and simply as possible. [...]

Of course we bring many kinds of "extratextual" knowledge and information to bear on our interpretation of a text. No text "speaks for itself," though it exerts a power over what we may reasonably say about it by virtue of it being a complete arrangement of certain words (rather than others) in a

¹⁴⁷ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 64.

certain order (rather than some other conceivable order). The knowledge and information we bring to the text includes linguistic knowledge, knowledge of literary genres, conventions and aims, and knowledge of human behavior. It may also include specific information about the author, his environment, his beliefs, his stated aims. We do not *deduce* our interpretation from such information. Rather we use it as a source of possibilities that the text may have actualized.¹⁴⁸

With this, Reichert reiterates the intentional powers of the artist, who strategically crafts and configures materials for desired effect. But he invests near equal responsibility in the reader, who must exert some dedicated efforts to invoke the artist's presence through experiencing those effects, probing *around* and *outside* the text, and reconfiguring those strategies in what Irwin would call the process of urauthor construction. Reichert's passage is concrete and commonsensical, yet supported by deeper theoretical justifications for how to achieve a sound, sustainable literary praxis. It is a viable candidate to plaster on any course syllabus in which interpreting art texts figure centrally.

Ev-Cog Critics: A Hermeneutics from the Bioculture

At this point, a few citations of ev-cog critics and their hermeneutic models is expedient. In the introductory remarks to one of his early books, *Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (1996), Patrick Hogan, who would become a leading exponent and practitioner of cognitive literary studies, opens with a critique of the hermeneutic theories of Umberto Eco. Hogan argues that Eco's ideas, as gathered in his *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), are "not adequate to provide the necessary clarification and

¹⁴⁸ Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation*, 125.

explanation of meaning and method.” However, “this is not a failing peculiar to Eco. Readers familiar with the range of current writings in the theory of interpretation will recognize that [...] Eco is one of the most rigorous and erudite literary theorists writing today.” As Hogan sees it, the problem “that underlies the vascillation and obscurity on the topic of meaning rests in the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that Eco shares with almost all recent theorists—and, in fact, almost all not-so-recent literary theorists as well.” Hogan contends, I think rightly, that “a great deal of the theoretical debate surrounding meaning and interpretation has been seriously misguided. For even the most seemingly divergent views typically share very dubious assumptions about being and knowing.”¹⁴⁹ While not endorsing every tactic, proposition, and direction Hogan takes in his hermeneutical system, I do share in his basic epistemological starting points and methodological premises described here:

I argue—contrary to prevailing views in literary studies—that interpretation is and should be a case of ordinary inferential reasoning and thus that there is no methodological difference between interpretation in the humanities and theory construction in the physical sciences. In addition, I argue that the nature of interpretation does not entail cultural, historical, or other forms of relativism, as commonly thought. Quite the contrary, in fact. A clear understanding of interpretative method indicates that intercultural, historical, and other “hard cases” of interpretation differ from ordinary interpretation in degree only, and not in kind.¹⁵⁰

Nancy Easterlin takes similar points of departure in elaborating her biocultural hermeneutics. The sweep of her book *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and*

¹⁴⁹ Patrick Colm Hogan. *On Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 2–3.

¹⁵⁰ Hogan, *On Interpretation*, 3.

Interpretation (2012) is basically an extended, methodically developed argument for the primary place of interpretation in literary studies and what that all entails. Easterlin establishes a hermeneutic model that invites in scientific knowledge from any relevant empirical discipline (the “bio” in her biocultural) to update and complicate our interpretative responses to literature, particularly once a reader crosses into the zones of criticism/significance. And Easterlin integrates a strong command of evolutionary, cognitive, and psychological science into her close readings of authors, ranging from Wordsworth to Raymond Carver, with grace and intricacy. But Easterlin is also firm in privileging discursive methodologies over more empirical or positivistic approaches to literary studies, thus signaling her call for a continuation of literary studies’ core tried-and-true tradition: that of producing and teaching good, operable, close interpretations of primary texts. Easterlin is more skeptical than some in the biocultural humanities about the power of external scientific disciplines to provide a magic potion, methodologically or substantively, that will enable reader-critics to miraculously converge upon closed correct interpretations of literary texts. So she configures a hermeneutic middle ground that rejects 1) a strong scientism aiming at transforming the humanities into an empirical discipline of greedy reductionism, 2) the morbid hermeneutic-epistemological deadends of poststructuralism, and 3) the ego-stroking salves of strong reader-response schools of criticism. This theoretic middle ground is rendered with as much logical coherence one could hope for considering the philosophical minefields Easterlin must negotiate.

To weave her path, Easterlin threads her theories around the “interrelated questions of aims, objects, and methods” of literary studies, indicating where these might overlap with and diverge from the aims, objects, and methods of other sciences. She strives, in her words,

to map out an alternative theoretical stance that suggests that the very nature and diversity of literary artifacts, which are themselves only fully constituted via a complex cognitive process of production and consumptions, a process itself inherently interpretative, militates against a programmatically scientific approach to literature.

[...]

In contrast to the relatively strong emphasis on quantitative research championed by some Darwinian literary critics, then, I suggest that biological and cultural evolution together highlight the centrality of meaning-making processes for our species and, by extension, provide ample justification for interpretation as the core aim of our discipline.¹⁵¹

Easterlin believes that programmatic empirical approaches to the arts will ultimately fail, or at least impoverish, those arts and their audience-critics.¹⁵² In Easterlin's view, non-discursive approaches to literary criticism simply will not accommodate for the "unimaginable complexities"¹⁵³ of human mental life and the interpretative processes that unfold during the reading experience. That experience entails a complex individual human mind-brain, situated in a particular historical world, coming into contact with a complex aesthetic text, which conjures a world populated with various other minds, which was produced by another mind from another time and world. Citing the work of Marcus

¹⁵¹ Nancy Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 6.

¹⁵² It should be noted that Easterlin's characterizations of some of her "opponents" here, if we want to call them that, can be a bit exaggerated, or at least have been corrected since her writing. Joseph Carroll, for instance, has been crystal clear in his recent prodigious publications about the value and rightful place of discursive forms of literary criticism and pedagogy. He just sees near-equal value in and rightful place for more statistically informed, empirically oriented, truly collaborative praxes of literary criticism (e.g. co-authoring papers with scientists and/or importing their best methods for applying to our own thinking through and about literature).

¹⁵³ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 20.

Nordlund, Robert Trigg, and Merlin Donald, Easterlin sketches out a pragmatic, if at times unsteady, hermeneutic model that strives to account for: the “dynamic, reciprocal”¹⁵⁴ cognitive-emotional interplays arising through the agent-vectors of author, text, world, and reader. Easterlin assumes a biographical *and* biological author, a biographical *and* biological reader, and a text that wants to communicate something about a fictional world *and* a real world.

Compounding this already tricky-and-sticky matrix of interacting vectors is the raw “complexity of literary phenomena” and their ontological status as “cognitive objects.” Easterlin wages that literary phenomena are “products of individual consciousnesses that reach fruition when their material instantiations are apprehended by other consciousnesses.” As products of what Donald calls “theoretic culture” and what Easterlin calls “symbolic culture,” literary objects have a “complex material-cognitive phenomenology whose essence, its iteratively constructed meanings, is not amenable to objective testing.” Thus, “the notion of anything resembling scientific objectivity in interpretative criticism [...] seems unachievable.” Because of their status as cognitive objects, Easterlin suggests, literature is unlike the cells and physiological systems that biologists might study, or the measurable material reactions that chemists might study. Their ontological fluidity and unimaginable interpretative complexity means that they are less amenable to the “iterative process of scientific hypothesis, experimentation, falsification, and proof.”¹⁵⁵ From here, Easterlin parrots Trigg to make this provocative, and I think persuasive, ontological observation: it might be perfectly reasonable for an intellectually honest, rigorous thinker to be a “realist” about one class of entity (e.g. bodies, organs, molecular and chemical processes) and a

¹⁵⁴ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 20.

¹⁵⁵ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 22.

“relativist” about another class of entities (e.g. meanings derived from art experiences). This seems a fair stance to strike. One that does not risk easy regression to the most egregious logical and ontological incoherencies of postmodern relativity. Moreover, by stressing the iterative nature of these meaning-construction processes, which includes both literary reading and science itself, Easterlin reminds us about the deep recursive structures that likely underpin the cognitive functions of the human mind-brain: structures that seem to drive a fundamental processing principle at the very root of language itself, interpretation generally, and even (in an especially intensified way) second-order symbolologies.

Easterlin does hedge herself here, wisely: “This is not the same thing as saying literary meaning is endlessly deferred in any radical sense; rather, literary works are intentionally constructed not only in light of the endless complexity of world and reader but largely because of that complexity. And interpretive criticism is the attempt to shed some significant but relative light on that complexity.” She notes, loosely echoing the implicit/explicit dialectic of second-order symbolologies, that “interpretation is the process of explaining what is not plain or explicit, such as the possible meanings generated by strings of words.” But she also rejoins with a more controversial claim: “Interpretative criticism addresses a core feature of literature, *meaning*, but the immateriality and relative instability of this core feature makes it impossible to adjudicate between rival and reasonable interpretations.”¹⁵⁶ Strong claims like this, in combination with the redundant and rather gauzy conceptual figures of the “unimaginable” and “immaterial,” can give Easterlin’s reader some pause, casting the utility of her hermeneutic speculations in a more pallid light.

That said, while someone like Hirsh might sound a more confident tone about the possibility of adjudicating between diverging interpretations, Easterlin is actually not that far

¹⁵⁶ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 23.

afield from his thinking. Hirsch was always careful to emphasize that achieving certainty of meaning was not possible; rather, achieving the most valid, most probable interpretations was the eventual goal of the hermeneutic circle. The circuit of that loop might not ever be closed entirely, but surely the loops could converge upon some shareable spaces. Gottschall's shrinking of the possibility space is not incompatible here either. Even if language itself is a generator of mathematically infinite combinatorial possibilities, as linguists like Pinker readily point out, and even if individual mind-brains are in constant states of fluid motion—the real-life *practice* of interpreting an inscribed product of that language must entail *some* processes of narrowing, not widening, this theoretical infinitude. The real acts of living with language and literature, which are both produced by real human beings, do not obviously render infinite regress, infinite paralysis, or infinite creativity. Recourse to extratextual, intratextual, and intertextual materials can reduce that field of possible meaning space and presents itself like a commonsense solution to this problem. Easterlin, a self-described pragmatist, would probably be compelled to agree with such observations. So in my view, all four of these thinkers (Easterlin, Hirsch, Gotschall, and Pinker) ultimately have much more in common with each other than their academic philosophical hairsplitting might suggest.

Reinforcing the presumed dominance of interpretation in human psychology and behavior, Easterlin sees human beings as unavoidably entangled by and invested in “perpetual meaning-making activities.” And crucially, she demonstrates how “literature often plays a part in reawakening us to the sense of meaning-making”—a process that usually gets pushed into our unconscious minds. Participating in the aesthetic-semantic transactions of literature foregrounds into conscious working memory what gets naturally consolidated (for good evolutionary reasons) into the deeper recesses and procedural memory systems of the

human mind-brain. By reading literature, we are compelled to confront, examine, and negotiate with our interpretative systems. We are forced to look under the hood of our meaning-making engines. Whether this kind of activity is adaptive or maladaptive, pleasurable or painful, it is a certainly a fascinating and high-level cognitive challenge. And it is for Easterlin the central problem of the literary experience, if not the human experience: “Considered as a whole, the semantic power of imaginative literature bears witness to the centrality of meaning-making for the human species, for the business of producing and consuming texts is primarily about extending our meaning-making capabilities, not about something else during which meaning-making happens to become some secondary kind of adventure.”¹⁵⁷

Easterlin does more work to hook her hermeneutic model, and modern modes of advance literary production and interpretation, into the evolved universal architecture of the human mind. The evolved mechanisms she circles around here are also part and parcel to a theory of second-order symbolologies: “Rather than seeing text and meanings as a distinguishing feature of literary or humanistic culture, a point of view that further marginalizes literature and the other arts, we might ask what impulse has led to the creations of symbolic artifacts for purposes of interpretation. But considered in light of our unique features as an evolved species, the drive to create cognitive objects that offer themselves up for interpretation is of a piece with our distinct species logic.”¹⁵⁸ Referencing Ellen Dissanayake’s work on these topics, Easterlin remarks how literary phenomena can be thought of as “special”—or even “extra special”¹⁵⁹—performances of a suite of mental

¹⁵⁷ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 24.

¹⁵⁸ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 26.

¹⁵⁹ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 54.

mechanisms that evolved to help our species occupy its special “cognitive niche.”¹⁶⁰ I would add that these extra-special performances are *high-intensity displays* of these species-typical mechanisms. And going one step further, a replete aesthetic field, dense with second-order symbols, could be thought of as an extra-*extra*-special case: a high-intensity display of already specialized, and *special-making*, features and circuits of the human mind-brain. To create and properly interpret these special fields of representational-symbolic-aesthetic displays, however, Easterlin rightly observes that humans require additional helps beyond our psychobiological endowments: namely, we need cultural institutions and certain kinds of memory technologies (what she calls external storage systems) to extend the human mind and allow us to cope with these rich, but potentially baffling and time-consuming, semantic puzzles. Both of these vectors have intensified during our modern industrial and information ages.

In the end, Easterlin makes a forceful case for why and how to take the best from both worlds (the worlds of Snow’s two cultures) to craft a responsible model of hermeneutics that is at once science-friendly yet literature-dominant. It is a hermeneutics that hangs together logically and empirically for the most part, and one that justifies a literary criticism that can unite the bio with the culture in fair proportions. Easterlin, in fact, would prefer to obliterate the rather artificial borders between these two worlds. “This two-cultures mentality is simply wrong,” she writes. If literary critics want to produce credible relevant work in today’s advanced stages of scientific knowledge, they must answer to “the complex and fascinating

¹⁶⁰ The “cognitive niche”—as defined by the likes of John Tooby, Leda Cosmides, Irv DeVore, and Steven Pinker—refers to the mental “geographies” and behaviors that enable and constitute the uniquely flexible cultures and on-the-fly adaptiveness to new environments that the human species is known for. The mechanisms that carve out that niche can include specialized memory systems that allow for hindsight, capacities for symbolic thought and projection that allow for foresight, and any other higher order cognitive systems that allow for social cooperation and negotiation, long-range planning, tool-use and tool-making, hunting, etc.

psychobiological factors that bear on our production and consumption of literature” and avoid “trivializing [...] interpretation and meaning as aspects of language and texts and the special provenance of humanities, when they are distinguishing features of the human species.”¹⁶¹ At the same time, however, we must also make room for the fluid, combinatorial complexities of life and literature. Unimaginable complexities notwithstanding, Easterlin still tasks the reader-critic with producing pragmatic, intellectually responsible, evidence-based interpretations above all. Triangulating those interpretations with the latest knowledge in other relevant disciplines (the mind sciences, psychology, anthropology, etc.) is certainly important, today more than ever, and is most welcome in Easterlin’s hermeneutic universe. However, her reader will also come away viewing this part of the critical equation as taking the passenger seat next to the principal driver of literary studies: the concern with negotiating valid interpretations of the text at hand. In the end, Easterlin’s formidable critical performance—a truly remarkable and thoroughgoing theoretical exposition, coupled with several compelling close-readings of primary texts—is one that must not be overlooked in any modern hermeneutics theory.

Moving to film and media studies, the 2004 collection *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media* is a force of scholarly power arguing for the viability and rightful place of concepts of authorial intention in screen art. Its selections are informed by recent evocog science and commonsense pragmatic thinking. A prefatory note claims that, in this post-poststructuralist time, “there has been a new awareness of the fact that media products are not only produced by discourses and ideologies, but also by individuals of flesh and blood.”¹⁶²

The scholars within its pages do not simplify the matter, however. And they deftly

¹⁶¹ Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 34.

¹⁶² *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. Torban Grodal, Bente Larsen, and Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004), 7.

problematize the picture of how to get at those ever-elusive urauthors of film and media products, which are complicated by matters of a collective craft industry and the corporate affiliations of mainstream cinematic narratives. Nonetheless, these writers converge by and large on a basic, axiomatic reality: that there are real-life decisionmakers at the head of the snake who are charged with selecting and organizing the final cinematic products; that these products are intended to produce certain audience effects; and that those decisions and their makers can be at least speculated upon with intelligence, if not identified categorically for furthering valid interpretations of the media product at hand.

In the collection's opening article, "Agency in Film, Filmmaking, and Reception," Torban Grodal supplies cogent explanation for our inextricable need to assume authorial intention in the executions and readings of art texts, and how we can best negotiate this need. His arguments are steeped in hermeneutic history and ev-cog theory, and they are highly persuasive in marking out a middle ground between an oversimplified romanticized concept of The Artist-Filmmaker and the postmodern voids of The Dead Author. Quoting Grodal's introduction at some length is useful:

One of the central human mental models is that of agency. Our biological predispositions have been molded at a time when the prime human problems were related to interaction with living agents. Animals hunted humans and humans preyed on animals. Furthermore, humans interacted with each other. Thus, our evolution is the story of how agents have interacted with each other and with nature. The concept of agency even provided a modal for understanding physical nature; just as a religious understanding of the universe mostly consists in describing it by means of divine agencies (cf.

Boyer 2001). It is fundamental for normal human functioning that our theory of other minds acknowledges that such minds belong to conscious, intending, and desiring beings; the lack of an ability to achieve such an understanding leads to autism. A model of agency typically implies that a body is pervaded by an agency that possesses the ability to perceive, to be conscious, to have thoughts and emotions, to have specific traits, and to have the ability to intend and act.

It is therefore not surprising that a major mode of explaining film focuses on agency. [...]

It is puzzling that some cultural historians link the use of agency, e.g. the concept of the author, with Western capitalist societies, or [...] with Judeo-Christian societies. This is quite wrong: to explain origin and functioning by a personalized agency is an old and universal procedure. [...] To think that non-Western and/or pre-modern cultures are anonymous is a strongly patronizing idea that is fundamentally Eurocentric.

This article will therefore steer a middle course between individualism and non-individualism. Foucauldian or Barthesian ideas of the death of “man” and the author, and the absolute reign of anonymous structures or differences, are untenable objectivisms. [...] The individual is not a modern invention, not a Western invention, and even apes have very distinct individual traits and capabilities. Cognitive neuroscience provides the theoretical basis for understanding that we are biological and cultural individuals, who possess universal as well as individual features reflecting our individual life stories.

General phenomena have to be filtered through individuals who are at the crossroads of many different influences. [...] Thus, this article argues that films are or may be individually authored and that they are also products of general cultural and biological determinations.¹⁶³

Grodal's prevailing idea is that the human mind evolved theories of agency for sensible adaptive reasons, and these theories inevitably inform our film-viewing experiences, for better or for worse. Mainly, however, it is for the better. The arguments Grodal unfurls from here work through this pervasive human disposition for agency-assignment. Several are important to enunciate for a hermeneutics accommodating second-order symbolics.

"The basic experience of agency," writes Grodal, "in a non-mediated word is that is it a dynamic point of crystallization of power within a space." Humans, animals, and natural forces in real life "express their power within a world that is the scene of agency." Film, with its unparalleled capacities for creating a simulacrum of spatiotemporal mimesis, can exploit these facts of cognition, perception, and the human situation in powerful ways. As Grodal puts it, "The basic approach to films and other audiovisual media is molded on our perception of a natural world in which agency unfolds." And, as I want to stress later for my theory of a generic symbolic-realism, "our *basic* experience of films is therefore a *realist-mimetic* one: We see a world in front of our eyes that simply exists, and we try to detect agencies within that world, because such agencies are the sources of meaning and power."¹⁶⁴ Grodal points out that for many mainstream filmgoers, those agents tend to be "characters-actors," who can usurp the place of any other filmmaking agents in the audience's critical equations; they become "actor-authors." In the art film, on the other hand, viewers tend to

¹⁶³ Torban Grodal, "Agency in Film, Filmmaking, and Reception, in *Visual Authorship*, 15.

¹⁶⁴ Grodal, "Agency in Film," *Visual Authorship*, 17. Italics mine.

shift their theory of filmmaking agency to the director. If they are not invited to do so in any explicit ways by a filmmaker, it is certainly an implied and assumed convention amongst savvy art-filmgoers today, who “experience the film as a kind of communication by an agency, perhaps analogous with someone listening to a voice.”¹⁶⁵ Art films present fictional worlds just like mainstream films do. But art-film viewers typically watch those films “to get an insight into a director’s special and personal vision of the world,” to experience “contact” with “a powerful personality.”¹⁶⁶

Grodal astutely rejoins that “the average viewer of mainstream films may know only a few directors” and thus a series of tensions arise:

The popular conception of such successful mainstream film directors is, however, not one based on thinking that the director of a film has a special vision or wants to communicate a particular message. The mental picture or model is one of an especially skilled person, a crafts-person or magician, who is able to make more exquisite objects than the average crafts-person. [...] Thus, for the average viewer, the director is either nonexistent or a skilled *metteur en scène*. [...]

This does not rule out that the average viewer may have vague ideas of an addresser-agency as a concept that is used to interpret those aspects of a film that pose interpretive problems or create distance from the fictional-mimetic world. [...] But to go “upstream,” i.e. against the communicative and mental flow from the addresser via the viewers’ perceptions of the film to their simulation of the actions, is a default procedure in the special sense that

¹⁶⁵ Grodal, “Agency in Film,” *Visual Authorship*, 18.

¹⁶⁶ Grodal, “Agency in Film,” *Visual Authorship*, 19.

the viewer falls back on those interpretative strategies that characterize non-fictional communication (i.e. to interpret intention and context). Most mainstream films are made so that the viewer may enjoy the easy ride “downstream,” following the flow that leads to simulating the diegetic world and its actions.¹⁶⁷

In my model of second-order symbolotics, filmmakers or artists who activate their replete aesthetic fields to deliver second-order meanings must then ask their audience to cognate “upstream” to some extent or another. Activating these upstream modes signals that we are likely invested in, as Grodal points out later referencing Barthes, more of a “readerly text”: one in which the author attempts to “transmit his or her visions to the reader,” be it efficiently, tyrannically, or otherwise. A “writerly text,” on the other hand, is supposed to be the “new democratic text which was a tool for the reader’s own imagination and self-expression, making the reader the true writer”—or as Hirsch might warn, mere presentation of so much grist for one’s own mill. As Grodal bitingly points out, the reality is that the “division of labor between reader and writer is undemocratic, and Barthes did not consider that artists might have more aesthetic competence than the readers or viewers and might use more time and energy of the production than readers and viewers would use on the reception.”

It is important to emphasize here that learning how to prepare for these upstream, readerly modes of art viewing can take some getting used to. It can take fuller immersion in the text, and possibly repeat viewings. It can take immersion in similar kinds of art acts. It can take teaching of and exposure to such techniques. It can take research or discussion that happen outside the text at hand, facilitated institutionally or privately.

¹⁶⁷ Grodal, “Agency in Film,” *Visual Authorship*, 18.

Grodal provides several more insights germane to a hermeneutics of second-order symbolologies. In the passage below, he discusses “open” texts, ambiguous formal cues, the shades of difference between artistic creativity and viewer *recreativity*, and the mental-emotional saturations that can be felt from the semantic compressions and decompressions released through open associative networks. Ambiguous cues in a text, Grodal contends, do not magically license viewers to erase their obligations to evoke an authorial presence behind those ambiguities. In fact, probably the opposite is true. A series of open or ambiguous cues in a text does not mean we can infer an equally free-floating, vague, feeble, or evacuated author. Rather, they seem to compel us to re-ground those cues back toward a meaning-maker, toward some more-or-less stable urauthor.

The “open” or writerly film is [...] not necessarily one that allows more room for the viewer’s own imagination. The open film is just as pattern-bound as the closed film; the open films do not necessarily differ in their level of viewer activation or viewer freedom, but they provide different emotional reactions, as closed texts are linked to action-motivating emotions that may be released, whereas open films cues saturated feelings and associations. An open ending will even be a much stronger activator of the viewer’s awareness of a direction, because interpretational problems in the fictional world may cue the viewer into attempting to disambiguate the film by trying to figure out the addresser’s intentions. [...]

It is important to distinguish between a viewer-based creativity and the viewer’s level of activation. As David Bordwell has shown, the viewer needs actively to process the cues that the addressers have produced. The viewer

may fuse the film cues with personal experiences and with competences derived from previous film viewings, or react on elements that are in conflict with the viewer's own values and experiences. But originality takes time and professional skills, and therefore the viewer's activity is either essentially driven by the addresser agency or the viewer's experience is most likely an impoverished one. Thus, the pleasure of being an active reader or viewer is typically similar to that of solving crossword puzzles: It is the personal process that is gratifying, although it is only an active recreation or what the addresser has intended and made. [...] The intended function is, however, not a viewer norm; if viewers are able to make more gratifying experiences than those intended by the filmmaker, they are just as free to do as I am to use a chair for papers and books, although the chair was not "intended" for that purpose and is functionally better suited for sitting on.

Devices aimed at creating open effects, like open endings, are just as powerful and precise cues as closure, although the cued experience may be one of openness and subjective saturation. Thus, the feeling of mental plentitude by strong activation of open associative networks is due to a mental overload because the lack of categorization means a lack of cognitive compression—and these uncompressed cognitive associations do not necessarily indicate a real mental complexity.¹⁶⁸

In my model of second-order symbolotics, it might be acceptable to consider symbolic devices open or ambiguous in the sense of their being reliant upon a hidden or implicit decoder key; also, some second-order signs can point in several polysemous semantic

¹⁶⁸ Grodal, "Agency in Film," *Visual Authorship*, 22–3.

directions, rather than in more straightforward doubled/allegorical direction. But *valid* second-order symbols must be considered a verifiable component of pattern-bound texts, which are intended by some recognizable urauthor to cue the interpreter toward certain effects of emotion or meaning. These second-order signs are vectors that can lead to, if not constitute, that matrix of “saturated feelings and associations” Grodal sees as defining many art texts—an idea Grodal will elaborate at some length in his later work *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (2009). An RAF (replete aesthetic field) deploying second-order symbolic devices could be reimagined, in Grodal’s language, as a text saturated with compressed associational meanings resulting in specific kinds of cognitive-emotional loading—sometimes overloading. Grodal directly mentions symbolic structures in a later passage, wherein he stresses the importance of gaining exposure to an auteur’s *oeuvre* in order to properly decode that filmmaker’s stylistic signature and symbolic language: “Symbolic or stylistic features may seem mysterious when only one film in an *oeuvre* is considered, but such opaque features may possibly be disambiguated if we use the whole *oeuvre* as a context. The procedure is similar to making a set of equations with a set of unknowns.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, a keen handle on second-order symbolologies seems again vital for our critical equations to produce valid outputs.

Interpretation does not occupy the same central position and topic of study in Joseph Carroll’s critical praxis as it does in Easterlin’s and Grodal’s. Nevertheless, Carroll’s body of work implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) assumes the proper place of an operable set of well-thought-out hermeneutical positions in order to teach and practice sound literary criticism. In one of his earlier works of evo-crit, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004), Carroll derives his own set of interpretive terms and scales,

¹⁶⁹ Grodal, “Agency in Film,” *Visual Authorship*, 33.

mostly from a Hirschian hermeneutic universe. Carroll's "total structure of meaning" is akin to Hirsch's domain of meaning/interpretation, whereas his "total meaning situation" stakes out basically the same territories as Hirsch's domain of criticism/significance.¹⁷⁰ Carroll's terms and elaborations are worth noting, but I have stuck with Hirsch's original nomenclature for simple reasons of aesthetic preference and first origins.

More instructive perhaps is this later passage Carroll composed to preface a critical intervention into *Hamlet*. It basically unfolds as a broad, expository, hermeneutic heuristic, which could be applied to any work of literature or art text more generally:

A comprehensively adequate interpretive account of *Hamlet* [or any art text] would take in, synoptically, its phenomenal effects (tone, style, theme, formal organization), locate it in a cultural context, explain that cultural context as a particular organization of the elements of human nature within a specific set of environmental conditions (including cultural traditions), register the responses of audiences and readers, describe the socio-cultural, political, and psychological functions the work fulfills, locate all those functions in relation to the evolved needs of human nature, and link the work comparatively with other artistic works, using a taxonomy of themes, formal structures, affects, and functions derived from a comprehensive model of human nature. In practical terms, of course, there is only so much one can do in a single essay.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See, in particular, Chapter 3, "Human Universals and Literary Meaning," 131–2.

¹⁷¹ Joseph Carroll, "Intentional Meaning in *Hamlet*: An Evolutionary Perspective," *Style* 44, no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 230–260.

This passage is only implicitly based on any strong form of evolutionary social science, which is Carroll's bailiwick: i.e. it is in many respects scientitically agnostic as a standalone statement, which should make it palatable even to humanists who fear toxic forces of Scientism overtaking their territory. And it provides a well-wrought summary of the basic interpretational attitude and goals I wish to effect in a biopoetics of symbol. Second-order symbols and indirect referential complexes play crucial determiner roles in the style, theme, and formal-organization components of Carroll's wider hermeneutic vision and interpretational schematic. Thus, a knowledge of second-order symbologics—knowing when its schemes might be useful to deploy in text-interpretation as well as text-making—should be an essential building-block for a viable hermeneutic theory and, in turn, for a viable arts-education program more generally.

To take this last point a step further, I want to posit that most viable art criticism, by default, registers an artwork's potential for and effectuality in second-order symbol-making. That is, a baseline criterion for judging artistic merit accounts for a work's designs and deftness at second-order symbolizing. Does this text, apart from telling its first-level story or evoking its first-level images, attempt to allegorize? If so, for what purpose? Is that allegorizing effective, convincing, compelling? Does this work's first-level formal cues move *beyond* the literal toward making other connections, meanings, arguments? Beyond the mimetic? Beyond historical specificity? Beyond the well-wrought concrete image? Beyond emotional simulations or evocations? Beyond its autotelic aesthetics? Whether this symbol-assuming critical stance is internalized explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, via institutional learning or intuitional immersion in the arts, the takeaway is this: that most critics *do* assume such stances in their critical praxis, to one degree or another. Thus, good art

criticism, professional and amateur alike, functions under a fundamental heuristic: first-level formal cues *might* be read as intertextually allusive, as implicitly metaphorical, as subtextually symbolic of something *not there* in the immediate first-order textual cues.

Terry Eagleton: Hermeneutic Test Case #1

Terry Eagleton's *How to Read Literature* (2013) affords ripe opportunity to look under the hood of an eminent critic's interpretative vehicles and his hermeneutic priorities. Geared toward literary novice and expert alike, this immensely accessible book reads as part handbook, part rhapsodic conversation, part informal hermeneutics. In it, we bear witness to a seasoned professional critic renegotiating with some past selves, opening up a commonsense theory of reading literature in which attention to language and form reigns supreme. Eagleton enumerates central features that distinguish literary works from other written texts, instructs about literature's social functions and values, and demonstrates to readers how to engage with literary texts with proper attention, intelligence, and pleasure. But we also see a critic enacting, if not resolving, certain contradictions of his hermeneutic model. Underneath his semi-articulated hermeneutics and close readings of texts, we observe tacit assumptions about authorial intention and the construction of sound interpretation coming to the surface—notions Eagleton may have preferred to keep more submerged. In the end, we get further testimony on several prior points from a highly respected professional critic and an unwavering celebrant of the literary arts.

Notably, Eagleton has been a devout Marxist literary critic throughout his career, who might stir in other brands of Big Theory into his critical mix. As he notes in his prefatory remarks, however, the author suspends his interests in theory and politics for *How to Read*

Literature. That is because “one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of sensitivity to language.” This book, Eagleton hopes, will “provide readers and students of literature with some of the basic tools of the critical trade, without which they are unlikely to be able to move on to other matters.” He also wants to demonstrate “that critical analysis can be fun, and in doing so help to demolish the myth that analysis is the enemy of enjoyment.”¹⁷² All of this is highly agreeable.

Nonetheless, when considering his Marxist background, it is still rather startling to read how Eagleton now, at age 74, paints literature and its core values. Marxist criticism places supreme value on the historical specificities of a text, on a hermeneutics of suspicion, and on social change. Here, however, Eagleton’s running motif is that the essence of literature is language: language carefully shaped to provoke specific reader effects, ideas, and emotion. And he positions himself on more of a pragmatic middle-ground, which allows for the literary product to be divorced, at least to a certain degree, from particular historical circumstances as well as its creator. Eagleton’s chapter “Interpretation” opens with the following gambit:

One of the things we mean by calling a piece of writing “literary” is that it is not tied to a specific context. It is true that all literary works arise from particular conditions. Jane Austen’s novels spring from the world of the English landed gentry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, while *Paradise Lost* has as its backdrop the English Civil War and its aftermath. Yet though these works emerge from such contexts, their meaning is not confined to them. Consider the difference between a poem and a manual for assembling a table lamp. Unless we are really starved for inspiration, we do not generally

¹⁷² Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, ix-x.

turn to it in order to reflect on the mystery of birth or the frailty of humankind. A poem, by contrast, can still be meaningful outside its original context, and may alter its meaning as it moves from one place or time to another. Like a baby, it is detached from its author as soon as it enters the world. All literary works are orphaned at birth. Rather as our parents do not continue to govern our lives as we grow up, so the poet cannot determine the situations in which his or her work will be read, or what sense we are likely to make of it.¹⁷³

Literary art gets balanced in that precarious position between the two proverbial poles of particularity and generality, uniqueness and universality. Eagleton views literature, sensibly enough, as situated in and reflective of particular histories; while also striving to rise above those conditions, to strike a more universal, future-oriented resonance. This doubleminded trajectory recalls the hermeneutic lineage of Goethe. But it also overlaps with some central functions and cognitive demands of second-order symbolics. Eagleton's postulations here are intellectually well-reasoned and very unremarkably pragmatic. Coming from a critic who has worn the mantle of literary Marxism for so long, however, they are actually quite remarkable.

Perhaps more interesting, and complicated, are Eagleton's assumptions about how to negotiate the presence of the author in our aesthetic transactions and critical judgments. Casting authors as absentee parents is better than killing them off entirely, as Barthes and de Man try to do. Still, his analogy of the orphaned work of art is running on the fumes of certain worn-out notions promulgated by the New Critics and their (mis?)interpretations of Eliot's "Individual Talent": notions that suggest the author is best left as a shadowy afterthought, that language and text are the only reliable structures in literary art. Later

¹⁷³ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 117.

poststructuralist and reader-response schools of criticism of course piggybacked on these ideas in their bids to abort the author from their critical equations. There remains a case to be made for (at least a weak version of) such arguments. And many artists are eager to consort with schemes that prioritize the creative freedom and cognitive free-play of audience members while interfacing with their art objects. Indeed, the thought of courting an audience many generations in the future who will react to their work in *any* way at all, for *any* purpose at all, intended or not, must be a seductively easy notion to fall back on: “Misinterpretations be damned! All hail grist-for-one’s-own-mill! So long as my poem is getting read, or used in whatever manner thinkable, by some future human being, many ages from now—my work is done.”

Unfortunately for Eagleton, despite his stated commitment to ignore that absentee parent, to vacate the notion of an author who designed a text to effect certain results, other parts of his book betray the inescapability of a creative intentional force behind those allegedly orphaned words on the page. For instance, a few pages later we see Eagleton teaching readers how to manage and brace for “works of literature that are more resistant to interpretation.” Referencing a particularly tortuous paragraph from *The Ambassadors*, a paradigm of Henry James’ stylistically convoluted later years, Eagleton remarks that the passage “is a far cry from Dan Brown” (coincidence duly noted). Most tellingly, he defers to both the author and the author’s meaning to untwist James’s thick ropes of obfuscatory prose:

The reader is forced into a sweated labor of decipherment. It is as though the reader and author become co-creators of the work, as the reader is drawn into the twists and turns of the syntax in a struggle to unpack the author’s meaning.

James feels the need to spin his syntax into a spider's web in order to catch every nuance of experience and every flicker of consciousness.

This super-subtlety is one of several reasons why modernist works of art can be obscure, and thus hard to interpret. [...] It is as though the opaqueness and complexity of modern existence are beginning to infiltrate the very form of literary works, not just their content.

The contrast with realist fiction is clear. In a lot of realist writing, language is made to seem as transparent as possible, yielding up its meaning without much resistance. It thus creates the effect of presenting reality in the raw.¹⁷⁴

Eagleton's conclusions are incisive and apt. But it is the instabilities in his vision of authorial presence I want to examine. This later "revised" stance, which re-introduces the author and re-conceptualizes the aesthetic transaction as one of *co*-creation, illustrates the inescapability of three basic assumptions that I (and most biocultural critics) operate under. First, there is (or was) a real, historically situated, phylogenetically evolved, ontologically developed mind-brain—the artist—that originates the art object. Second, the art object activates the aesthetic transactions and interpretative acts of real-life, historically situated, evolved mind-brains of its art observers. And, third, the intentional acts of these artists can be thought of as more or less traceable and verifiable through close attentions to textual, biographical, and cultural contexts. From a biopoetic standpoint, knowing who the authors are and what their minds are like, is not only a crucial starting point toward solid academic criticism, but an integral part of the games and pleasures of the literary/cinematic/artistic experiences to begin with. Thus,

¹⁷⁴ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 124–5.

Eagleton, while resistant to authorial control in theory, registers some version of authorial presence in practice.

Eagleton is more internally consistent—and aligned with my own theories and arguments—on the following two points: the demarcation points for setting off literary texts from non-literary texts; and his observations about the “super-subtle” webs of meaning that literature, especially in the modern era, can spin. Literary texts, unlike street signs or instructional manuals, call for lingering over, for close attention to the details and form of the media itself. “Part of what we mean by a ‘literary’ work,” Eagleton asserts, “is one in which *what* is said is to be taken in terms of *how* it is said. It is the kind of writing in which the content is inseparable from the language in which it is presented. Language is constitutive of the reality of experience, rather than simply a vehicle for it.”¹⁷⁵ On roadsigns, for instance, language is “simply a vehicle for thought that could be expressed in a whole variety of ways”¹⁷⁶; whereas literary language is bound up with the very meanings it is delivering. Eagleton is not stumping for another art-for-art’s-sake movement here. Indulging in the sensorial, autotelic effect of literature’s language is one step in the literary transaction, and one of its great assets. But certain literature also compels its readers to fit those effects to interpretation, to extract meaning from autotelic experiences and other salient linguistic/formal cues of the text. This step demands some extra conscious work—from reader and author alike. The ideal reader must be dedicated to engaging a literary text on its own set of terms. And sometimes those terms can be puzzling, difficult, obscure, allusive in their frames of reference. Referring back to the same passage from *The Ambassadors*, Eagleton observes, “Like a lot of modernist writing James’s prose refuses to slip down easily.

¹⁷⁵ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 3. Italics mine.

¹⁷⁶ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 3.

It poses a challenge to a culture of instant consumption.”¹⁷⁷ In this modern aesthetic of meaning-making, a text creates an almost physiological resistance to meaning-construction, privileging delayed over instantaneous gratification. This is a key idea in art theory generally, but it is particularly applicable to a biopoetic model of second-order symbolisms. I return to it often.

In his ongoing taxonomies of literary versus non-literary texts, which Eagleton distributes in informal if fragmented fashion across this work, Eagleton deploys a classificatory concept whose phrasing deserves some special note here. That is, by being “peculiarly portable,”¹⁷⁸ literature segregates itself from other kinds of more pragmatic text objects, which for Eagleton include food recipes, instruction manuals, roadsigns, and bus tickets. Literary texts, in this light, are seen as more capable of being “carried from one location to another.” Eagleton does not mean that literary texts are more physically portable than something like a bus ticket. Rather literary texts are “less dependent for their meaning on the circumstances from which they arose.” Readers of literary texts “do not take their language as practical. Instead, we assume that it is intended to have some value in itself.”¹⁷⁹ This explanation is basically a reiteration of his earlier observation: that “literary” authors and their readers tend to strive, at some point in their respective creative/interpretative processes, to backburner historical particularity and to reach a more universal resonance across space and time.

However, I see a different, perhaps more interesting implication alive in Eagleton’s choice of “portability” here. The complexities and multiple gratifications that literary texts afford us—be they aesthetic or intellectual, logical or emotional, instructive or playful,

¹⁷⁷ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 124.

¹⁷⁸ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 118.

¹⁷⁹ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 118.

immediate or delayed—do not have to emerge from objects that are voluminous or intricate in their material instantiations. And Eagleton’s idiom of “peculiar portability” suggests forces of compaction and compression at work within poetic art. Eagleton uses the compressive allegory of *Animal Farm*, for instance, to illustrate how “George Orwell casts the complex history of the Bolshevik Revolution into the form of an apparently simple fable about farmyard animals,” thereby creating a piquant “tension between form and content.”¹⁸⁰ The twin forces of universalization and compaction result in objects that can be readily transferred into the *future* while being *contained* within a few strokes of the pen or paintbrush, a few shutter openings of the camera. If Dickinson’s brain is wider than the sky, a single stanza of her poetic scribbles and dashes is far wider than a library full of bus tickets and instruction manuals. Roughly speaking.

A final observation about Eagleton’s work bears mentioning. Though he does reference the Orwellian allegory *Animal Farm*, Eagleton refrains from use of this term, labeling it simply as fable. Revealingly, the terms “allegory,” “symbolism, and “metaphor” are not included in Eagleton’s index. Symbol occurs three times in the body of his text, allegory and metaphor twice—but not in any special sense. His usage of these terms function as brisk secondary descriptors at best: they in no way indicate that these phenomena (call them modes, techniques, devices, concepts) might be vital to literary experience. One can reasonably ask if it is fair to discuss “how to read literature” without more than passing reference to these terms. In my view, it is not. And this seems a major oversight. Our next author, however, does not neglect matters of symbolic meaning in his exploration of how to read literature expressly “like a professor.”

¹⁸⁰ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 3.

Thomas Foster: Hermeneutic Test Case #2

Thomas Foster's *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (2003/2014) presents another highly accessible yet pedagogically sage handbook geared toward literary neophytes. Its companion piece, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: For Kids* (2003/2013), is aimed at an even younger generation of readers. In both, Foster achieves a chummy, plainspoken voice perfectly pitched for introducing such finicky audiences to the pleasures, rigors, tradecraft, and surprises to be found in well-practiced literary criticism—and, by extension, literature itself. Foster's narrator is a fleet yet erudite guide, profound but never heavy-handed, as earnest as he is comedically self-effacing. Inspecting a few components and passages of his work provides another case-study opportunity for examining how literature is conceptualized, and transmitted, by a seasoned literary professional and dedicated teacher.

Foster spins his hermeneutic and pedagogical models out of some refreshingly frank, invariably amusing portrayals of the student/teacher dynamic common in English classrooms today. These anecdotes provide a much-needed window onto the real-life operations and scenarios of literary education in action. The following passages are prime examples, and they cut to the bone of several recurring controversies native to literary learning, art studies generally, and second-order symbolisms specifically:

A moment occurs in this exchange between professor and student when each of us adopts a look. My look says, "What, you don't get it?" Theirs says, "We don't get it. And we think you're making it up." We're having a communication problem. Basically, we've all read the same story, but we haven't used the same analytical apparatus. If you've ever spent time in a

literature classroom as a student or a professor, you know this moment. It may seem at times as if the professor is either inventing interpretations out of thin air or else performing parlor tricks, a sort of analytical sleight of hand.

Actually, neither of these is the clear case; rather, the professor, as the slightly more experienced reader, has acquired over the years the use of a certain “language of reading,” something to which the students are only beginning to be introduced. What I’m talking about is a grammar of literature, a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules, that we learn to employ in dealing with a piece of writing. Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is no different. It’s all more or less arbitrary, of course, just like language itself. Take the word “arbitrary” as an example: it doesn’t mean anything inherently; rather, at some point in our past we agreed that it would mean what it does, and it does so only in English. So too with art. [...]

Literature has its grammar too. [...] You can read, and part of reading is knowing the conventions, recognizing them, and anticipating the results. [...]

Stories and novels have a very large set of conventions: types of character, plot rhythms, chapter structures, point-of-view limitations. Poems have a great many of their own, involving form, structure, rhythm, rhyme.

Plays, too. And then there are conventions that cross genre lines.¹⁸¹

Foster’s introductory setup here is refreshingly candid and incisive; his conceptual resolutions, deceptively simple and broad ranging. Some of it could sound trite or

¹⁸¹ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, xxv–xxvi.

inconsequential to advanced literary practitioners—those who have been breathing the rarefied ethers of Literary Art, or dwelling in obscure corners of literary scholarship and theory, for most of their adult lives. But Foster’s solutions to this very typical student/teacher communication breakdown are really not so obvious. They are not so commonsensical to the novice preparing to explore the edges of a dense literary forest populated by three cross-pollinating, ever-proliferating species: 1) literary *texts*, 2) the literary *tradition*, and 3) literary *criticism*. Navigating this forest can be daunting by any account: for experts, too, let alone literary neophytes and skeptical youngsters. It is a lot of voices to track, a lot of new (and abstract) worlds to explore.

Foster’s emphasis on teaching the broader “language” of literature, and its more-or-less arbitrary grammar of conventions, is a vital starting point. For its grammars and vocabularies are neither absorbed by unconscious cognitive osmosis during childhood, as natural languages are; nor governed by prescriptive codebooks or formalized dictionaries and usage manuals, as modern written languages are. Exposure to the most effective forms and techniques of the literary past—through apprenticeship, institutional mechanisms, or other means—can help stabilize such conventions. But the conventions of literature and other art texts remain much more informal, mercurial, and contingent than the standardized conventions of other cultural-symbolic practices. They are dependent as much upon individual artistic biases as they are upon an inherited “tradition,” however that gets defined. (Traditions and canons can be considered another more-or-less arbitrary, non-scientific undertaking.) Teaching the languages of literature and art, then, tends to be less amenable to the more tractable, linear, programmatic learning models that other disciplines have found

reliably profitable. Still, all is not lost. And Foster begins to chart a hermeneutic/pedagogical path forward in the next spotlighted passages.

Foster reflects, for example, on stock procedures readers can use to acquaint themselves with literature's specialized, un-codified conventions and techniques of meaning-making. Meta-topics like this tend to get under-emphasized in literature classrooms today, either taken for granted or backburnered for other matters. But they are in so many ways the spine of all good literary reading and criticism. Occasional refreshers of these core matters can be one of the glues to hold literary and art studies together (if we deem such a thing important). Another question from Foster's representative student, and Foster's brilliantly concrete answer:

Okay, let's say you're right and there is a set of conventions, a key to reading literature. How do I get so I can recognize these?

Same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

When lay readers encounter a fictive text, they focus, as they should, on the story and characters: who are these people, what are they doing, and what wonderful or terrible things are happening to them? Such readers respond, first of all, and sometimes only, to their reading on an emotional level; the work affects them, producing joy or revulsion, laughter or tears, anxiety or elation. In other words, they are emotionally or instinctively involved in a work. This is the response level that virtually every writer who has ever set pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard has hoped for when sending the novel, along with a prayer, to the publisher. When an English professor reads, on the other hand, he will accept the affective response level of the

story (we don't mind a good cry when Little Nellie dies), but a lot of his [or her] attention will be engaged by other elements of the novel. Where did that effect come from? Whom does this character resemble? Where have I seen this situation before? Didn't Dante (or Chaucer, or Merle Haggard) say that? If you learn to ask these questions, to see literary texts through these glasses, you will read and understand literature in a new light, and it'll become more rewarding and fun.¹⁸²

Pair this last set of questions with Irwin's heuristic of urauthorial intent, build it on top of a Hirshian apparatus for interpretation and criticism, and we might have the makings of a reliable ur-heuristic for reading literature well: with creative flexibility and richness, but also with some programmatic hope for reaching valid, correctable interpretations by hewing to a tentatively prefixed set of guiding rules.

Two further points from this passage are worthy of note, keys to responsive criticism derived through a viable hermeneutics. First, practice. Foster's Carnegie Hall remark implies more than just practicing literary responses in institutional, academic settings. It also invokes the need to position oneself for maximal (or at least optimal) exposure to, contact with, and immersion in literature and its commentating communities. Programmatic rote learning can probably take us only so far—in many fields of life and perhaps in literary and art studies especially. So there is a certain amount of learning-by-osmosis and life experience implied here. (Of course, one way of learning by osmosis and exposure is by taking many academic courses in art studies.)

Second, in addition to devoting oneself to regular practice, a good reader of literature will also commit to this: looking beyond the elementary “instinctual” effects of narrative and

¹⁸² Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, xxvi–xxvii.

affect generated by literary texts. Training our attention upon “other elements” becomes key. And this goes for other kinds of art texts as well, not just fiction and poetry. Indeed, film critics like Bordwell and Grodal point out similar obligations when viewing art films: story and affect-evocation remain integral to art cinema; but formal cues and authorial signatures will complicate and contribute to the overall meaning structures of these texts; and it is up to the viewer to allocate extra cognitive resources to apprehend and interpret those films as fairly as possible. Miss those cues and markers, and you’ve possibly missed much of the art.

Foster’s next set of passages, previewed in the chapter’s epigraph, are perhaps the mantric heart of this chapter if not the project as a whole. They dovetail with several strands of the previous paragraphs. But Foster also carves out some demarcation zones for what good literary reading entails and, thus, what literature itself is. Whereas Eagleton focuses on language sensitivity as the *sine qua non* of good literature and good literary reading, Foster nominates three perhaps less obvious candidates as the bread-and-butter of literary activity: memory, symbol, and pattern. These classes of phenomena are dependent for their existence on the linguistic units of a text, of course—but what part of literature arises from anything except language, its medium of delivery? Foster’s emphasized features, however, are also a step or two removed from language. To activate our memory systems, our symbolic imaginations, and our pattern-detection faculties, the human brain must recruit cognitive modules above and beyond its language-processing centers. Foster decrees,

Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd. English professors, as a class, are cursed with memory. Whenever I read a new work, I spin the mental Rolodex looking for correspondences and corollaries—where

have I seen his face, don't I know that theme? I can't *not* do it, although there are plenty of times when that ability is not something I want to exercise. [...] This does not necessarily improve the experience of popular entertainment.

Professors also read, and think, symbolically. Everything is a symbol unless proven otherwise. We ask, Is this a metaphor? Is that an analogy? What does the thing over there signify? The kind of mind that works its way through undergraduate and then graduate classes in literature and criticism has a predisposition to see things as existing in themselves while simultaneously also representing something else. [...] This predisposition to understand the world in symbolic terms is reinforced, of course, by years of training that encourages and required the symbolic imagination.

A related phenomenon in professorial reading is pattern recognition. Most professional students of literature learn to take in the foreground detail while seeing the patterns that the detail reveals. Like the symbolic imagination, this is a function of being able to distance oneself from the story, to look beyond the purely affective level of plot, drama, characters. Experience has proved to them that life and books fall into similar patterns. Nor is the skill exclusive to English professors. Good mechanics [...] use pattern recognition to diagnose engine troubles: if this and this are happening, then check that. Literature is full of patterns, and your reading experiences will be much more rewarding when you can step back from the work, even while you're reading it, and look for patterns.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, xxvii–viii.

Foster's personal "confessions" and conversational tone are characteristically endearing as usual. More important, the privileging of the symbolic imagination, as part of his trinity of a well-applied literary hermeneutics, connects to the larger purposes here of mounting a biopoetics of second-order symbolism. Pattern recognition and memory (particularly of other texts) play overlapping support roles both in Foster's symbolic imagination and in a biopoetics of symbol. "The kind of mind," writes Foster, "that works its way through undergraduate and then graduate classes in literature and criticism has a predisposition to see things as existing in themselves while simultaneously also representing something else." A biopoetics of symbol shares this "predisposition" of mind theory, while scrutinizing it further and extending it beyond the mind-brains of the prototypical English major and grad student. Foster also judiciously notes that "this predisposition to understand the world in symbolic terms is reinforced, of course, by years of training that encourages and required the symbolic imagination." Same goes for a biopoetic examination of the traditions of the symbolic arts.

Much of Foster's book, in fact, turns on teaching readers how to better manage their own symbolic imaginations in light of an author's highly attuned literary-mythic-symbolic imaginations. A common note struck across Foster's rhetoric is the urging of readers to refine their sensibilities for seeing *beneath*, *beyond*, or in *addition to* the more superficial, immediate pulls of literature: i.e. narrative absorption, affect evocation, and first-order meanings of language. A survey of his chapter titles gives good sense of the pro-symbolic, pro-intertext attitudes that underpin Foster's views on literature and how to make the most out of literary experience:

- It's More Than Just Rain or Snow
- Is That a Symbol?

- Geography Matters
- He's Blind for a Reason, You Know
- It's Never Just Heart Disease
- It's All Political
- It's All About Sex...
- ...Except Sex
- Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?
- When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare...
- ...Or the Bible

Foster's unapologetic advocacy for symbolic technique and the symbolic imagination is both invigorating and potent.

A more problematic aspect of Foster's hermeneutic model gets revealed in his chapter expressly dedicated to symbolism, "Is That a Symbol?" The bulk of the chapter's propositions are intelligent, persuasive, and well apportioned. Foster's justifications for the symbolic decoding process, however, are too cavalier. He defers, I feel too strongly, to the reader's creative imagination as the final arbiter of symbolic interpretation. He grants interpreters unrestrained free play and celebrates the potentially infinite networks of meanings that open signification in literary arts can trigger. Though well intentioned, and certainly containing some important grains of truth, Foster's remarks might swerve into the lanes of soft-psych student-centered learning a bit too recklessly. He opens the chapter with the following maneuvers—some of which steer in close line with the hermeneutic course outlined above, others of which re-introduce that proverbial Hirschian/Searlian transgressive speech-act ethic, which licenses a text as grist for one's own mill:

Is that a symbol?

Sure it is.

That's one of the most common questions in class, and that's the answer I generally give. Is that a symbol? Sure, why not. It's the next question where things get hairy: what does it mean, what does it stand for? When someone asks about meaning, I usually come back with something clever like "Well, what do you think?" Everyone thinks I'm either being a wise guy or ducking responsibility, but neither is the case. Seriously, what do *you* think it stands for, because that's probably what it does. At least for you.

Here's the problem with symbols: people expect them to mean something. Not just something, but one something in particular. Exactly. Maximum. You know what? It doesn't work like that. Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work straightforwardly [...]. Some symbols do have a relatively limited range of meanings, but in general a symbol can't be reduced to standing for only one thing.

If they *can*, it's not symbolism, it's allegory [...]: things stand for other things on a one-for-one basis.

[...]

Symbols, though, generally don't work so neatly. The thing referred to is likely not reducible to a single statement but will more probably involve a range of possible meanings and interpretations.

[...]

We want it to mean something, don't we? More than that, we want it to mean some *thing*, one thing for all of us and for all time. That would be convenient, manageable for us. But that handiness would result in a net loss: the novel would cease to be what it is, a network of meanings and significations that permits a nearly limitless range of possibilities. The meaning of the [symbol] isn't lying on the surface of the novel. Rather, it waits somewhere deeper, and part of what it requires of us is to bring something of ourselves to the encounter.

Foster's reluctance to re-ground symbolic meanings back to the text or a re-constructed urauthor with clear intentions is understandable. It is the most pedagogically expedient and socially diplomatic way out of a complicated literary landscape: one that is potentially riddled with ambiguous symbolic cues, conflicting interpretations, dead authors, and living ones who are reticent to spill their symbolic secrets (if they have any).¹⁸⁴ There are good philosophical reasons to entertain this position as well: the strongest intentionalist will admit to the impossibility of determining, with total certainty, the absolutely true and fixed meanings of all (or any) of an author's textual cues. But in the end Foster's stance still feels too epistemologically flimsy, too hermeneutically unsatisfying. Just because we may never be able to adjudicate a literary text's meanings with definitive certainty, that does not preclude us from attempting to marshal a coherent chain of intratextual and extratextual

¹⁸⁴ Foster notes he is very open to the democracy of critical approaches to literature. And his affable arguments have appeal. He maintains that many approaches can be "not only valid but produce readings of considerable insight." He recollects that he has "learned a great deal" about certain literary texts, as well as his own shortcomings as a critic, from "alternative approaches." For Foster, "One of the great pleasures of literary scholarship lies in encountering different and even conflicting interpretations, since the great work allows for a considerable range of possibilities," 112. One cannot argue with this. However, just because one learns interesting or valid things about a subject matter while reading criticism, that does not necessarily mean that piece of criticism as a whole should be deemed valid or all of its premises accepted without scrutiny. Converging the possibility space of meaning is not simply discarded.

evidence that can reasonably back up our symbolic hypotheses. While reader imagination will always, and should, play a co-starring role in the symbolic-aesthetic process, Foster cedes lopsided power to the reader alone. The hypothetical slippery slope of this tack lands us in literature classrooms transformed into free-for-alls of unrestrained symbol hunters: students indulging in egoistic nonsense, contorting themselves into interpretative flights of fancy to impress teacher, or flirting with mild cases of literary apophenia.

This last point bears further elaboration. Apophenia, a term coined by German neurologist Klaus Conrad (from the Greek *apo* [away from] + *phaenein* [to show]), refers to the mental condition, often disordered, wherein the human mind perceives meaning in random sensory data. Apophenia has been diagnosed in schizophrenics, who often experience these delusions as revelation. Statistical overfitting, the gambler's fallacy, and the hidden meanings that practices like fortune-telling and divination claim to reveal can all be considered non-clinical instances of apophenia.¹⁸⁵ Postmodern literary figures including Borges, Pynchon, and Eco, and more recently sci-fi writer William Gibson (*Pattern Recognition*), have famously dealt with the potential ramifications and complications of reading meaning into meaningless patterns, cues, and other phenomena of nature or human behavior. From here, it is not hard to imagine breeding generations of literary apopheniacs inside the most lax "symbols for everyone!" English classrooms.

Wayne Booth addresses some of the potential ramifications of runaway literary apophenia in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983). In his chapter on unreliable narrators, Booth simply calls this "symbol-hunting." And he relates it to a similar problem of runaway irony-hunting, which he sees complicating the critical enterprise and our interpretations of narrative work since the advents of literary modernism and postmodernism. Booth, for instance, cites

¹⁸⁵ "Apophenia," Wikipedia.

an “indignant” Mary McCarthy, who in a *Harper’s* article from 1954 railed against “the search by a Freshman English class for hidden meanings” in a story she intended to be read as pure autobiography. “One is tempted to join in Miss McCarthy’s amusing attack on the misguided professor of that class,” Booth admits, because in this case, “The hunt for hidden symbols and ironies has been carried too far.” Booth then pivots: “But when we consider more closely the professor’s plight, and particularly what Miss McCarthy herself adds about the nature of her purposes in the story, the situation is not quite so clear.” Booth recites the author’s intentions, which McCarthy offers up very forthrightly in the *Harper’s* article, and goes on to point out that those intentions actually turn out to be quite more complex than she lets on. He also pragmatically points out that, “meanwhile here are the poor professor and his students back in the classroom, reading this story along with some Kafka and James, some Hemingway and some Joyce, or even perhaps along with certain others of Miss McCarthy’s own stories, where the ironies are piled thick and deep.”¹⁸⁶ Booth’s point about classroom mechanics is a nontrivial one. At the same time, it resets Irwin’s refrain about the necessity of constructing our interpretations and crafting literary-critical judgments based on that notorious case-by-case method. But in the end, it does not seem fair to dismissively fault well-intentioned students and teachers, who are forced to constantly toggle between this author and that author, this subtle perspective and that one, this poetic mode and that one, this literary history and that one—and they are probably doing all that as efficiently (read: quickly) as possible, so their students get some sense of the breadth and diversity of the literary tradition. So there will be some leakage in their interpretative schemes to be sure. Sometimes that leakage is good and proper. Sometimes it is not, leaving literary teachers and guides with the real responsibility to recognize, correct, and stop the hemorrhaging.

¹⁸⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 367–68.

Booth also cites Saul Bellow's bellows about "deep reading" in his *New York Times Book Review* article, "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!"¹⁸⁷ Booth acknowledges the prudence in Bellow's warnings to readers to not let themselves fall through the rabbit hole while engaged in their interpretative deep-drilling operations. He then pivots: "But the warning, cannot take us very far, when, as Bellow says, 'the best novelists and poets of the century have done much to promote' the kind of deep reading he deplores. Bellow's own novels all require great subtlety in the reader."¹⁸⁸ He concludes, "Even if we take McCarthy's and Bellow's advices and abandon symbol-hunting, the equally pervasive irony-hunt will go on. Once on this road we cannot turn back; we cannot pretend that things are as simple as they once seemed."¹⁸⁹ In other words, once the box of symbolic (or ironic) literature has been opened—and opened by some of the most powerful literary voices and traditions in recent history—we cannot responsibly put these new parts of the literary grammar back into their respective boxes. So despite McCarthy's and Bellow's calls to the contrary, we have Booth lending his endorsement of the virtues of deep reading and symbol deciphering—at least when deemed appropriate using case-by-case thinking. Also pertinent here are Booth's unapologetic appeals to ontic intentions of authors (whether "flesh-and-blood," "implied," or otherwise¹⁹⁰) and the use of corroborating extratextual materials to converge on those intentions.

With all this in mind, an intellectually honest second-order symbologies cannot ignore the slippery apopheniac slope. Even if the condition is mainly indigenous to schizophrenics, gamblers, gypsies, postmodernist science fiction, and some misguided

¹⁸⁷ Saul Bellow, "Deep Readers of the World, Beware!" *The New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 15, 1959, cited in Booth, 369.

¹⁸⁸ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 369.

¹⁸⁹ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 369.

¹⁹⁰ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 415. Booth's entire work, of course, is an extended meditation on the existence, nomenclature, and position of "the author" in the literary-critical experience.

English teachers who fail to perform case-based due diligence to sort out the intentions of some literary work—it is still a nontrivial issue to contend with, and one that Foster inadequately addresses.

Despite Foster's over-tolerant pedagogical precepts for "valid" symbol-decoding, the rest of his passage above is more lucrative, with Foster arbitrating several contentious issues in literary studies with characteristic homespun clarity. There is, for instance, his plainspoken distinction between allegory and symbol—a classification debate that has roused untold pages of philosophical and literary hairsplitting for well over two thousand years, most intensely over the last two hundred.¹⁹¹ He dispenses with the issue, pretty credibly, in one sentence. And his correlative point that literary symbols and their interpretations are anything but neat or mathematical is a crucial principle for understanding of the artistic-symbolic imagination. To have proper commerce with art texts, a neat mathematics will probably not apply.

Throughout his work, Foster also effectively models for his literary learners several pragmatic heuristics and tools for reading literature. He talks through the kinds of questions and often-involved mental procedures a reader has to deploy to do things like: recognize salient narrative and stylistic patterns, negotiate a text's politics, and key into an author's literary-symbolic imagination and sensibilities for meaning-making generally. His principle of symbol investigation, for instance, is commonsensical but a good basic starting point: "If we want to figure out what a symbol might mean, we have to use a variety of tools on it: questions, experience, preexisting knowledge." Referring to E.M. Forster's (allegedly) symbolic cave in *A Passage to India*, Foster models the types of questions readers can then begin to ask: "What else is Forster doing with caves? What are other outcomes in the text, or

¹⁹¹ The next chapter fleshes out a few highlights of these storied debates.

use of caves in general that we can recall? What else can we bring to bear on this cave that might yield up meaning?”¹⁹² A “nonsymbolic thinker” will interpret Forster’s cave or, to use one of his later examples, Frost’s depictions of autumnal New England as “a beautiful evocation” of nature or life. Foster assures us such things are indeed beautiful evocations, and “pleasurably so.” However, “there is more than just that going on.”¹⁹³ He follows with a more broadly applicable heuristic, and further reader self-reporting:

You can’t simply say, Well, it’s a river, so it means *x*, or apple picking, so it means *y*. On the other hand, you can say this could sometimes mean *x* or *y* or even *z*, so let’s keep that in mind to see which one, if either, happens here. Any past experience of literary rivers or labor may be helpful as well. Then you start breaking down the work at hand into manageable pieces. Associate freely, brainstorm, take notes. Then you can organize your thoughts, grouping them tougher under headings, rejecting or accepting different ideas or meanings as they seem to apply. Ask questions of the text: what’s the writer doing with this image, this object, this act; what possibilities are suggested by the movement of the narrative or lyric; and most important, what does it *feel* like it’s doing? Reading literature is a highly intellectual activity, but it also involves affect and instinct to a large degree. Much of what we think about literature, we feel first. Having instincts, though, doesn’t automatically mean they work at their highest level. Dogs are instinctual swimmers, but not every pup hits the water understanding what to do with that

¹⁹² Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 107.

¹⁹³ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 113.

instinct. Reading is like that, too. The more you exercise the symbolic imagination, the better and quicker it works. We tend to give writers all the credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination; our creativity, our inventiveness, encounters that of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what she means, what we understand her to mean, what uses we can put her writing to. Imagination isn't fantasy. That is to say, we can't simply invent meaning without the writer, or if we can, we ought not to hold her to it. Rather, a reader's imagination is the act of one creative intelligence engaging another.

So engage that creative intelligence. Listen to your instincts. Pay attention to what you feel about the text. If probably means something.¹⁹⁴

Valuable here are Foster's reminders to let our instinctual and emotional responses to a text (which should eventually be bracketed and moved beyond) be our initial guides to constructing meaning, symbolic or otherwise, from that text. He reiterates the importance of simple exercising of the symbolic imagination, while reintroducing the author as essentially the *co*-creator of the literary co-experience.

In fact, aside from the irksome first section of his symbolism chapter, Foster never comes close to evacuating an authorial presence from his critical equations. He pays literary artists more than passing lip service throughout his work, referring often to their aims, designs, formidable literary knowledge, and tangible creative processes. (He is similarly not shy about granting literature professors some real, if tentative, authority in the classroom and their readings of texts: just by dint of their age, life experience, and lifelong exposure to

¹⁹⁴ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 113–14.

literature, they come to texts with wider frames of reference and more finely calibrated literary sensibilities and intelligence; this can help them spin rich if not more valid interpretations at the outset of the literary transaction.) Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter “Does He Mean That?” to authorial intention. His ideas there are mostly in tune with the consequentialist realities of a ontic authorial presence behind the meaning structures of literature. Listening, at some length, to Foster massage the timeless issue of intention is instructive:

Along about now you should be asking a question, something like this: *you keep saying that the writer is alluding to this obscure work and using that symbol or following some pattern or other that I never heard of, but does he really intend to do that? Can anyone really have all that going on in his head at one time?*

Now that is an excellent question. I only wish I had an excellent answer, something pithy and substantive, maybe with a little alliteration, but instead I have one that’s merely short.

Yes.

The chief deficiency of this answer, aside from its lack of pith, is that it is manifestly untrue. Or at least misleading. The real answer, of course, is that no one knows for certain. Oh, for this writer or that one we can be pretty sure, depending on what they themselves tell us, but in general we make guesses.

Let’s look at the easy ones—James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and what we could call the “Intentionalists”—writers who attempt to control every facet of

their creative output and who intend virtually every effect in their works. Many of them are from the modernist period, essentially the era around the two world wars of the twentieth century. In an essay called “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth (1923),” Eliot extols the virtues of Joyce’s newly published masterpiece, and proclaims that, whereas writers of previous generations relied on the “narrative method,” modern writers can, following Joyce’s example, employ the “mythic method.” [...] Eliot uses his essay on Joyce to defend implicitly his own masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, which also builds around ancient myths, in this case fertility myths associated with the Fisher King. Ezra Pound borrows from Greek, Latin, Chinese, English, Italian, and French poetic traditions in the Cantos. D.H. Lawrence writes essays about Egyptian and Mexican myth, Freudian psychoanalysis, issues in the Book of Revelation, and the history of the novel in Europe and America. Do we really believe that novels or poems by any of these writers, or their contemporaries Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, will be naive? Doesn’t seem likely, does it?

[...]

Okay, so much for the modern writers, but what about earlier periods? Prior to 1900, most poets would have received at least rudimentary elements of a classical education—Latin, some Greek, lots of classical poetry and Dante and Shakespeare—certainly more than your average reader today. They could count on their readers, moreover, having considerable training in the tradition.

[...]

Since proof is nearly impossible, discussions of the writer's intentions are not especially profitable. Instead let's restrict ourselves to what he did do and, more important, what we readers can discover in his work. What we have to work with is hints and allegations, really, evidence, sometimes only a trace, that points to something lying behind the text. It's useful to keep in mind that any aspiring writer is probably also a hungry, aggressive reader as well and will have absorbed a tremendous amount of literary history and literary culture. By the time she writes her books, she has access to that tradition in ways that need not be conscious. Nevertheless, whatever parts have infiltrated her consciousness are always available to her. Something else that we should bear in mind has to do with speed of composition. The few pages of this chapter have taken you a few minutes to read; they have taken me, I'm sorry to say, days and days to write. No, I haven't been sitting at my computer the whole time. First I carried the germ around for a while, mulling over how best to approach it, then I sat down and knocked a few items onto the screen, then I began fleshing out the argument. Then I got stuck, so I made lunch or baked some bread or helped my kid work on his car, but I carried the problem of this chapter around with me the whole time. I sat down at the keyboard again and started in again but got distracted and worked on something else. Eventually I got where we are now. Even assuming equal levels of knowledge about the subject, who probably has had the most ideas – you in five minutes of reading or me in five days of stumbling around? All I'm really saying is that we

readers sometimes forget how long literary composition can take and how very much lateral thinking can go on in that amount of time.

And lateral thinking is what we're really discussing: the way writers can keep their eye on the target, whether it be the plot of the play or the ending of the novel or the argument of the poem, and at the same time bring in a great deal of at least tangentially related material. I used to think it was this great gift "literary geniuses" have, but I'm not so sure anymore. I sometimes teach a creative writing course, and my aspiring fiction writers frequently bring in biblical parallels, classical or Shakespearean allusions, bits of REM songs, fairy tale fragments, anything you can think of.¹⁹⁵

Foster presents several ideas worthy of grasping onto here. First, the mental habits of "lateral thinking" will often guide the author's hungry and well-read mind, consciously or subconsciously, to infuse a text with "tangential" meanings; yet the best authors can do this without losing track of the need to provide for other first-order pleasures of language, narrative, and psychological mimesis. Second, similar habits of lateral thinking get mirrored in literary readers. Third, our (best) artists will have invested a disproportionately greater amount of time and cognitive energy into the planning and creating of their products, as compared to the temporal and cognitive expenditures of their audience's contact with and interpretation of those products. (Those expenditures can start to balance out when the audience goes beyond minimally required, first-contact reading/viewing of the text at hand.) Fourth, readers can only look for traces, "hints and allegations," of those artists' intentions, not full-fledged undeniable proofs.

¹⁹⁵ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 90–94.

To expand on that last point, lest we find ourselves in too-frenzied an effort to crank out the One True and Correct Meaning of a text, this bears reminding: all interpretations, especially those underwritten by a strong theory of authorial intention, are in the end just “guesses.” That word should not undermine the intentional enterprise, however. As Hirsch, Irwin, and most of our hermeneutic theorists would point out, guesses—about *anything* in life, not just art texts and intentional meaning—can vary in quality. Some guesses will be highly informed, logically well-constructed, comprehensively accountable to all relevant factors of the problem as well as established facts, and more probable. Others might be grossly ill-informed, illogically constructed, less comprehensive, and less probable. Textual interpretation, even if it amounts to so much “guesswork,” is still more constrained and thus theoretically less “infinite” than textual criticism—which works *from* the constraints of interpretation to accomplish its own kind of intellectual work.

Foster’s acknowledgment of a strong creative presence, however qualified that intentional model might be, still causes significant friction against his *laissez-faire* reader-centric precepts for decoding symbolism. To help smooth that friction out for him, perhaps the rule-of-thumb Foster fails to articulate explicitly, but is suggested in no uncertain terms throughout his book, is this: If you, the reader, can hypothesize a well-evidenced symbol, allusion, or other second-order meaning in a work of canonical literature, chances are the writer was way ahead of you. That author is likely smarter, or as smart, or simply more well-read than you. Thus, the feature under question probably was “meant” to be symbolic—if not consciously then subconsciously, as a result of a highly commodious mind absorbed in all the warps and woofs of life, art, and the literary tradition.

Foster's hermeneutic and pedagogical negotiations provide dramatization of how slippery these issues, which are so central to the literary experience, still prove themselves to be. But it also shows how we can gain traction on them through honest intellectual inquiry and some finely graded conceptual schemas.

A final passage from Foster, this from his concluding "Envoi" chapter, bears citing:

First, a confession and a warning. If I have given the impression [...] that I have exhausted the codes by which literature is written and understood, I apologize. This simply isn't true.

[...]

What this book represents is not a database of all the cultural codes by which writers create and readers understand the product of that creation, but a template, a pattern, a grammar of sorts from which you can learn to look for those codes on your own. No one could include them all, and no reader would want to plow through the resulting encyclopedia. [...]

Second, a felicitation. All those other codes? You don't need them. At least you don't need them all spelled out. There comes a point in anyone's reading where watching for pattern and symbol becomes almost second nature, where words and images start calling out for attention.¹⁹⁶

The biopoetics of the following chapter attempts some account of the cultural, evolutionary, and cognitive forces that drive one of art's distinctive coding devices: second-order symbolism. While Foster is right to point out that we do not need, nor could we ever manage, to spell out all the codebooks of art, we should still find it profitable to "look under the hood" of their operations. A deeper inspection of these ev-cog mechanisms, which enable the

¹⁹⁶ Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, 303–304.

special codings and experiences of art to take place, might help students understand the underlying processes at work; and thus expedite them to arrive at “that point in anyone’s reading where watching for pattern and symbol becomes second nature, where words and images start calling out for attention.” The attainment and internalization of these specialized reading skills—to read doubly, deeply, laterally, simultaneously, serially yet in parallel—is a signature mark of the literary mind. Possessing such skills, one might be deemed a proficiently fluent “speaker” of the languages of literature, and of art more generally.

* * * * *

These two test cases of literary hermeneutics in action I hope serve multiple functions. Primarily, texts like Foster’s and Eagleton’s can help gauge how reading procedures for apprehending and evaluating literature get transmitted across the generations: to young people who are just getting exposed to sophisticated adult literature and its communities of commentators. They provide effective indices of how critical attitudes about literature first get shaped. These attitudes, in turn, will have deep ripple effects on public appreciation for literature and the arts for many years to come. Thus, inspecting the ontologies of their hermeneutic models, in comparison to one another and other hermeneutic theories, might be judged as more than mere academic exercise alone.

Slow Reading: A Hermeneutics of Lingering

The slow-reading principle is an inferred, if not sometimes explicitly stated, axiom of most of the hermeneutic models discussed above. And it provides another articulation point needed for a hermeneutics of intention and second-order symbol to cohere together. The principle advocates for ingesting art texts slowly, meticulously, perhaps nonlinearly. It also

entails re-reading, re-viewing, or re-visiting art texts on second or more occasions. The specific media of those texts and the way they unfold materially in time—through strings of written words, moving images, static visual arrays, or otherwise—are moot points. The real questions of slow-versus-fast, or careful-versus-careless, reading involve the mental habits and cognitive attitudes we bring to those texts, whatever they look like. It is about how we choose to investigate and attend to the texts we are presented with. Without slow, “cognitively replete” reading procedures, many virtues of our “replete arts”—second-order symbolism chief among them—will be rendered moot points themselves.

Eagleton is one of the theorists explicit about incorporating the slow-reading principle into the fabric of his hermeneutic model: “A whole tradition of what Nietzsche called ‘slow reading’ is in danger of sinking without trace. By paying close attention to literary form and technique, this book tries to play a modest part in riding to its rescue.”¹⁹⁷ I hope this project, by advocating for the power of second-order symbolic meaning in art texts, also becomes a small part of this cavalry coming to its rescue. For the capacity to wrest second-order symbolic meanings from replete texts (if there are such meanings to be wrested) depends on a willingness and sensibility to slow-read: a willingness to halt the automatic, easy, sensory flows of our art texts; a willingness to subject ourselves to those stimulus flows repeatedly, sometimes on multiple occasions; and the sensibility for knowing which texts might deserve slow-reading, and which might not. The lateral thinking and simultaneous parallel perceiving that feed the second-order symbolic imagination are, in many ways, attendant upon being willing and ready to slow-read. If slow-reading is a compulsory path to registering the full formal and semantic effects of language in replete literary art, or the full formal and semantic effects of audio-visual cues in replete cinematic art; and if second-order symbols are often

¹⁹⁷ Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, 1.

“hidden” in background or subtextual areas of those replete aesthetics; then, the practice of construing valid interpretations from replete second-order texts entails commitments to slow-reading.

Of course, time is a precious resource here on planet Earth. We cannot devote every waking moment of our lives to microscopically inspecting every component of every piece of art we might happen upon, whether that art deserves our rigorous attention or not. Artists who appropriate techniques of symbolic realism seem well-attuned to this problem, intuitively or consciously. Their solutions, in a certain sense, involve a balancing act between the techniques of our most “resistant” forms of modernist experimental arts (Eagleton’s hard-to-slip-down texts) and our easier-to-go-down popular arts. Linear one-to-one meaning correspondences might be balanced with multi-directional polysemic correspondences, cognitive automaticity balanced with cognitive taxation. The recipes for striking those balances will differ, of course, according to the artist’s purpose, material, and individual sensibilities—which is all part of the interpretive games and enigmatic pleasures of art. Kubrick, for instance, was in the unusual position of being granted complete artistic freedom from the large-scale production studios he contracted with. Yet he still expressed to many of his colleagues and consorts over the years his persistent concerns for achieving popularity and “a good story.” His filmmaking process and products betray a much deeper sense of artistic mission and duty, one more akin to the literary modernists, and one that demanded a much more complicated and intellectually demanding set of interpretative procedures for wresting full comprehension of his films. But he was always calibrating in his creative equations how to spin a good yarn and how to get eyeballs on the screen.

Eagleton's quotation above, summoning the Nietzschean dirge for slow-reading, pairs well with the entire sweep of *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (2013). Written by another veteran of the literary trenches, David Mikics, this book-length essay amounts to an extended plea for pacing ourselves, for bracing our interior lives against the relentless attention-seeking demands of the new Digital Age. Mikics paints a picture of the diminishing art of slow, deep, sustained reading within a hypermediated contemporary cyberworld comprised of so many short, buzzy, superficial messages. The work is a pre-mortem requiem. But Mikics's arguments are compelling, his social commentary biting, and his grief over their impending loss far from hysterical. Examining the basic arguments and a few passages will bring the full thrust of slow-reading, and the perils posed by its diminishment, into sharp relief.

In Mikics's view, the internet's incessant mediating presence in our work lives colludes with its equally brooding presence in our leisure lives, which it saturates with memory-trapping soundbytes, half-cocked opinionating, and profit-motivated advertising. We might say this new digital world has unleashed a different breed of information "repleteness": the ultimate cognitive overloading of media and messages that aggressively compete with one another, nagging us for some bit of (transient) attention. There are points when Mikics can sound like the OG bellyaching about the good ole days. But the author does not deny the web's obvious benefits and powers for good. He is smart enough to know that any tool can be used for any purpose, noble or ill. And he must be equally aware of the untold numbers of wrong-headed jeremiads written during every technological paradigm shift of human media history. In the long view, his angst about the current media landscape—specifically how it poses unprecedented toxicity for the pleasures and powers of

slow-reading—should not be discounted as so much luddite hysteria. There is timeless wisdom in the art of slowing down, of course, which Mikics convincingly laments as an endangered species. Indeed, is this not one of the central motifs of so much of our poetry and art?

Mikics duly notes the psychosocial tug-of-wars induced by the contemporary media moment. As evidenced in several studies and surveys Mikics cites, heavy internet use appears to be resulting in an epidemic of “frazzled nerves and fractured attention spans” rather than a new culture of deeply informed or deeply satisfied individuals that the internet prophets often promise. Mikics knows that “the problem of divided attention didn’t begin with the digital age, of course.” But he also observes, I think realistically, that these divides are growing strained, testing the informational-emotional capacities of the human mind in quite unprecedented ways: “only recently, only now that we carry instant electronic connectivity wherever we go, has it reached avalanche proportions.” He notes that Roman aphorist Publilius Syrus once quipped, “To do two things at once is to do neither”; and rejoins that most people today are “constantly doing two (or three, or four) things at once.”¹⁹⁸ Integrating ancient adage with recent mind science, Mikics cites observations like this one from Walter Kirn: “the constant switching and pivoting,” which the internet demands from us, has been shown to “energize regions of the brain that specialize in visual processing and physical coordination and simultaneously appear to shortchange some of the higher areas related to memory and learning.”¹⁹⁹

Ironically, perhaps, negotiating replete art and second-order symbolism also requires some deft cognitive switching and toggling skills. And it is also quite clear that the pure

¹⁹⁸ Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 13.

¹⁹⁹ Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 15.

informational power of the internet can support artists, interpreters, and researchers by distributing and triangulating interpretative commentary within a much wider community of minds. It expands the possibility for increasing the public's knowledge of artists and their creative processes, thereby affording opportunities for converging on better, more valid intentional meanings of artworks. However, the kind of mental toggling and lateral thinking one deploys to properly apprehend a replete aesthetic object is self-evidently different from the multitasking behaviors and distraction-oriented attention incentivized by the most dominant forms of our digital environments. It is the latter which Mikics rightly raises red flags over.

Mikics also makes compelling use of recent studies in the psychosensory science of reading. To keep our heads above water while navigating this brave new cyberworld of media oversaturation and the potentially endless streams of text, image, sound, and video, we are leaning on certain reading habits that are antithetical to those of slow-reading: "The labor needed for truly rewarding reading stands in contrast to the lazy manner of surveying texts we have developed during the last few internet-dominated decades. Researchers have discovered that people read online texts, whether blog or Facebook pages or news stories, in an F-pattern," in which the reader scans pages with a few quick horizontal lines and mostly a straight beeline down the vertical axis. He knows that "skimming and rapid, informational reading have always been with us. A good newspaper story, backed by a juicy headline, had always been designed so it can be read for few key paragraphs, rather than all the way to the end." But he also notes that this "classic tabloid style was adopted, and accentuated by the internet, which encourages us to graze meadows instead of making us dive in to ponder a

subject.”²⁰⁰ Mikics cites a successful internet marketing strategist, who observes, with cringe-worthy frankness, “most blog readers are riddled with ADD, so your content has to be structured to accommodate.” And Mikics understands that “advertisers are well aware of the F pattern: the most expensive ad is generally at the top left-hand side of a web page, in the fattest, most attention-worthy corner of the F.”²⁰¹ For Mikics, then, the internet becomes “the epitome of a postmodern age that prizes quickness and fast connections above all else. But this seeming efficiency turns out not to be efficient at all; our busyness and swiftness don’t end up being productive.”²⁰² If anyone disagrees with such a sentiment, current-events and controversies surrounding fake news, which reached critical mass during the 2016 American election cycle, bear reminding.

The overarching picture that emerges from Mikics’s polemic is one in which some very real, very potent self-perpetuating forces—psychological, cultural, and economic in nature—conspire to incentivize fast, superficial reading over slower, deeper, more thoughtful reading. Mikics’s arguments gain further credence when applied to the specialized reading realms of our art texts. Imagine practicing the “art” of F-pattern skimming with *Paradise Lost*, a Shakespearean sonnet, a page from *Mrs. Dalloway*. Imagine “grazing” a replete aesthetic field, especially one overgrown with second-order symbols. Such habits can only result in greatly impoverished interactions with such works of art. No, not the end of the world. But certainly these are missed opportunities to unfold a deeply meaningful, richly aesthetic life experience—before we are delivered from this (cyber)world to the next.

²⁰⁰ Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 19

²⁰¹ Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 19.

²⁰² Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 17.

Mikics's arguments come to powerful convergence in the passage below, which spotlights several key virtues for achieving responsible, deep engagement with art texts: repetition, time, care, effort, and patience.

In the brave new digital world, we are intent on speed rather than repetition and slow study. As a result, we have lost sight of the fact that reading well requires time and patience. This point can't be repeated often enough. Book-length arguments and works of imaginative literature reveal themselves only over time. We must work hard to get more out of the books we read—and good books always reward slow-moving, careful attention. The point is a pedagogically necessary one as well. We are not doing our children any favors by encouraging the idea that everything they do should be easy, effortless, and quick. [...] Bad writing, the mere assembling of sentences from the [internet] with some alterations or additions of one's own, goes along with bad reading. [...] What goes for writing goes equally for reading.²⁰³

This passage presents a monument to the values of both *lingering* and *hard work* in our reading and writing lives. We could point to gaps and flaws in the arguments of veteran literature professors like Eagleton, Foster, and Mikics. But what cannot be argued with is their resounding faith in the values of literature, art, and reading with care, with intelligence, with rapt attention. If we are willing to invest in some practice and some readerly elbow grease, there are rewards awaiting those who apply the proper reading methods to the proper artforms. Rewards that the infinitely vast, if shallower, webs of the buzzing internet will always be hard pressed to provide.

²⁰³ Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 18.

Consulting the Artists: A Hermeneutics of Genuflection

If we want to invest faith in the originary powers of textmakers, if we agree to genuflect to artists' control over us and their texts, we ought to entertain a few of their own viewpoints on these subject matters of intention and interpretation.

One contemporary author who gives full-throated approval to re-admitt the authorial presense back into our literary-critical equations is American novelist Jeffrey Eugenides. Eugenides advocates for something more than just the artifice of an implied author, too. He understands authors as real, mostly reliable human entities, whom we should be able to count on for shedding some rays of light, however provisional or dim, upon a world of darkness and confusion. Authors are not here to confuse their audiences even more. They are not here to con or subject us to a cruel game of smoke and mirrors for the sake of confusion itself, or for the marketability that might come with sheathing oneself in obscurantist mystery. Critic Evan Hughes suggests that Eugenides' recent novel *The Marriage Plot* was the author's latest "salvo in the debate that has occupied Eugenides' generation for 25 years, about what exactly fiction is for."²⁰⁴ The overarching question of that debate: Should writers today privilege the difficulty and readerly resistance of the modernist/postmodernist literary avant-garde; or "the more straightforward narrative pleasures"²⁰⁵ of an easier-to-digest, nineteenth-century brand of realistic fiction? In a letter to fellow novelist Jim Lewis, Eugenides provides some reflection on this problem:

I'm struck by your idea that we can get along fine without an avant-garde. I'm not sure I've ever heard it put quite so bluntly before. Joyce was

²⁰⁴ Evan Hughes, "Just Kids," *New York Magazine*, Oct. 9, 2011, <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/jeffrey-eugenides-2011-10/>.

²⁰⁵ David Haglund, "Yes, Jeffrey Eugenides Was Thinking of David Foster Wallace," *Slate*, Oct. 10, 2011, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2011/10/10/jeffrey_eugenides_david_foster_wallace_jonathan_franzen_and_the_.html.

writing *Ulysses* in the aftermath of World War I, when Europe and the European dream of progress and Utopian rationalism lay in ruins. I can imagine, in such a desperate, broken time, wanting to read books that were in no way like the books that had come before, books that, by the sheer destructive force of their aesthetics, spoke to the real destruction of war and, at the same time, began to show a way ahead by virtue of their grand experiments.

This isn't how I feel right now. There's a lot of noise in my head, coming from all directions, the radio, the television, the computer, the street. You could write a book that echoes this cacophony, but that might serve only to amplify it. What I want in a book is a refuge from the noise and confusion, plus a reminder that another human being is on the other end of the exchange, someone who isn't peddling me false consciousness but is bringing, or at least attempting to bring, things into light. Maybe this is just creeping middle age, but it's the way I'm tending these days.²⁰⁶

So Eugenides sees virtue in following the traditions of realistic narrative-driven fiction, at least in his own writing and at least in our current historical moment. But his views are nuanced. He hints that this predilection could just be a phase. The point here is not to suggest that artists—be they novelists or short-fiction writers or filmmakers—must be ciphers of wisdom, beacons of the clear guiding lights of Truth. Yes, the *claritas* of Homer and Aristotle, which Croce gestures at in the epigraph of this chapter, appears to be one of Eugenides's aims. But he well knows that clarity and truth can take many forms, especially

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Father of Modernism," letter to Jim Lewis, *Slate*, June 16, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2004/the_father_of_modernism/the_carnival_of_bloomsday_and_the_death_of_the_western_novel.html.

in art. He mostly advocates for a good-faith contract between author and reader, and between narrator and narratee as well. Eugenides's readers are invited to give themselves over to a controlling consciousness. That consciousness can be conceptualized as both a contrivance and a real live human being. Either way, readers can look to that entity for some sort of knowledge or intriguing perspective on the world and humanity. And hopefully that knowledge can be construed as at least modestly "enlightening." Such enlightenment might come via an author's detailed mimetic realism, via exemplification, if not by a grander, far-sighted philosophical scheme or vision of life. Such notions reset the rule-of-thumb Foster half-alluded to: Would it be very wise to invest our time in art made by dummies and simpletons? Or by obscurantist charlatans? By people who don't have anything substantial to add to the conversations about who, where, or why we are? By people who spend years of their lives writing or creating something, but without any designs or hope that their products will be appreciated or be understood by any other human being on the planet? By (if we take a postmodern view) disembodied vacuous nodes of a language system?

To speak in broad generalities for a moment, the artist's life is usually one of focused thought, richly felt experience, recollected emotion, possibly much solitude and heartbreak, and certainly immersion as a reader/viewer/student of the art being practiced.²⁰⁷ Giving readers a *carte-blanc* right to co-opt art objects for their own purposes, allowing them to think that whoever created an art object does not matter in the interpretative equations in the slightest, granting them license to erase the author, the decisionmaker, the selector of all the formal cues use to generate artistic experience—this strikes as intellectually if not ethically

²⁰⁷ For weekly evidence of how contemporary writers immerse themselves in the reading life, for instance, see *The New York Times Book Review*'s column By the Book: Writers on Literature and the Literary Life (<http://www.nytimes.com/column/by-the-book>.) This "archive [...] in which authors and other notable people discuss their lives as readers" offers a rich window into the mental and aesthetic head-spaces of these artists.

irresponsible. It presents a rather preposterous if not grave travesty of how art operates in the world, what it can do for us as human beings. Eugenides's normative preference for writing realistic fiction is rather beside the point in the end—although several points are worth remembering for thinking through the features of symbolic realism. Rather, it is his reinvigoration of the artist's authority within the critical equation, his acceptance of the artist as a reliable grounding for understanding our artworks, that is valuable.

Sharing similar spirit, the Intentism Movement provides final punctuation to this section, and to the chapter's hermeneutics as a whole. A loose alliance of living contemporary artists and thinkers, the Intentists are forthright about their desires for their own art, and art generally, to be taken as it was intended. The group's website aims to codify these desires. Their manifesto (reproduced in full below) defines Intentism as “a movement of artists, authors, actors, and musicians who believe that art can convey an artist's intended message to his or her intended audience. As a movement it both recognizes and celebrates the relationship between an artist's creation and its creator.” The rest of the document is a brash call-to-arms to foment artistic autonomy while rejecting postmodern critical practices that evacuate the artist or encourage interpretative proliferations of infinite regress. Its three principles are re-assembled here:

1. Intentists believe that the artist is free to convey his or her intended message.

Intentists believe that European postmodernism has contributed to gagging the artist.

2. Intentists believe a confused, hidden, or denied intention leads to zero accountability.

3. Conversely, Intentists believe that an omission of artist intention can lead to enforced restrictions on the artist and even censorship.

Appended to the manifesto are four additional statements of purpose:

- Intentists believe that although their artwork can have a complex meaning and be understood on a number of levels, there are definitely ways it can be misunderstood—therefore not all interpretations are equally valid.
- Intentists believe that their artwork is able to convey their artistic intention to their intended audience.
- Intentists believe that the voice of their work is a force for good.
- Intentists celebrate the “creative trail” in their work by frequently keeping elements of the editing processes in their work. This layering of ideas we call “palimpsestism.”²⁰⁸

Such proposals are identical to, or at least dovetail with, many of the major principles spotlighted in the pages above. For instance, complex, layered meanings in artworks can exist, can be intended, and can be accurately understood. Misinterpretations of artworks can likewise occur. Authors can be held accountable to their works’ meanings. Identifying a unified artistic voice is possible, and for the Intentists this can even entail a sociopolitical as well as aesthetic “good.” Their palimpsest vision of artwork directly echoes Genette. But it also broaches the crucial idea of editorial and revision work.

To expound on that last point, unless you are Jack Kerouac writing *On the Road*, most serious artists expend vast energies subjecting their work to rigorous rounds of self-

²⁰⁸ *Intentism: Intentionalism and the Arts*, “Manifesto,” website, <http://www.intentism.com/manifesto.htm>.

assessment, self-editing, and self-revision, in addition to editorial exchanges with others. These adjustment/refining procedures clearly signal that these artists are involved in some self-conscious, self-motivated, goal-seeking behaviors. That goal must include the evocation of specific desired effects and meanings in their audiences. In other words, they are clearly involved in a project of *intention*. Otherwise, why all the editorial fuss? Invariably, literary writing involves elaborate stages of planning, notetaking, and creative-marinating, followed by markup and marginalia, multiple drafts, and editorial streamlining. Cinematic art involves tedious and expensive preproduction work, followed by carefully designed shoots, reshoots, editorial cutting, and postproduction tweaks. To be sure, a confluence of motives will influence any artist's creative process: economic motives for trade and profit, status motives for increased cultural capital, psychoemotional motives of self-expression, to name a few. But the intentional, semantic, communicative, and (let's just call it) "artistic" motives seem undeniable. What else could fuel such economically risky, temporally costly, cognitively taxing activities other than a clear intentional desire—a desire to share a specifiable set of meanings, relay a certain vision, or provide a specific experience to other cognizant human beings?

The Intentists have found backing by several philosophers and academics. They count William Irwin among their vocal patrons. Professor of philosophy Colin Lyas posts these words of support on the Intentist homepage:

Those who are against reference to artists and their intentions seem to me to dehumanize art, and that is of a piece with a more general dehumanization of culture that I find in many thinkers (usually under the claim that author = authority = authoritarian = tyranny etc.). The recognition of the humanity of

another, as a person, is a buttress against any attempt to treat that person as a thing, or a sub-human, to be dispensed with without moral consequences. (I note that Hitler and many of his followers thought of the Jews as sub-human and outside the respect that acknowledging another as human demands from us). Moreover, to see humanity in the intention of the work is to acknowledge the status of that work as an end and not (see Kant) as a thing to be treated as a means to an end. I also add that I think that to ignore the fact that the work is intimately related to the person who produced it is to cut oneself off from its proper appreciation. A work of art is a human gesture and its maker can be seen (perhaps with difficulty at times) *in* the gesture. To appreciate the work is to appreciate the quality of the gesture.²⁰⁹

Hirsch's language ethic immediately comes to mind here. Another philosopher, Paisley Livingstone, blurbs this: "Intentism is a constructive new movement that embraces the creative efforts of artists working in a range of media and art forms. Intentism redirects our attention from the discourse of critics and theorists to the artists whose thoughts and actions are the ultimate source of whatever is genuinely valuable in the arts."²¹⁰ The "Readings" area of their website also collects a strong set of link-to articles by academics, scientists, and intellectuals, together with book recommendations, interviews, reviews, and documents.²¹¹

I want my own project to take the aims and philosophies of the Intentism Movement seriously. A good second-order symbolology, I think, assumes that credible symbolic interpretations should be traceable back to a symbol-deploying textmaker. Even if such interpretations are all just provisional guesswork in the end, second-order meanings must be

²⁰⁹ Intentism: Intentionalism and the Arts, homepage, <http://www.intentism.com>.

²¹⁰ Intentism: Intentionalism and the Arts, homepage, <http://www.intentism.com>.

²¹¹ Intentism: Intentionalism and the Arts, "Readings," <http://www.intentism.com/reading.htm>

considered part of an artist's intentional framework—if not deliberately conscious then at least plausibly sub/unconscious, as reasonably emerging from the swirling mental-emotional mix of the creator's artistic horizons.

INTENTISM

Intentionalism and the Arts

HOME MANIFESTO BLOG THE ARTS FORUMS READING MEDIA MEMBERS WEB STORE EXHIBITIONS MORE

Intentist Manifesto

Intentism *noun*
\\in-'tentiz?m\\

Intentism is a movement of artists, authors, actors and musicians who believe that art **can** convey an artist's intended message to his or her intended audience. As a movement it both recognizes and celebrates the relationship between an artist's creation and its creator.

Intentists believe 3 principles:

1

*Intentists believe that the artist is **free** to convey his or her intended message.
Intentists believe that European postmodernism has contributed to **gagging the artist**.*

Eminent poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, seen as a champion of Postmodernism, believes intention, "...will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and the entire system of utterances." For many of Derrida's followers this means that there must **ALWAYS** be more than one interpretation of any text or work. Intention will **NEVER** be completely present. There will **ALWAYS** be undecidables.

Intentism believes in **UNGAGGING** the artist so that he or she can speak to us.

Who is right?

Much of postmodernist art theory claims that the artwork has no universal meaning and can therefore say many things. Meaning rests with the interpreter rather than the artist. If this is true, then the work can mean anything and therefore, effectively mean nothing. NB. For clarification of Intentist's definition of 'meaning' see Intentism: Resurrection of the Artist.

The artist has been gagged.

Much of Postmodernism encourages the belief that no artist or author is able to convey his or her intended meaning because everyone must experience art through their limited frame or reference. Semiotician and social theorist Roland Barthes wrote of '*The Death of the Author*' because, in his eyes, the author's intention is irrelevant. "*To give a text an Author...is to impose a limit on that text.*"

Intentists appreciate the revolutionary insights much of postmodernism has made, particularly in the awareness of the baggage every viewer brings to an artwork. However, Intentists believe 'No creative input, no meaning input.' Consequently, a viewer cannot provide a new meaning.

Furthermore, since the epistemological qualities of a work finish when the creator creates no more, a viewer can perfectly, but not omnisciently understand the work, since the meaning of the work does not change with each new view. In essence, the hermeneutical circle should be considered the hermeneutical spiral, as a viewer can reduce subjective associations or significances.

Intentists call this the **GAGGING** of the artist because the artist is very much alive and has a message to say.

2

Intentionists believe a confused, hidden or denied intention leads to **ZERO** accountability.

This is bad for art and bad for society.

A dead artist can no longer be associated with a painting advocating racism or homophobia, for example. Both Heidegger and Paul De Man have been rightly criticized for writing anti-Semitic articles, which is hypocritical unless an artist's

voice can be heard and recognized.

3

Conversely, Intentionists believe that an omission of artist intention can lead to enforced **restrictions** on the artist and even censorship.

When the *Contemporary Art Museum* in Cincinnati, opened the art exhibition *The Perfect Moment* in 1990, the city of Cincinnati brought suit against the Centre and two curators as some of the work was considered offensive. The prosecution only showed the work, the defense explained possible artistic intention. The jury acquitted all the accused.

Art has been at the vanguard of changing social behaviour, often encouraging tolerance and civil liberties. Art has often been one step ahead of society in attitudes towards women, race and politics, acting as a social conscience in times of oppression.

The potency of art to speak to the hearts and minds of people is not doubted by dictators who are often keen to silence its voice.

Without the influence of art with a message civilization will be that much more brutal, that much more intolerant.

Intentionists believe that although their artwork can have a complex meaning and be understood on a number of levels, there are definitely ways it can be misunderstood - therefore not all interpretations are equally valid.

Intentionists believe that their artwork is able to convey their artistic intention to their intended audience.

Intentionists believe that the voice of their work is a force for good.

Intentionists celebrate the 'creative trail' in their work by frequently keeping elements of the editing processes in their work. This layering of ideas we call 'palimpsestism.'

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²¹² Intentionism: Intentionalism and the Arts, "Manifesto," website, <http://www.intentionism.com/manifesto.htm>.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical and Methodological Orientation: A Modest Ev-Cog Proposal / Consilience / No Mo Pomo

Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.

— Theodosius Dobzhansky²¹³

A Modest Ev-Cog Proposal

This project seeks to contribute, however modestly, to the vibrant dialogues crisscrossing the humanities, arts, and sciences in the academy today. Its nascent biopoetics of symbolism exemplifies how diverse precincts of knowledge and their associated academic disciplines can relate to one another in mutually beneficial ways. It remains largely optimistic, not cynical, about what the best scientific knowledge can offer to the best arts and humanities studies. And vice versa. Using ev-cog frameworks to think through phenomena like second-order symbolism, replete art, and the hermeneutics needed to effect those phenomena, it seeks to carve out a small piece of the consilient puzzle. That is, it aspires toward creating a more unified, reliable, reciprocally reinforcing base of knowledge about the world and the life born within it. A consilient biopoetic account of second-order symbolism is obligated to account for several dimensions and scales of natural objects and events:

- human nature (evolved species-typical traits—psychological, behavioral, physiological, and/or anatomical—that recur across human populations and are assumed relatively fixed by a special genetic endowment of *homo sapiens*)
- several scales of human history (evolutionary, cultural, local)

²¹³ Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Biology,” *American Biology Teacher* 35 (March 1973), 125–9.

- the architecture of the human mind generally
- the architecture of specific human minds (the personality and psychological dispositions of specific artists, for instance, but also specific readers)
- the biology and mechanics of human communication systems
- more flexible human cultural behaviors, which both produce and are refracted in our representational art texts

The biopoetic propositions in these pages constitute a tentative exploratory step into this constellation of vectors.

A mix of theoreticians and practitioners in ev-cog studies can be counted among the project's models and predecessors. Joseph Carroll, Brian Boyd, Jonathan Gotschall, Nancy Easterlin, Porter Abbott, Harold Fromm, Frederick Turner, Patrick Colm Hogan, David Bordwell, Torban Grodal, Noël Carroll, Edward Slingerland, Harvey Whitehouse, Pascal Boyer, Steven Pinker, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, Antonio Damasio, David Barash, Joseph LeDoux, and Terrence Deacon have all been formative in my approach and conceptual foundations. The scholars in this agglomeration vary in terms of their thinking styles, analytical tools, and central objects of study. And they often disagree with one another's conclusions and disciplinary prognostications in their work, sometimes with vigor. But they all share in this: their scholarship is paradigmatic for how to successfully appropriate "external" disciplinary knowledge within one's home fields. Their prior work I hope gives this one some imprimatur.

Consilience

The core theoretical-methodological thrust comes from the principles and mission of consilient scholarship. Information on the consilience project can be gleaned from a growing galaxy of literature that explains its epistemological aspirations or constructs knowledge in the spirit of furthering the project itself. E.O. Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998) afforded the term its currency.²¹⁴ Slingerland and Mark Collard's *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and Humanities* (2012) remains a formidable collection of theoretical extrapolations and practical applications of Wilson's ideas.²¹⁵

Emblematic of practical criticism embodying the principles of consilience are niche articles like "A Consilient Approach to Horror Video Games: Challenges and Opportunities" (2016) by Mathias Clasen and Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, published in the Danish peer-reviewed journal *Akademisk Kvarter*.²¹⁶ As précis to their ev-cog analysis of horror-genre computer gaming, Clasen and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen springboard off Wilson's historical understanding of the latest "crisis" in the humanities. Then they suggest how humanistic scholarship can adapt itself, without much problem, to the tenets of consilient research and academic discourse:

The crisis has many causes, but [...] E.O. Wilson identified at its crux an epistemic rift between the humanities and the sciences. [...] Wilson argued that this unhappy development reached an apogee with the emergence of poststructuralism in the 1970s. Declaring that human inquiry could never transcend the indeterminate nature of the sign, the poststructuralists went on a campaign of radical antifoundationalism. There was no valid way, they held,

²¹⁴ E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

²¹⁵ *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and Humanities*, ed. Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²¹⁶ Mathias Clasen and Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, "A Consilient Approach to Horror Video Games: Challenges and Opportunities," *Akademisk Kvarter* 13 (Oct. 10, 2016): 127–42.

of choosing between competing hypotheses, especially not in human affairs. The ensuing intellectual climate has sustained scientifically outmoded explanatory paradigms such as orthodox psychoanalysis and later reconfigurations of Freudian theory. How could humanistic scholars make new and exciting discoveries when working from this intellectual impasse? In giving up truth, poststructuralism also gave up scientific relevance.

[...] Humanistic scholarship may be concerned with the idiosyncrasies of a particular species, but it does not follow that the enterprise should be itself equally idiosyncratic. The humanities will benefit from adopting as a methodological touchstone the basic tenet of consilience: reality forms a unified, hierarchical causal order (Carroll, McAdams, and Wilson 2016). The laws of biology obey, but do not reduce to chemistry; the laws of chemistry obey, but do not reduce to physics. From this uncontroversial epistemology fractionates a useful heuristic: the human sciences should constrain, but not determine how we approach art (Gottschall 2003). A consilient approach, then, is uniquely equipped to shed light on the form and function of cultural artifacts. It counteracts the anti-scientific ethos of dominant poststructuralist paradigms, which has contributed significantly to the crisis and perceived irrelevance of the humanities.

The poststructuralist dominance has not gone unchallenged, and many have done so from a Wilsonian position (Boyd 2009; Carroll 2013; Gottschall 2008; Pinker 2002). An increasing number of “biocultural” scholars absorb the major theoretical and empirical breakthroughs in, especially, the

evolutionary social sciences (Carroll et al. 2015). They argue that the humanities stand to reclaim lost relevance and prestige if they reconnect to the knowns of the human condition. Such an aspiration will neither erode the purpose of the humanities, nor turn their rich and time-honored disciplines into the handmaidens of science; the cultural-historical complexity of humanistic subject matter will continue to necessitate traditional approaches in an integrated paradigm (Boyd, Gottschall, and Carroll 2010; Carroll 2013; Rainsford 2007).²¹⁷

Much of this restates the ideals of consilience and supervenience that critics like Hogan (see Preface) have been formulating over recent years. But a few points can be isolated for emphasis and the authors' potent phrasing. Their claim that "in giving up truth, poststructuralism also gave up scientific relevance" cannot be overstated. No matter what goods poststructuralism may have delivered into the lit-crit communities, or the academic and nonacademic communities at large, its rejection of truth-discovery and scientific knowledge has produced nontrivial amounts of collateral damage. The authors' endorsement of deploying a non-idiosyncratic critical style to understand the idiosyncratic subject matters of art is also well-stated. So are their desires to stem the anxieties of humanities scholars who worry that consilience will inevitably transform their sacred disciplines into a technolinguistic wasteland of vulgar reductionism ruled by the Overlords of Scientism.

In the online video-interview series *On Literature and Science*, Carroll, Gottschall, Boyd, Slingerland, and David Sloan Wilson discuss the value of practicing a consilient,

²¹⁷ Clasen and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, "A Consilient Approach to Horror Video Games," 128–29.

evolutionarily informed approach to the humanities.²¹⁸ Gottschall parses consilience as “the idea that the principles of physics constrain the principles of chemistry, which constrain the principles of biology, which constrain the principles of psychology, which constrain the principles of the social sciences and the humanities. So everything is connected into a continuous whole.”²¹⁹ And Slingerland formulates the following cogent ideas about emergent phenomena, the consilience project, and its synthetic-analytical goal of conceptual integration:

It’s important to realize that at each level of explanation [on the scale of object complexity], there are new emergent entities that have their own properties. They’re not predictable from the lower levels. Some people who oppose vertical integration think that we want to make everything the Department of Physics [...] that we should all be physicists. But that’s absurd. It doesn’t even happen *in* the sciences. You have physicists, and you have quantum physicists. You have people who look at physics at higher levels and they’re often in a different department. You’ve got physical chemistry and organic chemistry—they’re not squished together, because organic molecules have these emergent properties that you can’t predict from the lower level. And you need these emergent entities to talk about what’s going on. It’s possible that in principle it’s all predictable from some level of physics, but I’m not actually sure it’s tractable computationally—plus it would be really

²¹⁸ *On Literature and Science*, YouTube video series, 2009. The work in the ev-cog humanities, to say nothing of recent research on art and the brain, has exploded over the last decade. Even a simple Google or Amazon search will inundate any curious party. This video series offers a good primer for the uninitiated, and it does so while effectively putting faces on the people behind the scholarship. Participating scholars summarize many of their core assumptions and mission-principles, which get articulated at length in their more rigorous, thorough-going written works.

²¹⁹ Jonathan Gottschall, *On Literature and Science*, Part 4, YouTube video series, 0:00–0:22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yAF971Qbro>.

stupid! Because we have these heuristic categories at these new levels that do great work for us and have real explanatory force.

So what vertical integration is *not* saying that human-level truths are just illusions that we're going to explain away once we get the neuroscience right. Human-level truths are like truths in organic chemistry: they are emergent categories, of things like beauty or truth or intention. They describe something that's important to human beings and has real heuristic value. We in the humanities study these concepts and how they interact. All vertical integration is arguing is that we've got to allow our understanding of these concepts, when it's applicable, to be informed by lower levels of explanation.

And that we should be *troubled* when there are conflicts between the two.²²⁰

Slingerland punctuates his remarks, many of which chime with Sunny Auyang's fox/hedgehog model of the evolutionary biologist (see Preface), with this crucial epistemic point: whenever we detect a conflict between adjacent rungs on the ladder of conceptual explanation—e.g. between neuroscience and psychology, between psychology and sociology, between psychology and literature, between literature and the science of reading—then we should feel “troubled” by this. In turn, we ought to be moved to try to resolve this conflict. Resolution may end up being unattainable in one's present moment: a lack of proper tools, computing power, manpower, or luck can hinder problem-solving; so can the design limits of the human brain. But these prospects should not prevent us from wondering about these problems. They should not prevent us from troubleshooting detected discrepancies using intellectual *bona fides*; from formulating and exploring hypotheses; from testing those

²²⁰ Slingerland, *On Literature and Science*, Part 4, ~0:23–2:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yAF971Qbro>.

hypotheses using empiricism and rational thinking; from subjecting those hypotheses to procedures of falsification, verification, and commonsense reason.

Frederick Luis Aldama's introductory remarks to *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative* harmonize with these points. Aldama homes in on why the humanities will benefit from an authentically consilient interdisciplinary approach:

To understand why our work in the humanities matters, [...] we can wipe out that erstwhile line in the sand that artificially separates the sciences from the humanities; that separates those disciplines deemed empirical and in pursuit of the universal (the “nomological”) from those considered speculative (even if analytical) and in pursuit of the idiosyncratic (the singular or “punctual”).

Whether we're talking about mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology or psychology, literature, linguistics, philosophy, history, and classics, knowledge in each discipline advances along a continuum between the hypothetical and the tested and confirmed. The humanities are part and parcel of the knowledge the human species has acquired about itself over the centuries, together with the social sciences and the natural sciences.

Knowledge is acquired in many ways and may exhibit many degrees of generality, certitude, and power to predict the future. It can be the product of direct observation and a small number of general assumptions, or the result of a very elaborate and long chain of hypotheses and deductions. It can

possess a rich factual content or be almost devoid of it, but it must always lead back to factual observations.²²¹

Steven Pinker endorses a similar robust consilience for scholarship and education generally. In “Toward a Consilient Study of Literature,” he aims his gaze expressly at literary studies, observing, uncontroversially I think, that “literary analysis would surely benefit from the latest scientific ideas on human thought, emotion, and social relations.” He carves common ground with Frederick Crews, who Pinker says “applauds the analytic and empirical mindset of [Darwinian lit-crit] with the reservation (which I share) that evolution is just one of a number of human sciences that will be needed to achieve a consilient literary scholarship.”²²² Positions like that are hard to argue against anymore.²²³

The consilient, interdisciplinary impulses energizing Aldama’s and Pinker’s comments are not new. As soon as formal intellectual disciplines started taking shape centuries ago, their borders were porous, readily crossed by intelligent people wishing to cull insights from multiple areas of life and knowledge. But in recent decades, these energies have reached a steady gathering force in the academy. Today more than ever, scholars are giving voice to the need for advancing disciplinary convergence, collaboration, borrowing, and

²²¹ Frederick Luis Aldama, “Introduction: The Science and Humanities Matter as One,” *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, ed. Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1.

²²² Steven Pinker, “Toward a Consilient Study of Literature,” *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007), 163–64.

²²³ Pinker’s literary sensibilities might not be as open or refined as those of professional literature critics. And his arguments about art in particular are always open to revision, critique, updates. However, the Scientism that many humanities scholars like to project on Pinker are usually unfounded if his works get read with a more open-minded, collegial *esprit de corps*.

interaction.²²⁴ More scholars from more disciplines are calling for an overarching epistemic trajectory that aims at concrete reliable outputs that emerge from the congenial integrations of the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. Works like Aldama's are representative of this larger trend. One can now find a flurry of books, chapters, and articles—in both the academic and popular presses—that chart projects and best practices for disciplinary border-crossings and borrowings. This is neither the time nor place to itemize that immense body of literature; but it is appropriate to note its existence and the many advances, internal conflicts, and questions it is producing. To take one very recent example, *Darwin's Bridge: Uniting the Sciences and Humanities* (edited by Joseph Carroll, Dan McAdams, and E.O. Wilson) provides one of the strongest contributions to the theory and application of consilient scholarship, and a clear map of the road ahead. Notably, this work is punctuated with an article by philosopher-polymath and renowned skeptic Massimo Pigliucci, called “The Limits of Consilience and the Problem of Scientism,” which provides a valuable check-and-balance to the most overzealous forms of the consilient mission.²²⁵

For its part, an authentically consilient biopoetics of symbolism should feel obligated to spin connecting threads across several rungs of explanation: evolutionary history, neuropsychology, cognition, social culture, aesthetics. The one in these pages is mostly, in Aldama's words, “the result of a very elaborate and long chain of hypotheses and

²²⁴ How we date disciplinary formations is as much a matter of taste and purpose as historical fact. One can register disciplinary demarcations in the Classical Age, with the ancient triumvirate and the wide coverage of Aristotelian philosophy; in the Middle Ages, with advent of the medieval universities; in the Enlightenment; and especially in the ages of industry, modern science, and the modern university. Today, we seem to be in a peculiar moment where the relentless urge to split, specialize, and erect borders has met an equally strong urge to combine, generalize, and erase some of those artificial borders. A tension—perhaps one always felt in intellectual history, but intensified today—can be felt in these contrary impulses to 1) develop ever-new clusters of subfields and 2) synthesize by eradicating disciplinary walls. Perhaps the proverbial foxes and hedgehogs are vying for their territories, with equal right, within individual minds and between several minds across several disciplines.

²²⁵ *Darwin's Bridge: Uniting the Sciences and Humanities*, ed. by Joseph Carroll, Dan McAdams, and E.O. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

deductions.” But this does not preclude it from the realms of factual observation (especially the “facts” of specific texts). Nor does it preclude it from being buttressed or overturned by future empirical work or larger datasets. With a rich body of ev-cog theories of mind, behavior, narrative, art, and symbol-making to draw on already—even if that body is growing, tentative, provisional—art scholars can only benefit by attempting some vertical integration between these paradigms. Such integrative gestures will lend the widest possible scope and context to questions about the nature, history, uses, and values of symbolism in the narrative arts. Even tentative answers to these questions would be a desirable component to the growing infrastructures of biopoetics, neuroaesthetics, and the evolutionary humanities. A consilient, comprehensive biopoetics of symbol would help frame the extensive yet ultimately unsatisfying work on literary symbol that can be found in older works of criticism, and that shows up as too scattershot, diluted, or ungrounded in the boilerplate entries of literary handbooks and introductions.

No Mo Pomo

As Clasen and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen suggest above, to advance any consilient program of literature (including a consilient biopoetics), it is imperative to steer the biopoetic ship away from postmodern and poststructuralist currents that can still create undertow in today’s critical humanities. In *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century—Revisiting C.P. Snow* (2013), Jerome Kagan depicts the blind alleys that postmodern (pomo) styles of thinking can lead scholars down, stressing the need for epistemic redirection. It has been a slow turn of the ship thus far, at least in certain corners of the humanities, but Kagan’s optimism that there *is* redirection seems fair appraisal

of the current situation. Kagan does not write off the pomo sensibility entirely either. He registers its intellectual impulses as rooted far deeper in the history of ideas than just the recent turns of deconstruction, social constructionism, and the culture wars:

A vocal band of twentieth-century scholars [...] announced that the presumed truths in the works of White European males, such as Montaigne, Locke, Hume, Kant, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Gibbon, or Tolstoy, were local to the prejudices of their gender, time, and place and were “social constructions.” These critics, often called postmodernists, argued that no value system or interpretation of text was inherently more valid than any other. The group that happened to be dominant promoted their values, methods, concepts, and explanations in order to retain power over those honoring a different ethical code. Although the members of a faculty or professional guild have always competed for positions of power, the postmodernists chose to make all intellectual effort political.

[...] The catechism of the postmodernists, or deconstructionists, who claimed Nietzsche and Heidegger as their grandparents and Derrida and Foucault as their parents, maintained that no writer had any special access to truth because there was no relation between a semantic description and reality. The meaning of every word depended on the other words in the sentence, and the meaning of every sentence depended on the other sentences in the narrative. Every scholar was caught in an infinite regress within a labyrinth of words that could never capture reality accurately. Words, as Joyce Appleby notes, were to be compared to balls careening wildly in a pinball machine

rather than jewels in a safe deposit box.

On reflection, this skeptical view is not as radical as it appears on the surface, for its fundamental thesis is traceable to Francis Bacon, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Virginia Woolf. The essential idea, noted earlier, is that every sentence has an envelope of possible meanings, and no meaning has a privileged status or unchanging referent. Hence, the relation between language and reality is always ambiguous. Although some aspects of the deconstructionists' message were valid, they were less revolutionary than they or their followers thought. However, they became so zealous in their semantic housecleaning they began to break some precious crystal goblets. The excessively harsh attacks on the correspondence meaning of truth, their caricature of scientific claims, and criticism of the belief that some mental symptoms were legitimate illnesses were motivated, in part, by the humanists' loss of status to the scientists who had become the preferred targets of affection, generosity, and attention from college deans and the media. [...]

If the meanings of all sentences are inherently ambiguous, the belief that any text could reveal the truth about anything is illusory. Because natural scientists believed they were discovering valid facts about nature, the postmodernists' attack on historians, philosophers, and literary critics was also a challenge to the scientists who claimed to possess a special purchase on truths about nature. [...] The reason why physicists rejected the ether as a medium through which light traveled is not to be equated with the reason why Jacques Derrida insisted that uncertainty penetrated every narrative.

[...]

This movement retained some vitality from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, but began to lose adherents because doing nothing, which is an impossible posture, was the obvious implication of its arguments. The few postmodern claims that were valid were assimilated and the extravagant announcements that strayed far beyond the bounds of reasonableness were cast aside.²²⁶

Two points from this lengthy passage bear highlighting. Kagan's prospect of doing nothing versus doing something presses the current project of consilient biopoetics forward. Even in light of its manifest difficulties—its many moving parts, its speculative and possibly premature links to the still-primitive sciences of mind, brain, aesthetics, animal communication, etc.—there is much to be gained by working through biopoetic puzzles with what we *do* know, empirically and rationally.

There is also insight to be gained in Kagan's metaphoric aside about how certain groups of thinkers view the ontological status of words and language. This analogy, attributed to historian Joyce Appleby, compares words to pinballs (for deconstructionists) or jewels (for traditional humanists). Both images are effective, penetrating to the crux of the ongoing skirmishes between pomo and traditionalist humanities scholars. We might justifiably ask, for instance, whether speech-acts are just so much pinball-playing: events of pure play devoid of real-world consequences, other than receiving a machine's preprogrammed score or another ball to shoot around. Language and fiction can certainly be used in ways that accentuate its qualities of experimental play and real-world indifference.

²²⁶ Jerome Kagan, *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century—Revisiting C.P. Snow* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 223–26.

Those qualities form an integral aspect of much poetry and literary art, sometimes acting as important markers for a text's symbolic potentialities as well. But most reasonable thinkers will quickly see that the deconstructionist's linguistic pinballs tell only part of the story.

The second half of Kagan's analogy envisions words as glimmering rubies, locked away perhaps in bank safety-deposit boxes or the plunder-chambers of lost pirate ships everywhere. This bejeweled vision of language will be construed as equally naïve by most rationally minded critics, linguists, and historians today. Yet it was a vision that held sway for many generations of readers and poets alike. The numinous qualities of language have been attached to a real or pseudo-spirituality by human cultures across history. They were key ingredients in feeding the symbolic-allegorical tradition of Western literature and thought (a point that will be developed in later chapters). A valid biopoetics of literature, art, and symbolism must be grounded in secular evolutionary science and biology; it should not promote a naively unreflective and uncritical word worship. And yet, perhaps it is not wrong to view certain qualities of literary language (or the visual/aural language of art cinema) as deserving special attention, if not outright reverence. Symbolic tropes, at least the fresh evocative ones, might be literary jewels after all—mental rubies among a wider roster of literary gemstones: diamond metaphors, golden dialogue, emerald rhymes, silver anaphora, sapphire narrative twists.

An authentically rendered biopoetics of our various artforms would thus have to be, among other things, a countermove to the terminologically muddled, intellectually obfuscatory, ideologically motivated criticisms that emerged under the aegis of pomo camps. Carroll and Boyd sort those camps neatly as Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist sociology, deconstructionist linguistics, and the ideologies of the most radical feminisms and hardline

identity politics. Foucaultian historiography and other species of Francophile philosophy can be added to this list, and generally any system of thought derives from an inflexible blank-slate view of the human mind and its psychological apparatus.²²⁷ With precursors in Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and others, the poststructuralisms of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and de Man infiltrated universities and intellectual thought in the late 1960s.²²⁸ As Boyd notes, these (viral) strains of intellectual commitments became subsumed under the term *Theory*, “a name that particularly took off and particularly annoys: there are those of us who don’t subscribe to it because it implies a fundamental critique of everything else that has ever been thought. And it’s not a very good critique. We can make much better critiques of certain assumptions in Western philosophy, I think, from an evolutionary perspective, much deeper ones and less flimsily than Theory does.”²²⁹ The biopoetics in these pages aligns fully with Boyd, grounding itself in the theory of evolution and the evolved cognizing mind, not in Theory capital “T.”

²²⁷ See, for instance, Carroll, *On Literature and Science*, Part 3, ~7:40+; and many of Carroll’s and Boyd’s major theoretical works.

²²⁸ The causal factors for Theory taking such a strong foothold at this time are multiple and complex. One could reasonably assign some of that causal force to national and world politics, the social unrest and general spirit of doubt and radicalization that emerged within these sociopolitical climates, and the dynamic cultural innovations that were growing alongside this turbulent historical moment.

In terms of academic institutions and their roles, we might look at Yale’s Department of English in the 1960s/70s as both case study and one of the centers of gravity of this new literary universe. Yale would become a hotbed of Theory and one of its most visible and powerful platforms. Their new Literature major was a Theory-based curriculum that stridently differentiated itself from the more traditional English major. Coupled with courses taught by de Man and lectures given by Derrida, this set the wheels in motion for a pandemic of dogmatic intellectual skepticism, fed by an academic culture of superstar gurus and their loyal acolyte followers. In a retrospective for *The Yale Herald*, Maude Tisch reports, in the 1950s and 1960s, “New Criticism remained the prevailing intellectual tide both at Yale and in the world of literary theory. This dynamic began to shift in the 1970s, when Yale found itself home to a group of Deconstructionist thinkers, the radical revolutionaries around whom would develop a formidable cult of personality known as the Yale School. Among these figures were Derrida, de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Peter Brooks.” With their storied literary traditions and burnished reputation as one of the world’s Queen Bees of humanities studies, Yale set a standard that other departments longed to copycat. See Maude Tisch, “A Critical Distance,” *The Yale Herald*, February 15, 2013, <http://yaleherald.com/news-and-features/a-critical-distance/>.

²²⁹ Brian Boyd, *On Literature and Science*, Part 3, YouTube video series, 4:30–4:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx00yV_qNQ.

David Bordwell might deliver the *coup de grace* against the intellectual Scylla that is Theory. In his introduction to *Poetics of Cinema*, Bordwell pokes fun at the language used to announce a recent conference in the Visual Culture program at his home university. The description of the conference, titled TRANS, is constituted by a series of verbal/conceptual pinballs (note Bordwell's image of "ricochet associations), which in the end amount to a rhapsodic incantation about "trans" this and "trans" that. Bordwell cheekily adds that the conference will be held in Transylvania. More seriously, he follows up with this incisive critique of what he terms *Grand Theory*:

Most humanists' conception of theory—or as we should call it, Theory, aka Grand Theory—is at once too broad and too narrow. It's too broad because it presumes that all human activity can be subsumed within some master conceptual scheme (even though some postmodernists advance the conceptual scheme that all conceptual schemes are fatally flawed). The current conception of Theory is too narrow because it presumes a limited conception of how one does intellectual work. The rise of Theory crushed theories and discouraged theorizing. Grand Theory created bad habits of mind. It encouraged argument from authority, ricochet associations, vague claims, dismissal of empirical evidence, and the belief that preening self-presentation was a mode of argument. Above all, it ratified what I call doctrine-driven thinking as the principal mode of humanistic inquiry.

[...]

The masses, Nietzsche once remarked, consider something deep as long as they cannot see to the bottom. [...] Combine Hegelian ambitions for a

world system of thought, patched together from a passel of incompatible doctrines, with prose that wants to strut and be evasive at the same time, and you have a trend that dodges the task to which we thought academics had pledged their professional lives: producing knowledge that is reliable and approximately true. There's a difference between getting a buzz and getting things more or less right.²³⁰

My hope, for both this project and my intellectual work generally, is to get things more or less right. Not to be a supplier of intellectual buzzes. Hence the tedious, belabored chains of reasoning you are already tired of reading, reader. But sober reason is perhaps called that, well, for a reason.

All this is not to say that the schools of pomo Theory have not had their moments of turning critical thought in salubrious directions. They had an important hand pushing toward a more open, culturally inclusive canon in the arts—something nothing short of remarkable and immeasurably valuable. And they have reminded academics (if no one else) to remain rigorously skeptical in the face of even the most alluring claims and thought systems. Skepticism is, of course, one of the engines of good science and all reliable knowledge.

However, a healthy skepticism that allows for and aims to arrive at provisional, probabilistic truths is much different than a wholesale carte-blanche skepticism—a cynicism that breeds either an epistemological nihilism where everyone is always wrong, or a squishy Tower-of-Babel epistemology where everyone is always right. In the grand scope, it is difficult to see how the pomo intellect—committed to an epistemic of either radical relativity or anti-truth, and beholden to the scholarly “method” of guru testimony—will ever add much substance to the slowly accreting iceberg of viable, reliable human knowledge. To torture

²³⁰ Bordwell, *Poetics*, 2–3.

that metaphor a bit, the pomo attitude moves the iceberg in interminable circles, causing more glacial melt rather than desirable precipitation of knowledge. It ushered in several global-warming events, which rippled across the humanities and social sciences starting in the 1960s and whose waves are still being felt today in many university departments and scholarly publications. Fortunately this is changing, however sluggishly.

In what could be a sign of a more science-friendly humanities and better things to come, the journal *diacritics* recently posted the following Call for Papers, recruiting papers for a set of special issues that would cluster around the theme “Thinking with the Sciences”:

THINKING WITH THE SCIENCES

diacritics still welcomes contributions to the ongoing “Thinking with the Sciences” series. We believe it is now time for scholars in the humanities and the literary disciplines to think *with* the sciences (and not *against*, or *instead* of them). Our title also suggests that epistemology is necessary but not sufficient; and that the promotion of an ancillary use of philosophy and the arts as illustrations or aesthetic adornments for “scientific knowledge” is not what matters.²³¹

This is a close approximation to the tack this dissertation, and in my orientation as a humanities scholar in general: to think *with* the sciences, not against them; to think with *any* scholarship in *any* field that remains committed intellectually to the formation of better and more reliable knowledge and truthful insights about the state of and our place within reality. Institutionally, what makes this a rather remarkable turn is that *diacritics* has been a flagship journal of pomo movements and a reliable purveyor of Continental philosophy since its

²³¹ “Thinking with the Sciences,” *diacritics* (Ithaca: Cornell University), Call for Papers posted on their website: <http://romancestudies.cornell.edu/diacritics/>. Emphases in original.

founding in the 1970s. *diacritics* was at the forefront of publishing translations of and celebratory responses to key documents written by Derrida, de Man, Foucault, Said, Jameson. The journal was an active promoter of thinkers who drove the philosophical, methodological, and pedagogical cleavings and cults of idolatry that emerged in humanities departments around the country. So their ostensible about-face here—in paying lip service to the value of thinking with the sciences—could be a momentous step forward.

It is under these lights, then, that I tender a modest, guarded, and hopefully self-critical form of ev-cog studies. One that, I hope, avoids what Carroll likes to call “vulgarized” versions of evolutionary thinking.²³² At the same time, in the epigraphic light of Dobzhansky, nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. And in my view, nothing in bioculture does either.

Methodological Orientation: The Middle Way

This project takes methodological inspiration from Easterlin’s discursive-pragmatic approach to ev-cog literary studies and Bordwell’s mid-level analytical model for practicing ev-cog film studies. It is more thought-experimental than actual-experimental, more qualitative than quantitative. But this should not disqualify more empirical, quantitative studies that can build off, expand on, or falsify any of its premises and conclusions. Some objectors will view such methods as armchair speculative pseudo-science. To those I just say: prove me wrong! Human knowledge welcomes and depends on your collegial efforts of (dis)proof.

²³² That is: oversimplified, unlearned, distorted versions of evolutionary logic and its cavalier applications aimed at arriving at pat “solutions” to virtually any problem of mind and behavior we might think of.

Bordwell, for his part, makes a persuasive case that a form of empirical knowledge-work actually *is* taking place when critics attend to the histories of an artform, the “data” and effects of particular texts, and the biographies and cultures of the creators who produced those texts. Such scholarly activity is more akin to “scientific” inquiry than to impressionistic belletristic criticism or the programmatic applications of Grand Theory. Bordwell values an interrogative approach that deploys mid-level questions of analysis to discover reliable knowledge about film texts. Both tacks are emphasized here:

Film studies, like most of what is pursued in the humanities, is an empirical discipline. It isn’t ontology, mathematics, or pure logic. A beautiful theory can be wounded by a counterexample.

So this collection [of essays] isn’t just critical and historical. It has one foot in film theory, but it doesn’t conceive theory as an all-purpose explanation, a *weltanschauung* ready for exploitation. The essays center on middle-level questions. [...] Such questions urge us not only to forge concepts (that is, mount theories) but also to look closely (analyze films) and to study the contingencies of time and place (investigate history). Out of midlevel inquiries can ripple bigger issues, such as the degree to which popular culture can be artistically innovative, or the way in which our minds engage with narrative. Noticing minor things, like actors’ eye movements, can lead us to broader conceptions of how films affect us. At the risk of looking fussy, I try to study manageable problems, but I also try to tease out some larger implications.

Some will say I'm actually aiming at "science." I'd say, rather, that I'm trying to join the tradition of rational and empirical inquiry, a broader tradition than what we usually consider to be science. This tradition includes historical research and a mix of inductive and deductive reasoning that tries to fit the answer to the question. My aim to produce reliable knowledge, both factual and conceptual, about film as an art form, in the hope that this knowledge will deepen people's understanding of cinema.²³³

[...]

In being question-centered and focused on particular phenomena, the poetics I envision somewhat resembles the practices of inquiry in scientific endeavor.²³⁴

This joining of rational and empirical inquiry, with an aim to generate reliable knowledge, is perhaps the true epistemological key to forging a viable consilient enterprise.

Bordwell goes on to summon the methodological approach of sociologist C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, which he sees as "characterized by a middle way":

Classic social science, in brief, neither "builds up" from microscopic study nor "deduces down" from conceptual elaboration. Its practitioners try to build and to deduce at the same time, in the same process of study, and to do so by means of adequate formulations and re-formulations of problems and their adequate solutions. To practice such a policy...is to take up substantive problems on the historical level of reality; to state these problems in terms appropriate to them; and then, no matter how high the flight of theory, no

²³³ Bordwell, *Poetics*, 3–4

²³⁴ Bordwell, *Poetics*, 21.

matter how painstaking the crawl among detail, in the end of each completed act of study, to state the solution in the macroscopic terms of the problem.²³⁵

Bordwell continues, “Elsewhere I’ve advocated that film scholars could pitch a project at a middle level, asking questions of some scope without deep commitments to broad doctrines, and using the answers to those questions to build hypotheses of greater generality.”²³⁶ My biopoetics of symbol ascribes to just these kinds of mid-level methodological ideals. It toggles between microscopic and macroscopic levels of observation and theorizing, adhering to no prefixed doctrines aside from these: a biocultural axiom that all art and art behavior emerges from the evolved human mind; and a deeper epistemic principle that reliable knowledge about art, art behavior, and broader reality *can* be grasped, however provisionally, by those same evolved minds.

Peter Stockwell’s “cognitive poetics” provides further methodological templating for a viable program of biopoetic inquiry. In *Cognitive Poetics* (2002), Stockwell parses the landscape of what a science-funded poetics of art (specifically literature) might look like:

A trivial way of doing cognitive poetics would be simply to take some of the insights from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, and treat literature as just another piece of data. In effect, we would then set aside impressionistic reading and imprecise intuitions and conduct a precise and systematic analysis of what happens when a reader reads a literary text. Given this methodological perspective, we would probably be mainly interested in the continuities and connections between literary readings and non-literary

²³⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 128. Qtd. in Bordwell, *Poetics*, 21.

²³⁶ Bordwell, *Poetics*, 21–22.

encounters. We would not really have much to say about literary value or status, other than to note it exists. [...]

In my view, treating literature only as another piece of data would not be cognitive poetics at all. This is simply cognitive linguistics.

[...] Taking the “cognitive turn” seriously means more than simply being interested in the psychology of reading. It means a thorough re-evaluation of all the categories with which we understand literary reading and analysis that have been drawn out in the past. Many of those patterns of understanding form very useful starting points for cognitive poetic investigation. Some of them require only a little reorientation to offer a new way of looking at literary readings. Occasionally, this might seem to be no more than recasting old ideas with new labels. I would argue [...] that new labels force us to conceptualize things differently.

[...] Though there are many different frameworks from cognitive science, cognitive poetics is essentially a *way of thinking* about literature rather than a framework in itself.²³⁷

The last few lines here bear special re-emphasis. The act of applying new labels to prior-known phenomena does hazard the risks of investing precious intellectual energy in games of pointless tautology. But as Stockwell suggests here, new labels do carry real power to induce a reorientation of our cognitive framings, a recontextualizing of the problems or phenomenon we study, perhaps even a recalibration of the causal forces of influence in a certain area of life. His point that cognitive poetics offers more “a way of thinking about literature” than a programmatic or normative frame for viewing literature is something that could also be said

²³⁷ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2–3. Author’s italics.

about a biopoetics of symbolism. Ultimately, this biopoetics might not offer anything all that new under the sun. But by recasting the terms of how the artistic-symbolic imagination works within a theater of an evolved brain cognating its way through the real world—and the simulated, experiential, aesthetic worlds of art—we might shift our perspective and appreciation of these behaviors ever-so-slightly, a shift that does add up to something worthwhile.

Stockwell's defense of the intellectual work that relabeling can perform shares some intercourse with a common castigation leveled against the neurosciences today (criticisms that become especially pitched in the neurohumanities and neuroaesthetics): namely, that these are "mere" sciences of correspondences. Neuroscience in its present form, so the castigations go, do nothing more than match certain lab-induced subjective thoughts or objective behaviors with corresponding brain-waves patterns and neuronal spike-action potentials. Sometimes these criticisms have important things to say. And cause-correlation fallacies are enduring threats to knowledge creation. But have any causes been discovered that do *not* correlate with their effects (quantum phenomena excluded)? If not, then there must be *something* to be gained through neuroscience's "game" of correspondences. It's a first step at the very least. Moreover, how can our basic view of human nature and behavior not shift, ever-so-slightly, upon learning just how tightly bound those behaviors are to the biochemical orchestras of the gray matter of our brains, the electrical circuitry of our neural systems, the hormonal transmissions of our endocrine systems? Some humanities scholars are not so impressed by the incremental steps being taken in the neurosciences: for instance, when something like the amygdala gets identified as a primary fear center of the human brain. Granted, perhaps labeling, identifying, and correlating do only so much for our

knowledge. But it is not difficult to extrapolate how a malfunctioning amygdala would, therefore, result in real-life human individuals fearing too much, or fearing too little, and producing serious behavioral and psychological consequences. How can this not reorient our view of human nature and behavioral possibility in *some* way? How can such things not make us reconsider what drives life at the most basic biological, if not ontological, levels? All this seems like a (cough) no-brainer. The relabeling work, which any biopoetics will be partly yet dutifully invested in, can perform similar reorientations. This point provides segue into our next section.

Checks and Balances: Neuroskeptics, Evo-Scoffers, and Turf Protectors

Any viable project in biocultural studies or the cognitive humanities will need to contend with the cautionary tales of neuroskeptics and scholars acting as transdisciplinary brakemen. The spider-webbing of the brain sciences and evolutionary sociopsychologies over the last several decades has led to their growing popularity. A certain cachet for all things “neuro” or “evo” exists. In response, a cadre of scientists, humanists, and journalists have begun to issue warnings about being too bullish on these fields. They point to technical and empirical/*in-vivo* limits. They worry experts (and their public audiences) will put too much faith in provisional conclusions derived from crude lab-based brain sciences or the most speculative kinds of evolutionary history. Their warnings are not unwise. These fields of knowledge are works-in-progress. Neuroscience is just cracking the surface of how our brains get orchestrated to process perception, generate behavior, give rise to consciousness, etc. Evolutionary sociology and psychology are far cries from Newtonian mechanics and,

thus, must be handled with an especially graceful touch in the humanities. These new disciplines, in short, have miles to go before they sleep.

The most discerning of these skeptics provide welcome checks on the intellectual impulse to consult the latest brain-science findings or the macroprocesses of biological evolution for answers to *any* problem of human behavior and human nature. In *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (2013) and “50 Shades of Gray Matter,” psychiatrist Sally Satel and professor of psychology Scott Lilienfeld effectively expose the bingings on neuroscience that our academic and popular presses have indulged in recently. Their arguments, strangely enough, tend to wash back down the drains of epistemic cynicism, however; and they occasionally show some rather limited understandings of the nuances of the sciences they are critiquing. More compelling, though not without their own set of problems, are Robert Burton’s *A Skeptic’s Guide to the Mind: What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Tell Us about Ourselves*, Paolo Legrenzi and Carlo Umiltà’s *Neuromania: On the Limits of Brain Science*, and Raymond Tallis’s recent body of “philosophical anthropologies” that take issue with today’s “neuromania” and “Darwinitis.”²³⁸

The distinguished neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland has teamed up with Oxford neuroscientist Molly Crockett to produce compelling work on what the sciences of mind can tell us about ourselves, our behaviors, and how those minds acquire knowledge. Churchland and Crockett are very much flagbearers of lab-based neuroscience aimed at discovering the brain-based roots of human nature and complex human thought. They have used these

²³⁸ Sally Satel and Scott Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (New York: Basic, 2013). Satel, “50 Shades of Gray,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/06/20/fifty-shades-of-gray-matter/>. Robert Burton, *A Skeptic’s Guide to the Mind: What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2013). Paolo Legrenzi and Carlo Umiltà, *Neuromania: On the Limits of Brain Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Raymond Tallis, various works: e.g. *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis, and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

sciences to explore human morality (i.e. “neuroethics”) among other intellectual minefields. Yet they have also been prudent to articulate the untidy, nonlinear progress of their scientific fields. They note the usually unglamorous nature of the results of most scientific research, and that these results get too easily hijacked by a popular media prone to oversimplifying or vacating the research of its nuance and incrementality. Small steps get overblown into bold headline-fetching claims of blue-sky “discoveries.” As Crockett beckons from the TED stage (in a talk that has become, encouragingly, one of the most-viewed in their science category), we must be ever-vigilant to avoid the pitfalls of “neuro-bunk.”²³⁹

Even V.S. Ramachandran, another practitioner and vocal celebrant of neuroscience, knows to hedge his bets in light of the current adolescent status of these fields:

By comparison [to other natural sciences], the sciences of the mind—psychiatry, neurology, psychology—languished for centuries. Indeed, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, rigorous theories of perception, emotion, cognition, and intelligence were nowhere to be found (one notable exception being color vision). For most of the twentieth century, all we had to offer in the way of explaining human behavior was two theoretical edifices—Freudianism and behaviorism—both of which would be dramatically eclipsed in the 1980s and 1990s, when neuroscience finally managed to advance beyond the Bronze Age. In historical terms that isn’t a very long time. Compared with physics and chemistry, neuroscience is still a young upstart. But progress is progress, and what a period of progress it has been! From genes to cells to circuits to cognition, the depth and breadth of today’s

²³⁹ Molly Crockett, “Beware Neuro-Bunk,” *TED Talks*, TEDSalon, London, November 18, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/molly_crockett_beware_neuro_bunk.

neuroscience—however far short of an eventual Grand Unified Theory it may be—is light-years beyond where it was when I started working in the field. In the last decade we have even seen neuroscience becoming self-confident enough to start offering ideas to disciplines that have traditionally been claimed by the humanities. So we now for instance have neuroeconomics, neuromarketing, neuroarchitecture, neuroarcheology, neurolaw, neuropolitics, neuroaesthetics, and even neurotheology. Some of these are just neurohype, but on the whole they are making real and much-needed contributions to many fields.

As heady as our progress has been, we need to stay completely honest with ourselves and acknowledge that we have only discovered a tiny fraction of what there is to know about the human brain. But the modest amount that we have discovered makes for a story more exciting than any Sherlock Holmes novel. I feel certain that as progress continues through the coming decades, the conceptual twists and technological turns we are in for are going to be at least as mind bending, at least as intuition shaking, and as simultaneously humbling and exalting to the human spirit as the conceptual revolutions that upended classical physics a century ago.²⁴⁰

As usual, Ramachandran provides a balanced voice, one of contained effervescent delight, about the possibilities and limitations for today's mind sciences. His acknowledgments of both sides of the coin—the “neurohype” and the real progress, the fractional discoveries that

²⁴⁰ V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (New York: Norton, 2011), xiii–xiv.

are discoveries nonetheless—would be wise refrains for consilient choirs to sing within the halls and vaults of academia.

Another eminent neuroscientist, Michael Gazzaniga, puts proper perspective on the current state of our knowledge in the mind-brain sciences. He balks at the trend of tentative discoveries traveling too widely and briskly outside their disciplinary bounds, and he notes the profusion and confusion of terminological differences between and sometimes within those disciplinary precincts: “The brain is complicated enough on its own, but the sheer number of different disciplines that are studying it has produced thousands of domains of information. It is a wonder that order can be put to the mountain of data. Words used in one discipline become distorted through poor or incorrect interpretation and become unfortunate foundations or inaccurate rebuttals of theories that may take decades to be questioned and reevaluated.” He continues, “Politicians or other public figures can oftentimes misinterpret or ignore findings to support a particular agenda or stifle politically inconvenient research altogether.”²⁴¹ Gazzaniga’s curbs on our enthusiasms are well-stated. And his emphasis on the importance of proper *interpretation* in these sciences casts yet another stone for hermeneutics on our educational ledgers.

In the humanities, English professor William Deresiewicz has raised some high-visibility red flags over the ev-cog movements percolating inside his home fields. He has voiced his acerbic concerns both inside his home field of literary studies and in mainstream media outlets.²⁴² His criticisms get leveled against what he sees as the most overconfident, imperialist strains of Darwinian lit-crit. But he also seems to recoil at the creep of science

²⁴¹ Michael Gazzaniga, *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 10.

²⁴² See, for instance, William Deresiewicz, “Adaptation: On Literary Darwinism,” *The Nation*, May 20, 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/article/adaptation-literary-darwinism>; Deresiewicz and the readers of *The Nation*, “The Origin of the Specious,” *The Nation*, June 24, 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/origin-specious/>. Joseph Carroll has responded effectively to Deresiewicz’s claims in several places.

within the folds of the traditional humanities in general. At the same time, Deresiewicz is a decided opponent of the self-immolating strains of postmodern skepticism. He acknowledges the possibility of achieving real, positive knowledge gains through formal liberal education, especially through close study of humanities texts. Unfortunately, the otherwise formidable and compelling Deresiewicz erects too many straw men in his attacks against ev-cog crit. He lumps together the good work with the more sloppy work that has emerged in these interdisciplines, mischaracterizing their most rigorous practitioners. He is too quick to cast off all ev-cog scholars as applying vulgar, un-nuanced versions of intruder sciences under the sacred canopies of literary studies. After reading his portrayals, one wonders if Deresiewicz has engaged very rigorously with the increasingly complex ev-cog sciences that fund these increasingly complex approaches to literature and art. Nevertheless, in the cold light of reason, Deresiewicz's hesitations are understandable. And the new ev-cog approaches to the arts are good to welcome the most discerning challenges of scholars like Deresiewicz, who has proven himself a devoted teacher of literature and vocal supporter of liberal-arts education in general.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik surveys the scholarly landscapes occupied by the alleged neuromaniacs on one side and neurocynics on the other. Gopnik, for instance, voices some agreement that scholars ought to be on special guard against “neurotautologies” (the topic broached in the Stockwell passage above):

Satel and Lilienfeld like the term “neuroredundancy” to “denote things we already knew without brain scanning,” mockingly citing a researcher who insists that “brain imaging tells us that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a ‘real disorder.’” The brain scan, like the word “wired,” adds a false gloss

of scientific certainty to what we already thought. As with the old invocation of “culture,” it’s intended simply as an intensifier of the obvious.²⁴³

But Gopnik is less convinced of other arguments coming from the neuroskeptics, supporting their cautionary notes but also noting their shortcomings. He envisions such developments as one of the proverbial pendulum swings preceding true intellectual progress. He charts a swing from the culture-fetishism of the 1980s to the ascendant neuro-fetishisms we see today. With neuroskeptics now heralding their voices across the noisy academic and media landscapes, we are now observing an abrupt correction: a partial swinging back toward a more cautious middleground.

Citing work by Churchland, Gopnik hits a pitch-perfect note about forging ahead with knowledge-creation, which continues despite working off provisional theories and facts, which slowly if steadily accrete by our delimited human brains and memory tools:

We’re perfectly capable of probing flawed equipment with flawed equipment: we know that our eyes have blind spots, even as we look at the evidence with them, and we understand all about the dog whistles we can’t hear. Since in the past twenty-five years alone we’ve learned a tremendous amount about minds, it’s hard to share the extent of his skepticism.

Psychology is an imperfect science, but it’s a science.²⁴⁴

[...]

Churchland [...] makes beautifully clear how complex and contingent the simplest brain business is. She discusses whether the hormone testosterone makes men angry. The answer even to that off-on question is anything but

²⁴³ Adam Gopnik, “Mindless: Two Neuroskeptics,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 9, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/09/mindless>.

²⁴⁴ Gopnik, “Mindless,” *The New Yorker*.

straightforward. Testosterone counts for a lot in making men mad, but so does the stress hormone cortisol, along with the neuromodulator serotonin, which affects whether the aggression is impulsive or premeditated, and the balance between all these things is affected by “other hormones, other neuromodulators, age and environment.”

So this question, like any other about neurology, turns out to be both simply mechanical and monstrously complex. Yes, a hormone does wash through men’s brains and makes them get mad. But there’s a lot more turning on than just the hormone. For a better analogy to the way your neurons and brain chemistry run your mind, you might think about the way the light switch runs the lights in your living room. It’s true that the light switch in the corner turns the lights on in the living room. Nor is that a trivial observation. How the light switch gets wired to the bulb, how the bulb got engineered to be luminous—all that is an almost miraculously complex consequence of human ingenuity. But at the same time the light switch on the living-room wall is merely the last stage in a long line of complex events that involve waterfalls and hydropower and surge protectors and thousands of miles of cables and power grids. To say the light switch turns on the living-room light is both true—vitally true, if you don’t want to bang your shins on the sofa sneaking home in the middle of the night—and wildly misleading.

It’s perfectly possible, in other words, to have an explanation that is at once trivial and profound, depending on what kind of question you’re asking.

The strength of neuroscience, Churchland suggests, lies not so much in what it explains as in the older explanations it dissolves.

[...]

The really curious thing about minds and brains is that the truth about them lies not somewhere in the middle but simultaneously on both extremes. We know already that the wet bits of the brain change the moods of the mind: that's why a lot of champagne gets sold on Valentine's Day. On the other hand, if the mind were not a high-level symbol-managing device, flower sales would not rise on Valentine's Day, too.

[...]

Humanism not only has survived each of these sequential demystifications; they have made it stronger by demonstrating the power of rational inquiry on which humanism depends. Every time the world becomes less mysterious, nature becomes less frightening, and the power of the mind to grasp reality more sure. A constant reduction of mystery to matter, a belief that we can name natural rules we didn't make—that isn't scientism. That's science.

Gopnik's last meta-observation is key. The humanities have not just survived the progressions and paradigm shifts of scientific advances, they have often flourished because of them. Moreover, Gopnik's remark about "how complex and contingent the simplest brain business is" speaks volumes. Indeed, any biopoetics of art will consist of explanations "at once trivial and profound," "simply mechanical and monstrously complex."

The takeaway of this section might be this. Ev-cog humanists should mind the cautionary tales and brake pedals of the best-intentioned and best-read neuroskeptics and evo-scoffers. But we need not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We will do ourselves a great disservice by simply ignoring the rich knowledge and compelling studies coming out of all corners of psychology, neuroscience, behavioral sciences, genetics, etc. Such knowledge can inform the deep theoretical understandings of art practice and behavior, and positively influence works of criticism that emerge from textual exegesis. There are enough grains of truth in these “external” fields—and in some cases, lush fields of already-ripened crops—that humanities scholars need not balk at integrating them into their work.²⁴⁵

Epistemic Orientation: Foundherentism / Intersubjective Postpositivism

Ontological Orientation: Modest Naturalism / Critical Realism

The epistemic and ontological propositions of several figures already discussed animate the deeper philosophical spirits of this project and my approach to critical thinking more generally: Bordwell’s rationalist-empiricist model of “reliable knowledge,” Gottschall’s narrowing of possibility spaces, and Hirsch’s confidence in the pragmatic efficacy of inferences based upon statistical probability methods. Complementing these are Susan Haack’s foundherentist epistemology and her attendant ontology of modest naturalism, and the intersubjective probabilistic epistemics of postpositivism and its attendant critical realism.

²⁴⁵ It is also entirely feasible, as scholars like Carroll, Gottschall, and Hogan like to point out, that humanities scholars can provide substantive feedback if not original contributions and datasets to pertinent fields in the natural or social sciences, depending on a scholar’s aims and preferences. I may lean a little more with Easterlin here, who questions the profitability and plausibility of a perfectly symmetrical relationship between these disciplines. But their share-and-share-alike ambitions are certainly admirable and not outside the realm of intellectual/institutional possibility.

Haack is a philosopher of science, law professor, and scholar and practitioner of pragmatism. A case could be made that her works *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (2009) and *Defending Science—Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (2007)²⁴⁶ provide a virtual Quran and Hadith of consilient epistemics. (Books of allegedly incontestable religious dogmatism may not be the best analogy for the secular, conditional, highly contested process of accreting earthly knowledge. Resetting the earlier precious-gem metaphor, let's say her books could be gold standards for philosophical justification of how to conduct viable interdisciplinary inquiries across the sciences and humanities. Haack demonstrates in these works an inimitable blend of philosophical rigor, deep historical knowledge of the relevant fields, perceptive commonsense, and humanistic sensibility. Her profound admiration for science, philosophy, and reason; meticulous thinking in general; and the contingencies of human experience are also on full display. Spotlighting a few passages from these works will provide a brief glimpse into Haack's capacious mind and her stance on these critically important issues.

Haack names her philosophy for producing reliable knowledge *foundherentism*. Foundherentism is a melding, conceptually and lexically, of the epistemological schools of foundationalism and coherentism. Her works are, in many ways, extended rationales for adopting a double-minded epistemic attitude that accommodates: 1) long chains of abstract, rational justifications and logical inferences (coherentism); and 2) a concrete grounding in commonly held axiomatic beliefs about the world, which arrive through human beings' evolved sensory organs and cognitive apparatuses and thus provide us with evidentiary *terra firma* (foundationalism). While Haack's stance is not entirely novel in the philosophy of

²⁴⁶ Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009); *Defending Science—Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003, paperback ed. 2007).

knowledge or science, the logic, balance, and comprehensiveness of her lines of argument are impeccable. And her term *foundherentism* is worthy of gaining common currency.

The epistemic method of foundherentism is basically one of degrees of justification: of successive rational approximations in light of the realities of sensory data, personal subjectivity, context, and time. In Chapter 4 of *Evidence and Inquiry*, “Foundherentism Articulated,” she states her *explicandum*: “A is more/less justified, at time t, in believing p, depending on...” Haack notes that this is a “personal locution,” that justification inevitably “comes in degrees,” and that these degrees of justification “may vary with time.”²⁴⁷ Haack’s warrants for foundherentism unfurl across the sweep of the book, which becomes a working embodiment of the very methods of knowledge production being described. Haack informs her reader, “The rationale for these assumptions will become clearer as the articulation proceeds,” calling her “procedure [...] a method of successive approximation.”²⁴⁸

The trajectory of this project follows a similar track: a gradual, winding build of successive justifications. Moreover, the best interpretations of second-order symbolism will probably follow foundherentist paths: readers will do best when keeping grounded in the sensory *terra firma* of the primary text at hand, coupled with other pertinent intertextual and extratextual evidence; building nested chains of reasoning about symbolic parcels of that textual landscape; and realizing that the resulting interpretations are not invulnerable to shifts in temporality and new evidentiary contexts inside or outside a text.

In Haack’s next chapter, “Evidence of the Senses,” the author navigates deftly the labyrinths and landmines indigenous to any philosophy of mind tackling how human beings sort, process, interpret, and act on sensory data. Happily, she pegs her epistemics here to an

²⁴⁷ Haack, *Evidence*, 117–118.

²⁴⁸ Haack, *Evidence*, 118.

explicitly ev-cog view of the mind. At the same time, she does not discount the power learned beliefs can have over the workings of that evolved, materially embedded mind:

Fundamental to the commonsense conceptions I have tried to build into my explication is the idea that the senses are the means by which we perceives things and events around us, and (pardon the pun) its mirror-image, that perception is a matter of interacting, by means of one's senses, with those things and events. One might describe this as a kind of epistemological realism. It is hardly naive, however, for it recognizes that we cannot always perceive clearly, that we sometimes misperceive, that our senses can be fooled by well-camouflaged insects and birds, by magicians and illusionists, artists and psychologists, and that in seriously disordered conditions people may even "perceive" what is not there at all (hear voices, see pink rats, and so forth); also that we may, if inattentive or flustered, fail to see what is before us, that we may not recognize, or may mis-identify, what we see, hear, etc.; that it can take training to learn to make some kinds of perceptual discrimination (to identify a wine or perfume blindfold, say, or to make sense of what one sees in an X-ray photograph or rear-review mirror).

My picture also acknowledges a partnership of perception with background belief, in the sense that our *beliefs about* what we see, hear, etc. are affected not only by what we see and hear, but also by already-embedded beliefs about how things are.

[...]

Implicit in what I have said so far is a point [...] usually disguised in discussions of “realist” versus “anti-realist” or “direct” versus “indirect” theories of perception. The account I offer makes perception of things and events around one, not of sense-data, color patches, or whatever. But at the same time it allows for the pervasive interpenetrations of background beliefs into our beliefs about what we see, hear, etc. It combines, in other words, what might be described as realist with anti-realist, or direct with indirect, elements.

My position is not new. As is rather well known, Peirce thinks of perceptual judgments as like abductions (as potentially explanatory hypotheses); as is less well known, he also holds that perception is direct, in the sense that its objects are the objects and events around us.²⁴⁹

Haack paints a picture here of a materially evolved yet recursively interpenetrative knowing mind—a mind that can be fooled and biased toward errors, but one that is generally successful in managing the slices of reality it has been designed to register. Her picture answers reasonably well to complaints at both ends of the epistemological spectrum: extreme material positivists and their penchants for vulgar reductionisms and epistemological overconfidence at one end, and pomo poststructuralists and their extreme epistemological and ontological skepticisms at the other. A mind-independent reality is fully acknowledged, but background beliefs inside the mind are not dismissed as causal non-factors.

Haack expounds on the nature of the perceptual-cognitive apparatuses that penetrate the world and allow us to function seamlessly in it. Citing J.J. Gibson’s theories of direct perception in ecological psychology, Haack makes the following bid:

²⁴⁹ Haack, *Evidence*, 157–58.

Fundamental to Gibson's approach is the idea that the senses of human beings and other animals are to be conceived as "perceptual systems," i.e. as systems for the detection of information afforded by the things and events in their environments. From this perspective, the study of perception in its natural habitat—active, exploring animals or persons finding their way around the world, seeking food, shelter, a mate—is expected to be more revealing than laboratory studies in which subjects are given artificially-restricted, static, controlled glimpses of puzzle pictures and trick artifacts; the theory of normal, successful perception is seen as central, not as something to be devised after a model suggested by *misperception* [...] and deliberately misleading images. The elaborations offered of how the senses detect the information afforded by objects in the environment (a matter, according to Gibson, of "detecting significant invariants in the stimulus flux") [...]; and the embedding of Gibson's theory of perception in a thoroughly evolutionary conception of the aptness of organisms' perceptual systems for coping with their environmental niche, all speak strongly in its favor.²⁵⁰

As evolutionary psychologists like to point out, it's not always the failures and gaps of perception, not the idiosyncratic or fully conscious parts of our mental lives, that are most instructive for comprehending the architecture of the human mind-brain. It can be the less conscious, more internalized or procedural aspects of our behavioral repertoires that, upon inspection, can reveal astonishing displays of biopsychological finesse, neural-somatic-social orchestration, and species-typical traits. Our evolved perceptual apparatuses, if they were mostly prone to malfunctioning or registering false slices of realities, would have led the

²⁵⁰ Haack, *Evidence*, 162.

human animal to our evolutionary demise long ago. Haack circles such ideas in these passages and throughout her work.

Assuming the basic reliability of our perceptual systems and the sensory-data streams that feed them, Haack contests Popperian epistemologies that advance falsification as the necessary-and-sufficient key for demarcating science from non-science. At the same time, she introduces into her epistemological mix the error-prone, temporally fluid, subjective self; and she never understates that subjective self's potential as a mediating influence. She claims, convincingly, that Popper "has, and can have, no credible solution to the problem of the empirical basis" of our mostly reliable sensory apprehensions of the world. "At the same time, at the meta-epistemological level," Haack aims, "first, to emphasize the strength of the case for an epistemology *with* a knowing subject, and, second, to delineate the initial stages of an argument for an acknowledgement of the contributory relevance to epistemology of the sciences of cognition, for a modest naturalism—and, in the process, of an articulation of my gradualist conception of the relation of philosophy and science."²⁵¹ Haack's gradualism and modest naturalism are epistemic/ontological positions worthy of emulation: for they roundly accommodate for emergent phenomena, phenomena of *prima facie* natural reality, and the phenomena of cognating brains that experience that natural reality with subjective coloring.

This further leads Haack to announcing her "modest meta-epistemological naturalism." That is, "with the knowing subject occupying a central place, epistemology is seen to depend, in part, on presuppositions about human cognitive capacities and limitation." Knowing things about our ev-cog architectures, in other words, enables us to know more about how we know. Haack goes on to anticipate the objection that "if it looks to some readers as if the theory offered here is little more than an elaboration of Quine's naturalistic

²⁵¹ Haack, *Evidence*, 144.

‘epistemology with a knowing subject,’ [...] Quine’s naturalism is profoundly equivocal, as mine, I trust, is not.” Even though Haack’s argumentative path toward resolution is, by her own admission, “far from smooth or straight,”²⁵² she thumbs the scale in slight favor of the advantages that formalized scientific inquiry can provision for humanity. Because of its fairly stable successes, science does deserve some distinguished epistemic status over and above less formalized, subject-centered commonsense alone. In her next chapter, “Naturalism Disambiguated,” Haack advances on these points.

For instance, Haack acknowledges the clear-and-present dangers posed by personal and sociopolitical biases that can infect any social enterprise, science being one such enterprise. But in agreement with philosophers like Quine, Haack also sees something special about science: something having to do with its methods of observation; its promotion of experimental procedures not just for verification but also for falsification of hypotheses; its open networks of information distribution; and its dutiful use of technological aids to record, measure, operate, and mentally extrapolate upon those observations. Tying her arguments together at the end of the chapter, Haack poses the question, “Does science have a special epistemic status?” The question is an incredibly important one, today more than ever; Haack’s response, equally so:

Thinking about this question at a commonsense level, unalloyed by any sophisticated epistemological theory, I should be inclined to answer “yes and no.” “Yes,” because *science* has had spectacular successes, has come up with deep, broad, and detailed explanatory hypotheses which are anchored by observation and which interlock surprisingly well with other; “no,” because although, in virtue of these successes, *science* as a whole has acquired a

²⁵² Haack, *Evidence*, 164.

certain epistemic authority in the eyes of the lay public, there is no reason to think that it is in possession of a special method of inquiry unavailable to historians or detectives or the rest of us, nor that it is immune from the susceptibility to fashion, politics and propaganda, partiality and power-seeking to which all human cognitive activity is prone. (This concedes something to the Kuhnians' sociological point, while resisting their epistemological cynicism.)

Can this commonsense answer be given any plausible theoretical underpinning? I think it can. Science, as I see it, has done rather well, by and large, at satisfying the criteria by which we judge the justification of empirical beliefs, central to which are explanatory integration and experiential anchoring. These criteria are not internal to, nor restricted to, science, they are criteria we use in appraising the evidence for everyday empirical beliefs as well as for scientific theorizing. Nor are they restricted to scientific cultures: primitive people attributing lightning and thunder to the anger of the gods, like scientists attributing it to electrical discharges in the atmosphere and the sudden expansion of air in their path, are seeking explanatory stories to accommodate their experience. But science has had notable success by these standards.

[...] The theoretical successes of science are like the great strides one makes in completing some long central entries in a crossword, after which filling in other entries is apt to become significantly easier. Or, to use the more official literal vocabulary of foundherentism: one of the things that is

epistemically special about science is its very substantial contribution to the explanatory integration of our web of empirical beliefs.

At the same time, it has to be scored well with respect to experiential anchoring. Two features of scientific inquiry have contributed to its success of this score: experimental contrivance and cooperative inquiry. [...]

One might put it like this: science has a distinguished epistemic standing, but not a privileged one. [...] It has been, on the whole, a pretty successful cognitive endeavor. But it is fallible, revisable, incomplete, imperfect; and in judging where it has succeeded and where failed, in what areas and at what times it is epistemically better and in what worse, we appeal to standards which are not internal to, not simply set by, science.

I hope that this not only established that broad scientism, whether revolutionary or reformist, is indefensible, but also constitutes a significant point in favor of *aposteriorist* naturalism.²⁵³

That special blend of experiential anchoring and collaborative inquiry, coupled with a revisionary impulse fueled by a moderate (but not ravenous) skepticism, grants science *distinction* but not privilege. Many conclusions and applications born out of modern science have proven successful. Yet its theories and datasets will always be partial, revisable, imperfect. Science becomes a very successful model of inquiry, but not the only one. Science might be distinguished, but scientism is not a desirable path forward. These ideas are crucial for achieving a fair understanding of the powers and defects of science. They receive extensive elaboration and even deeper, sustained attention in her antecedent book.

²⁵³ Haack, *Evidence*, 187.

Haack's *Defending Science* is a mosaic of rigorous philosophy of science, a virtuosic *history* of philosophy of science, and a treasure trove of wisdom about how human beings think and produce useful knowledge via texts and other symbolic formats. Many of the ideas spotlighted above get justified, exemplified, and rounded off to a much finer point. One of Haack's refrains, which bears underscoring here, is this: science, no matter how sophisticated it might appear in its various iterations and discourse, is basically an elaboration and extension of our daily brainwork and folk problem-solving. That is, science is rooted in intuitional forms of inquiry. "Scientific" forms of inquiry probably have more commonalities with "non-scientific" academic inquiry than differences. And the differentiators (if there really can be any) often come down to the usefulness and frequency of experimental approaches; the usefulness and frequency of technological "helps" that can support memory, measurement, and mathematical operations or extrapolations from data; and possibly (but not always) some semblance of predictive capability for its theories. Despite these shared roots with our intuitional forms of inquiry, observation, hypothesis-formulation, logical operation, and inference-generation, science has still earned its reputation as a distinguished progenitor and purveyor of truth and knowledge. In her prefatory overview of *Defending Science*, Haack summarizes, and attempts correction to, five common reader "misunderstandings" of her work. These counters and clarifications are not only edifying in their own right, they have greatly influenced this dissertation's core positions on the philosophy of science and knowing. Due to their deep impact, Haack's tenets, as presented in the introduction of the paperback edition, are reproduced below with only some condensation:²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Susan Haack generously grants a courtesy permission to reprint these elided passages from the paperback edition of *Defending Science Within Reason* in this dissertation.

Misunderstanding #1: My Position Isn't Really "Between Scientism and Cynicism"

[...]

At the core of scientific enterprise, as of history, of legal and literary scholarship, of investigative journalism, of detective works, etc., is inquiry, investigation; and scientific inquiry is subject to the same standards of honesty, thoroughness, and respect for evidence as all inquiry is. Like all inquiry, inquiry in the sciences is fallible and imperfect, often fumbling, and susceptible to corruption by prejudices and interests. Nevertheless, in their fumbling, human way, the natural sciences, at least, have found out a good deal about the world and how it works, and so have earned, not our uncritical deference, but our tempered respect.

Perhaps some readers thought that, since I take the concepts of evidence, warrant, truth, and reality to be both legitimate and central to an understanding of the scientific enterprise, my approach can't be so different from the Old Deferentialists'. But it is; for it construes the standards of good evidence and well-conducted inquiry neither as internal to the sciences, nor as explicable, as the Old Deferentialists supposed, exclusively in narrowly formal, logical terms. Moreover, it repudiates the false contrast of the rational and the social taken for granted by Old Deferentialists and New Cynics²⁵⁵ alike. It is more objectivist—more rationalist, in one sense of the word—than

²⁵⁵ "Old Deferentialists" is Haack's shorthand for dogmatic logical positivists and philosophers who deify the formal logics. Her "New Cynics" are equally dogmatic but in the opposite direction: they are the extreme skeptics of knowledge-making, whose attitudes are shot-through with pomo epistemological nihilisms.

the New Cynics' conception; but at the same time less imperialist, and less formalist, than the Old Deferentialists'.

Probably other readers thought that my refusal to minimize the tensions between the scientific and religious world-pictures, and my respect for the way the sciences have gradually arrived, entry by painstakingly worked-out entry, at a better-warranted view of the world and of ourselves come to terms with the inevitability of ignorance and uncertainty, and developed modest and practicable ways, amplifying the resources of everyday empirical inquiry, of findings out how things are, is scientistic. I don't think so. After all, I criticize Stephen Jay Gould's attempted reconciliation of the supposed "separate magisteria" of science and religion in part because it doesn't take religion seriously enough; and my judgment that the scientific world-picture is better-warranted than the religious is precisely that, an epistemological judgment—not an expression of uncritical deference to science, let alone of science-worship.

[...]

Misunderstanding #2: I Think Science Is "Just Common Sense"

The core idea of Critical Common-sensism is that inquiry in the sciences is like empirical inquiry of the most ordinary, everyday kind—only conducted with greater care, precision, and persistence, and often by many people within and across generations; and that the evidence with respect to scientific claims and theories is like the evidence with respect to the most ordinary, everyday claims about the world—only denser, more complex, and

almost always a pooled resource. [...] It is also conveyed by quotations from Einstein: science is “nothing more than a refinement of our everyday thinking,” and from Thomas Huxley: “The man of science simply uses with scrupulous exactness the methods which we all, habitually and at every moment, use carelessly.”

That very common but very misleading honorific of “science” and “scientific” as generic terms of epistemic praise obscures the otherwise obvious fact that not all and not only scientists are good inquirers, and encourages a fruitless preoccupation with “the problem of demarcation,” of how to draw the line between real science and pretenders. But in its more straightforward descriptive use, the word “science” simply refers to a loose federation of kinds of inquiry into a characteristic (if not a closed or sharply definable) kind of question about the world.

There is no uniquely rational mode of inference or procedure of inquiry used by all and only scientists, and responsible for the remarkable successes of the sciences; no “scientific method.” *All* serious inquirers—historians, detectives, legal and literary scholars, etc. as well as scientists—use their imagination to come up with a hypothesis which, if true, would explain some puzzling event or phenomenon; seek out all the relevant evidence they can lay hands on; and use their judgment whether to accept the conjecture, modify it, reject and start again, or figure out how to get more decisive evidence.

There are, however, many and various scientific methods, constantly evolving, and often local to this or that areas of science. Over the centuries, scientists have developed a great variety of special procedures, techniques, and tools, “helps” to inquiry, to borrow Francis Bacon’s happy word: models and metaphors that stretch the imagination, instruments of observation that extend and amplify human sensory capacities; devices of experimental design—controls, double-blinding, etc.—to help rule out interfering factors; numerals, the calculus, statistical techniques, and now, ever more complex and sophisticated computer programs that enhance human powers of reasoning; even an internal social organization that enables evidence-sharing and division of labor, and helps keep most scientists, most of the time, reasonably honest. And these refinements and amplifications [...] extend evidential reach to sustain respect for evidence, and to enable more rigorous assessment of its worth. Scientific investigation *is* an extension of everyday empirical inquiry; it is *not* “just common sense.”

Misunderstanding #3: “It’s Just an Analogy”

My account of the warrant of scientific claims begins with an analogy between the structure of evidence and a crossword puzzle. [...] Some readers thought the analogy *is* my theory of evidence and warrant. Again, not so; it is only the first step towards such a theory.

How reasonable a crossword entry is depend on how well it fits with the clue and the other already-completed intersecting entries; how reasonable

those other entries are, independent of this one; and how much of the crossword has been completed. Analogously, how warranted a claim is depends on how well it is supported by experiential evidence (the analogue of clues in the crossword), and reasons (the analogue of the already-completed intersected entries); how warranted the reasons are, independent of the claim in question; and how much of the relevant evidence the evidence includes. But the role of the analogy “is only to suggests ideas, which then have to stand on their own feet” (p. 58); and so far from being the end of the story, this is where the hard work begins.

[...]

I take experiential evidence to consist, not of propositions, but of perceptual events—a person’s hearing or seeing etc. [...] I posit a continuum from words and phrases learned largely by association with ongoing visual, etc., experience and in smaller part through intra-linguistic connections, to words and phrases learned largely by intra-linguistic connections and in smaller part through experiential associations. [...]

Unlike experiential evidence, reasons are propositional; but supportiveness, as I construe it, is not a narrowly logical matter. Rather, how supportive someone’s reasons are depends on how well they and the claims in question fit together in an explanatory story. But explanatoriness requires a vocabulary that identifies real kinds of thing or phenomenon; and so supportiveness depends on content, not on form alone.

Because it gives an epistemological role both to scientists' perceptual interactions with individual things and events around them, and to the relation of terms in the vocabularies of the sciences to kinds of thing and phenomenon, Critical Common-sensism is, as I say, "worldly." It is also, in a sense, realist. [...] Unlike radical constructivism, linguistic idealism, and irrealism, it takes there to be a real world—i.e. a world independent of how we describe it or believe it to be.

But mine is a modest, "innocent" realism. It allows us to acknowledge that our perceptual powers are limited, imperfect, and sometimes distorted by our expectations [...]. It allows us to acknowledge that truth is not transparent, and that scientific progress is uncertain and often ragged [...]. It understand "real" modestly, as "independent of how we believe it to be; and it conceives of kinds modestly, as knots of properties held together by real laws. The realist core of Critical Common-sensism is simply this: for scientific inquiry to be possible at all—for *any* kind of empirical inquiry to be possible at all—our sensory organs must be capable of putting us in touch with things and events in the world and those things and events must be of kinds, and subject to laws.

Critical Common-sensism is worldly, modestly realist—and also social. For the degree of warrant of a claim for a group of people depends in part on how efficiently evidence is shared among its members; and the degree of warrant of a claim at a time depends in part on what the best evidence possessed by any individual or group at that time is.

Misunderstanding #4: “We Had It All Along”

Some readers [...] thought my ideas were merely variations on themes already familiar in recent mainstream philosophy of science; in short, they thought, “we had it all along.” None, however, seemed very clear who, exactly the “we” were—or what the “it” was [...].

[...]

Not that my approach is lacking antecedents; but my most important intellectual debts are not to recent philosophy of science, but to much older thinkers. [...] Besides Einstein and Huxley, John Dewey, James Conant, Percy Bridgman, and Gustav Bergman also conceived of scientific inquiry, as I do, as a refined, amplified extension of everyday empirical investigation. [...] So far as I know, however, this insight has not been embraced or developed in more recent philosophy of science.

[...] Both John Maynard Keynes and Richard von Mises were skeptical, as am I, about the relevance of the mathematical calculus of probabilities to epistemological questions: Keynes suspected that it may not be possible to assign numerical values to epistemic probabilities, or even, always, to order them; von Mises insisted that the calculus probabilities applies only where we are dealing with a large class of uniform events, *not* to epistemic probabilities. But this insight has not been embraced or developed in more recent philosophy of science, either.

[...]

Many besides myself now see science as a deeply social enterprise—though this is hardly an insight of recent philosophy of science either, but will be entirely familiar to anyone who has read Peirce or Dewey. But my stress on evidence-sharing and its relevance to warrant, and on the ways in which the internal organization and the external environment of science can help or hinder its progress, is not a commonplace of recent philosophy of science.

Nor does the Critical Common-sensist conception of the social dimensions of science have much in common with the characteristic themes of recent radical sociology of science, Science Studies, feminist critique of science, etc.: the sexism, racism, classism, etc., allegedly lurking behind the epistemic pretensions of the sciences. [...]

I decline to take on the overwhelming task of surveying all the many and various sociological, ethno-methodological, feminist, literary-theoretical, etc., etc., expressions of the New Cynicism ... or all the many and various Bayesian, decision-theoretic, neo-Popperian, error-theoretic, model-theoretic, neo-pragmatist, naturalized, neo-instrumentalist/constructivist-empiricist, etc., etc., approaches developed in recent mainstream philosophy of science. But I note significant points of agreement, and of disagreement, as I pursue my own constructive project. [...]

Misunderstanding #5: “Only Disconnect”

[...] This [book’s] argumentative structure ramifies outward from the core epistemological and metaphysical ideas worked out in the first half of the

book to the questions about the place of science in our culture tackled later. Sadly, however, some readers missed the myriad ways in which ideas about evidence, method, reality, kinds, and laws play through the entire argument.

[...]

Cynical sociologists of science, apparently forgetting that science is a kind of inquiry, neglect the role of evidence; but a sensible, epistemologically informed sociology could help us understand the ways in which the internal organization and the external environment of science can foster efficient sharing of evidence and division of intellectual labor, and encourage honesty and thoroughness—or discourage them. Similarly, radical rhetoricians who focus exclusively on “the literature of science” neglect the worldly character of scientific inquiry, and fudge the differences between investigation constrained by evidence and the free play of the imagination; but a reasonably informed rhetoric of science could contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms of evidence-sharing and of the shifts and adaptations of the vocabularies of science.

[...]

On the value and dangers of science: science is valuable not only for the knowledge thus far accumulated, and not only for the ways in which technology has improved our lives, but also as a manifestation of the human talent for inquiry, representing, at its best, a remarkable amplification and refinement of human cognitive capacities; however, as with every human

enterprise, its integrity can be threatened by political pressure, by commercial interests, or by simple vanity, greed, or pride.²⁵⁶

Taken as a whole, Haack's work provides epistemic justifications for two deep pillars of a biopoetics of symbolism. First, by embracing neither the extremes of the New Deferentialists and scientism on the one hand, nor the extremes of the New Cynics and pomo anti-knowledge on the other, they justify modest (i.e. guarded yet still confident) integrations of recent scientific knowledge into humanities disciplines. Second, they justify applying an empirically-grounded, evidence-honoring, Critical Common-sensical method for inquiring into the second-order meanings and symbolic "realities" of an art text.

Another model for my macro-epistemic approach is the postpositivism of William Trochim. Trochim is professor of human ecology, research methodology, and policy management at Cornell. In his *Research Methods Knowledge Base* (an online handbook aimed at aspiring scholars in the social sciences), Trochim offers a broadbrush history of modern scientific research methodologies and the epistemics underpinning them. He identifies postpositivism as the heir and rightful successor to its antecedents, positivism and pomo social constructionism.²⁵⁷ Trochim's pragmatic postpositivist stance echoes many of Haack's premises and attitudes. Trochim advocates it as best-practice epistemology for social-science researchers today, and it is a model worthy of adoption in the humanities. Tonally reminiscent of Thomas Foster, Trochim crisply explains this evolution of epistemic theory:

²⁵⁶ Haack, *Defending*, ii–x.

²⁵⁷ William Trochim, "Positivism and Postpositivism," Research Methods Knowledge Base, Cornell University: <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/positvsm.php>. Note: Trochim hyphenates "post-positivism" here; I prefer it as one word and have silently elided the hyphen in these quotations.

When most people in our society think about science, they think about some guy in a white lab coat working at a lab bench mixing up chemicals. They think of science as boring, cut-and-dry, and they think of the scientist as narrow-minded and esoteric (the ultimate nerd—think of the humorous but nonetheless mad scientist in the *Back to the Future* movies, for instance). A lot of our stereotypes about science come from a period where science was dominated by a particular philosophy—*positivism*—that tended to support some of these views. Here, I want to suggest (no matter what the movie industry may think) that science has moved on in its thinking into an era of *post-positivism* where many of those stereotypes of the scientist no longer hold up.

[...]

One of the most common forms of post-positivism is a philosophy called *critical realism*. A critical realist believes that there is a reality independent of our thinking about it that science can study. (This is in contrast with a *subjectivist* who would hold that there is no external reality—we're each making this all up). Positivists were also realists. The difference is that the postpositivist critical realist recognizes that all observation is fallible and has error and that all theory is revisable. In other words, the critical realist is *critical* of our ability to know reality with certainty. Where the positivist believed that the goal of science was to uncover the truth, the postpositivist critical realist believes that *the goal of science is to hold steadfastly to the goal of getting it right about reality, even though we can never achieve that goal!*

Because all measurement is fallible, the postpositivist emphasizes the importance of multiple measures and observations, each of which may possess different types of error, and the need to use *triangulation* across these multiple errorful sources to try to get a better bead on what's happening in reality.

The postpositivist also believes that all observations are theory-laden and that scientists (and everyone else, for that matter) are inherently biased by their cultural experiences, worldviews, and so on. This is not cause to give up in despair, however. Just because I have my worldview based on my experiences and you have yours doesn't mean that we can't hope to translate from each other's experiences or understand each other. That is, postpositivism rejects the *relativist* idea of the *incommensurability* of different perspectives, the idea that we can never understand each other because we come from different experiences and cultures. Most postpositivists [...] believe that we each construct our view of the world based on our perceptions of it. Because perception and observation is fallible, our constructions must be imperfect.

So what is meant by *objectivity* in a postpositivist world? Positivists believed that objectivity was a characteristic that resided in the individual scientist. Scientists are responsible for putting aside their biases and beliefs and seeing the world as it "really" is. Postpositivists reject the idea that any individual can see the world perfectly as it really is. We are all biased and all of our observations are affected (theory-laden). Our best hope for achieving objectivity is to triangulate across multiple fallible perspectives! Thus,

objectivity is not the characteristic of an individual, it is inherently a social phenomenon. It is what multiple individuals are trying to achieve when they criticize each other's work. We never achieve objectivity perfectly, but we can approach it.

[...]

Clearly, all of this stuff is not for the faint-of-heart. I've seen many a graduate student get lost in the maze of philosophical assumptions that contemporary philosophers of science argue about. And don't think that I believe this is not important stuff. But, in the end, I tend to turn pragmatist on these matters. Philosophers have been debating these issues for thousands of years and there is every reason to believe that they will continue to debate them for thousands of years more. Those of us who are practicing scientists should check in on this debate from time to time (perhaps every hundred years or so would be about right). We should think about the assumptions we make about the world when we conduct research. But in the meantime, we can't wait for the philosophers to settle the matter. After all, we do have our own work to do!²⁵⁸

Trochim's postpositivist concepts and terms are well-ordained and applicable on several levels. His normative procedure of good-faith "triangulation" across multiple minds ("multiple fallible perspectives") in order to "approach" the truth represents the basic procedural arc for achieving valid knowledge within any form of disciplinary inquiry: science, history, reportage, medical diagnoses, legal judgments, interpretative exegesis (art texts included), and critical commentary that spins off those exegetical interpretations.

²⁵⁸ Trochim, "Positivism and Postpositivism." Author's italics. Two paragraph breaks have been inserted.

We still have much “work to do” in formulating a biopoetics of second-order symbolism. So, briefly summing up, my own “personal statement” for how to best behave as a scholar-thinker today would go something like this: I welcome research scholarship in any field that remains committed intellectually to the formation of better and more reliable knowledge and truthful insights about the state of reality and our place within it, through free, open, interdisciplinary inquiry that is undergirded by a rigorous but healthy skepticism of ideas and methods and facts; but one that is also willing to accede to certain axiomatic starting points and whose ultimate purpose is gaining the probability of truth in the light of sufficient, convincing evidence and well-reasoned systematic argumentation articulated with a clearly defined set of terms. Such an enterprise is underwritten by a provisional and probabilistic notion of truth about a mind-independent reality: a reality that, though always in various degrees and scales of flux, does retain enough stability and regularity on a macroscale to enable our evolved minds, which, compounding the problem, are themselves in various states of flux but also regularly patterned and stable *enough*, to capture pearls of truths, general or concrete, and turn those pearls into an edifice of reliable knowledge. That edifice remains open to expansion and reshaping in the light of new facts, better evidence, and more encompassing theory.

The peculiar nature of interpretation, of art experience, and of narrative fiction provide several more twists to these knots of knowing. Drilling down into the subterranean symbolic strata of a piece of narrative art, in hopes of striking a gusher of valid meanings, is an even *more* provisional knowledge-enterprise than that of, say, identifying the proteins produced by a set of genetic elements in a body. But a knowledge enterprise it must remain. Thus, the specs of my theoretical-critical architectonics might be articulated as follows: upon

the epistemological foundations of foundherentism and postpositivism, I build an ev-cog theoretical framework; upon that framework, I hang intentionalist-hermeneutic struts and planks, which shape out rooms to be furnished by applied exegesis, criticism, and valuations of individual works of aesthetic narrative art deploying second-order symbologies.

(K)Not This: What This Project Does Not Seek to Accomplish

Some ev-cog humanists today deem it an intellectual (perhaps professional) imperative to argue that “art,” as some general class of activity or artifacts, is a proper biological/cognitive adaptation. “Art as adaptation” is a common slogan in these circles. The basic logic behind the “art = adaptation” stance is this: art behaviors appear to be universal, and pleasant, and sometimes useful; therefore, they are probably adaptations; therefore, they can be deemed indispensable to the human species and, thus, worthy of study at the highest levels of critical thought. These debates are fascinating, thought-provoking, and valuable. However, my arguments regarding biopoetics do not depend on their outcomes. That said, a few notes clarifying my position follow.

The well-rehearsed controversy surrounding one of Steven Pinker’s earliest weigh-ins on art’s evolutionary adaptiveness provides a springboard here. In a later chapter of *How the Mind Works* (1997), Pinker synthesizes research on the cognition and affect of music with evolutionary theory to derive his pithy, but not unserious, conclusion that music is effectively “auditory cheesecake for the mind.”²⁵⁹ Pinker’s detractors were quick to offer response, of both the kneejerk and more-considered variety. Most seemed offended by the phrase, if not the supporting evidence and theories Pinker offered to warrant his conclusions. Cheesecake does not square with the lofty status usually bestowed upon music and other species of the

²⁵⁹ Steven Pinker, Chapter 8, “The Meaning of Life,” *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997).

beaux artes. So, attributing to Pinker the view that all instances of art (not just music) are nothing more than mental confections, opponents characterized his claims of art's non-adaptive nature as vulgar reductions of its power, use value, possibly even its sacredness. The fear was that, lest our current modern arts get labeled as anything other than adaptation—e.g. evolutionary byproducts or spandrels hijacking the PECMA channels of other adaptations, or worse yet biological noise²⁶⁰—they could get rubber-stamped within the public consciousness as useless, degraded in value, unworthy of our cognitive- and financial-resource investment.

When read judiciously, Pinker's arguments are more nuanced than this, especially in his more recent interjections on these topics. By 2007 Pinker was already clarifying himself, refining his thoughts on these subjects. In "Toward a Consilient Study of Literature," he makes the following well-considered claims about the emerging paradigms for integrating literary studies with the new sciences of mind and human nature:

The goal of explaining the human taste for fiction (a problem in evolutionary psychology) sits uneasily with the goal of improving the analysis and criticism of specific works of fiction (a problem in departments of English and other literatures). It's conceivable that evolutionary thinking will raise, and eventually solve, the scientific question of why we enjoy fiction without offering anything to the field of literary criticism beyond our folk theories of human nature. (Under this scenario, evolution would explain why those folk theories are true, but would not add anything to the power of those theories to

²⁶⁰ For cohesive and precise taxonomy of distinctions between *adaptations*, *exaptations*, *spandrels*, *byproducts*, and biological *noise*, see David Buss, April Bleske, Martie Haselton, Todd Shackelford, and Jerome Wakefield, "Adaptations, Exaptations, and Spandrels" *American Psychologist* 3, No. 5 (1998): 533–548. Found online: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/haselton/webdocs/spandrels.html>.

illuminate specific works of literature.) I don't think it will come down to this, but advocates of Darwinian lit-crit should be prepared to spell out what they hope evolution will add to literary analysis beyond a rehabilitation of the relevance of a conception of human nature. This in turn may require a more explicit rationale of what literary criticism itself is for, and why we attach so much importance to it—the kind of justification that many humanities scholars find philistine and demeaning, but that scientists are forced to muster every time they write a grant proposal.²⁶¹

Pinker's points about what evolutionary psychology can, and cannot, offer to the field of literary studies are important to consider. Critics like Bordwell and Easterlin, who emphasize the unyielding importance of interpretation and history in their ev-cog criticisms, might provide some answer to Pinker's concerns. Both integrate these sciences into the realms of art texts and their critical studies with elegance and judicious balance, never losing sight of the interpretative/historical facets of their respective film and literary traditions.

On the "art as adaptation" question, however, Pinker has remained mostly firm in his belief that today's most sophisticated belletristic arts are best understood as evolutionary byproducts, not adaptations proper. In light of our current evidence about human social and brain evolution, this is a view I mostly share. That is, today's modern arts are best conceptualized as complex mosaics of culturally propagated practices and packages of cognitive "technologies," which tap into various PECMA pathways of more specifiable psychological adaptations to give rise to some "artistic" experience. It becomes much harder to accept them as distinctly evolved, fitness-indispensable suites of adaptations, especially when tested against rigorous definitional parameters: e.g. Nikolaas Tinbergen's four

²⁶¹ Steven Pinker, "Toward a Consilient Study of Literature," *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 175.

categories of proximate/ultimate–synchronic/diachronic causations, or Buss et. al's distinctions between adaptations, exaptations, byproducts, and noise.

Moreover, some recent research appears to be supporting Pinker's original beliefs. Hankjan Honing, professor of music cognition at the University of Amsterdam, for instance, weighs in almost 20 years after Pinker's inflammatory coinage:

Pinker was probably right when he wrote: "I suspect music is auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of...our mental faculties." Or, to express his idea less graphically: music affects our brains at specific places, thereby stimulating the production of unique substances that have a pleasurable effect on our mood. [...]

Pinker's idea may actually be a very fruitful hypothesis whose significance has wrongfully gone unacknowledged because of all the criticism it elicited. After all, the purely evolutionary explanations for the origins of music largely overlook the experience of music we all share: the pleasure we derive from it, not only from the acrobatics of making it but also from the act of listening to it.

In a recent study, Canadian researchers were able to show precisely that: Music can arouse feelings of euphoria and craving, similar to tangible rewards that involve the striatal dopaminergic system. They were able to show that intense pleasure in response to music can lead to dopamine release in the striatal system. And, more importantly, the anticipation of an abstract reward

can result in dopamine release in an anatomical pathway distinct from that associated with the peak pleasure itself.²⁶²

New research outcomes aside, even if we were all to agree that music is in evolutionary terms primarily PECMA cheesecake, it would not follow *ipso facto* that music is unworthy of deep value and study. Such a verdict would in no way degrade music on the scale of what makes human life meaningful, valuable, pleasurable, bearable, or otherwise. Nor would it follow, even if we were to agree that *music* is a universally-recurring PECMA-tapping pleasure technology, then all *other* modes of “the arts” are equally as cheesecakey. Arts like poetry, narrative art, visual art, dance, and opera differ significantly in which PECMA pathways they coopt; moreover, individual works within those classes of art differ significantly in their PECMA-tapping profiles and emphases. Even if all these arts are finally conceptualized as more cheesecakey byproduct than straightforward cognitive-biological adaption—more socially assembled, culturally inflected orchestrations of various cognitive adaptations than very direct products of natural or sexual selection—it would not preclude them from being deemed worthy of close attention, understanding, propagation, and cultural preservation.

Modern professional sports provide some useful analogy for this debate. Formalized sporting activities elicit and put on special high display a host of physical, physiological, cognitive, and emotional adaptations: e.g. bipedalism; species-unique, anatomically sophisticated, hands that can manipulate objects with seamless dexterity; tissues, organs, muscles, bone structures, proprioceptions, and physiologies that promote moving our bodies

²⁶² Hankjan Honing, “Was Steven Pinker Right After All?” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 18, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/music-matters/201309/was-steven-pinker-right-after-all>. Honing cites Salimpoor, Benovoy, Larcher, Dagher, and Zatorre, “Anatomically Distinct Dopamine Release during Anticipation and Experience of Peak Emotion to Music,” *Nature Neuroscience* 24 (2011): 257–62.

through space and over land in balanced control—especially those which have optimized us for hunting and capturing prey, identifying and gathering foodstuffs, caring for young, etc.; and emotions attendant upon cooperation, competition, victory, and failure. Couple these with ritualized activities and gestures that may themselves be adaptations, and we have the makings of our modern high-dollar, high-status, high-visibility sport culture. But one cannot possibly suggest these formalized professional sports are adaptations in the proper sense of the term—even if people around the world, perhaps universally, feel them to be highly meaningful, valuable, something that one could not imagine “living without.” But certainly human beings could live without professionalized sports, without too much evolutionary cost. On the other hand, were we as a species to lose any of the adaptations *underpinning* them—our bipedalism, our hands, our proprioception, our ability to cooperate and compete for valued resources—that would be a different story entirely.

Our modern-day professional sports and arts are, in some sense, not unlike the formalizations and elaborations of second-order symbolism, too. It would hardly be controversial to identify our species’ basic symbolic aptitudes and our proclivities for symbol use as adaptations in the strong sense of the term. Most evolutionary thinkers will count the symbolic/linguistic aptitude as one if not the most pivotal adaptation of the modern *homo sapiens* brain. Second-order symbolisms, indirect referential complexes, the repleteness of modern-day aesthetic fields—these inescapably draw upon, build off, and put on special high display these adaptive cognitive mechanisms, inherent in our universal mental architectures. But that does not mean we can or should consider them adaptive traits themselves. A case could be made that second-order symbologies—being a rather inefficient, nonsystematic, epistemically blurry invention of recent modern humanity—are *maladaptive*. But does that

mean arts capitalizing on second-order symbolic techniques are less desirable, less worthy of study? Less worthy of teaching and spreading across the cultural universe? Certainly not.²⁶³

A better criticism of Pinker's reflections on the ev-cog nature of the arts—or at least his views concerning literary art—is his tendency to focus on middlebrow realistic fictions, while dismissing works of modernism and its avant-garde descendants as being outliers in his scheme of thought. Porter Abbott, on the other hand, embraces modern and postmodern narrative trends. Not unlike Nancy Easterlin, Abbott takes more seriously the nonrepresentational enigmas and cognitive difficulties of reader-resistant modernist/pomo art. In “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects: Abandoning Representation in Literature and Film” (2010),²⁶⁴ Abbott demonstrates how these “perverse” and “misbehaving” texts afford values beyond their presumed adaptive values: the values that emerge from fiction's serving as a tool for real-life situation modeling (Pinker) or cortical-cognitive organization (Carroll). “There are [...] plausible accounts of the evolutionary utility of fiction,” writes Abbott, “but where such theorizing runs into difficulties is when literature fails to perform what scientists say it is good for, notably in the alien terrain of some modernist and much postmodernist fiction.”²⁶⁵ Abbott aligns neither with Carroll, who wants to reassure that all instantiations of our contemporary fine arts are authentically, programmatically adaptive. Nor with Pinker, who, by equating some arts with cheesecake, risks demoting them into vessels for delivering

²⁶³ To analogize further, certain mental disorders, such as schizophrenia and depression, have been theorized as possible byproducts or maladaptations of *homo sapiens*' enlarged PFCs. Does granting them such status mean we ought not study them intently? Does it make them un-fascinating? Of course the opposite is true. Lest I am indicted for false equivalency in comparing engagement with modern arts to mental disease, I assure the reader my view of art is more anodyne than disease, more life-enhancer than life-degrader. That said, works like *Finnegan's Wake* might justifiably be called certifiable: fitness minimizers.

²⁶⁴ H. Porter Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects: Abandoning Representation in Literature and Film,” in *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). A revised version of the article appears in Abbot, “Sentences and Worlds,” Chapter 3, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013).

²⁶⁵ Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects,” 205.

transient pleasures (so many empty calories); and who, by equating other arts as too experimental or obfuscatory, risks missing out on their harder-fought pleasures and more enduring kinds of knowledge work they might perform (the vegetables that might not taste so good going down, but that will prove extremely valuable later). Abbott is further aware that just because some trait or behavior is biologically adaptive, this does not ensure its status as something human beings will consider morally, socially, or aesthetically desirable.

Abbott senses that humanist critics who try to shoehorn resistant or enigmatic art texts into some mold of adaptive-technologies-at-work will miss the special aesthetic, epistemic, and cognitive functions they *do* serve. These perverse garden-path arts, by failing to immediately satisfy narrative expectations or meaning-fulfillment, can “replace an art of representation with an art of cognitive states that are inaccessible or understandably avoided in the ordinary course of life.” These special states of cognitive ineffability, of recursively puzzling-out the art object at hand, “would seem to serve no apparently evolutionary purpose, indeed may even interfere with evolutionary success.” And yet these states can also “generate real knowledge of who we are. *Wisdom* may be a better term than *knowledge*, since what is often involved is knowing what it feels like not to know.”²⁶⁶ In the passage below, Abbott reinforces the values that non-mimetic, hard-to-digest narratives can deliver to readers—values that reach beyond transport, identification, and the authoritative *claritas* that someone like Eugenides highly prizes in fictions of psychological and narrative realism:

Even if no evolutionary value can be found for the perversity of these texts, this does not necessarily mean that their perversity is of no value. [...] I focus on a species of textual derangement that yields a kind of experiential knowledge rarely, if ever, available to us in the ordinary course of our lives

²⁶⁶ Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects,” 206.

and that is worth having. What it conveys is different from the “how true” effect of mimetic fiction. [...] Readers have always known [...] that we lose ourselves in fiction, getting inside it, enjoying what Richard Gerrig has called ‘the phenomenology of being transported.’ In narrative texts, especially, we feel and think with the characters in a process variously called projection, identification, empathetic understanding or, currently the exercise of our capacity to read minds. This is a rightly acclaimed distinction of fiction: it provides representations of human behavior that come alive in ways analytical discourse do not.

[...] however, I focus on three closely related ways of not doing what fiction is so acclaimed for.²⁶⁷

Abbott duly notes that “our biological and cultural evolution did not give us the cognitive engineering to accommodate [these texts] with ease.”²⁶⁸ But ease, immediate gratification, and transparent meanings do not have to be normative virtues of our art, even less so in life. As reiterated at the end of his article, Abbott’s “quarrel [is] not with the abundance of good work on art and evolution, but with its tendency at times to equate what we are evolved to do with what we should do. It is an old quarrel, but in an age when authorities can tell us how the mind works, it is at least humbling to know what it feels like when you are pushed against the limits of that mind.”²⁶⁹ The arguments Abbott presents here are strong ones. And they ring particularly true when considering second-order symbolic arts, which usually demand some conscious recursive reading or re-reading, some unraveling of puzzles, some

²⁶⁷ Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects,” 206

²⁶⁸ Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects,” 224.

²⁶⁹ Abbott, “Garden Paths and Ineffable Effects,” 205–6, 224.

additional efforts to triangulate ambiguous or polysemous meaning-structures. These efforts will stretch our cognitive resources beyond those needed for the more automatized processes of attending to and cognating first-order mimetic cues (e.g. realistically simulated character traits, easily recognizable narrative templating, etc.).

A Species-Eye View: *Homo Sapiens*—To Except or Not To Except?

To except or not except (our species)? That is the question (of this brief final section). Are we merely primitive animals, or are we a truly exceptional species? Do we creep, crawl, and bottom-dwell with the crustaceans; or do we soar and transcend with the angels? Are we imprisoned and embodied, or liberated through culture? These questions are themselves imbricated with deeper epistemic and (meta)physical problems involving world-to-mind perception, conceptual categorization, and pattern demarcation. Where do we perceive sameness and where difference? Do we lump or split? Where do our biological categories, or any conceptual categories, come from?

Modern set theory addresses many of these concerns with exacting philosophical and mathematical detail. But I have a crude answer to all such inquiries: Yes. Both. All. Such questions, and my doubled answers, speak to both the rhetorical-tonal complexion of this project and my broader epistemics and style of critical thinking. Below, I navigate the observations of four thinkers to approach a synthetic, if ambivalent, resolution.

In their books *The Tell-Tale Brain* (2011), *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique* (2008), and *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (2003), neuroscientists V.S. Ramachandran and Michael Gazzaniga and professor of geriatric medicine Raymond Tallis all endorse some view of human exceptionalism. At the same time,

as scientists keenly aware of evolution's invisible hand of influence across the biological spectrum, they also see humans as one link in the ever-evolving chains of organic life. Meanwhile, cognitive-literary critic Patrick Colm Hogan in *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (2003) makes more of a case for some lumping. But Hogan does his fair share of splitting, too, and is more open to admitting some specialness not just in the *human* animal but also in the *cultural* groups within the populations of *homo sapiens* (i.e. he sees cultures as having some identifiable demarcation boundaries and as factors that can inflect our universal human natures in nontrivial ways). Germane to this project, all four thinkers single out at various points in their books the special symbolic faculty of humans: each circulates his own variation on the idea that our unique symbolic aptitudes, and the deep ev-cog machinery that enables these aptitudes, are among the “exceptional” adaptive traits that caused such a radical “break” between our species and others. As Tooby and Cosmides might add, this unusual facility with symbol has been partly (perhaps largely) responsible for humans’ occupation of the “cognitive niche,” which has in turn enabled our occupation of virtually every terrestrial niche on the planet (not to mention some aquarium and atmospheric niches—submarines, SCUBA excursions, space stations, the moon, airplanes—at least temporarily).

At the outset of his book's preface, Ramachandran proclaims that one of his guiding principles “is that humans are truly unique and special, not—just another species of primate.” He muses, “I still find it a little bit surprising that this position needs as much defense as it does—and not just against the ravings of antievolutionists, but against no small number of my colleagues who seem comfortable stating that we are just apes—in a casual, dismissive tone that seems to revel in our lowliness. I sometimes wonder: Is this perhaps the secular

humanists' version of original sin?" Later discussing the "opportunistic" and "happenstantial nature of evolution," Ramachandran notes how "evolution found ways to radically repurpose many functions of the ape brain to create entirely new functions," and that "some of them—language comes to mind—are so powerful that I would go so far as to argue they have produced a species that transcends apehood to the same degree by which life transcends mundane chemistry and physics."²⁷⁰ Such lofty motifs of human uniqueness, transcendence, and special power sound more like the rhapsodic images of the Transcendental poet or New Age priest than those of the grim earth-bound scientist, toiling away in the lab probing at the biological meats of brains and bodies.

Gazzaniga strikes similar tones in *Human*, whose subtitle *The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique* does little to hide his personal slant on the questions at hand. He captures the arc of the issue well in the opening to his first chapter:

The great psychologist David Premack once lamented, "Why is it that the [equally great] biologist E.O. Wilson can spot the difference between two different kinds of ant at a hundred yards, but can't see the difference between an ant and a human?" The quip underlines strong differences of opinions on the issue of human uniqueness. It seems that half of the scientific world sees the human animal as on a continuum with other animals, and others see a sharp break between animals and humans, see two distinct groups. The argument has been raging for years, and it surely won't be settled in the near future. After all, we humans are either lumpers or splitters. We either see the similarities or prefer to note the differences.

²⁷⁰ Ramachandran, *Tell-Tale*, xiv, xv.

[...] I think it is rather empty to argue that [...] there is nothing unique about human social behavior.

[...]

Although it is obvious to everyone that humans are physically unique, it is also obvious that we differ from other animals in far more complex aspects. We create art, pasta Bolognese, and complex machines, and some of us understand quantum physics. We don't need a neuroscientist to tell us that our brains are calling the shots, but we do need one to explain how it is done. How unique are we, and how are we unique?

How the brain drives our thoughts and actions has remained elusive. Among the many unknowns is the great mystery of how a thought moves from the depths of the unconscious to become conscious. As methods for studying the brain have become more sophisticated, some mysteries are solved, but it seems that solving one mystery often leads to the creation of many more.²⁷¹

Like Ramachandran and others, Gazzaniga remarks not only on the mysterious elusiveness of the human brain, but also on the puzzles we have solved or are in the process of solving. And his preliminary remarks gesturing at the distinction of the human animal already carry persuasive value. (Although certain cats may understand quantum physics. They know more than they let on.)

Before this, in his prologue, Gazzaniga is more vigorous than even Ramachandran in his postulations of human exceptionalism. Alluding to the well-known graphic depicting our ape-to-human lineage, wherein the quadrupedal ape at one end gives way through

²⁷¹ Gazzaniga, *Human*, 7, 9. Author's brackets.

intermediate steps to the erect bipedal modern human at the other end, Gazzaniga states his preference to “amend” that picture: “I see the human turning around with a knife in his hand and cutting his imaginary tether to the earlier versions, becoming liberated to do things no other animal comes close to doing.” Continuing with force, Gazzaniga declares, “We are special. All of us solve problems effortlessly and routinely. [...] The human mind is so generative and so given to animation that we do things such as *map agency* (that is, we project intent) onto almost anything—our pets, our old shoes, our cars, our world, our gods. It is as if we don’t want to be alone up here at the top of the cognitive chain as the smartest things on earth.” So, Gazzaniga is a confessed splitter: “Everywhere I look I see tidbits of differences.” And while he perceives and understands “that most human activity can be related to antecedents in other animals,” he suggests that “to be swept away by such a fact is to miss the point of human experience.” And he does not hesitate to view humans as the result of a phase shift in evolution:

Although we are made of the same chemicals, with the same physiological reactions, we are very different from other animals. Just as gases can become liquids, which can become solids, phase shifts occur in evolution, shifts so large in their implications that it becomes almost impossible to think of them as having the same components. A foggy mist made up of the same stuff as an iceberg. In a complex relationship with the environment, very similar substances with the same chemical structure can become quite different in their reality and form.

[...]

Indeed, I have decided that something like a phase shift has occurred in becoming human. There simply is no one thing to ever account for our spectacular abilities, our aspirations, and our capacity to travel mentally in time [...]. Even though we have all of these connections with the biologic world from which we came, and we have in some instances similar mental structures, we are hugely different. While most of our genes and brain architectures are held in common with animals, there are always differences to be found. And while we can use lathes to mill fine jewelry, and chimpanzees can use stones to crack open nuts, the differences are light-years apart.

A phase shift occurred, and it occurred as the consequences of many things changing in our brains and mind.²⁷²

The phase shift Gazzaniga posits here bears some uncanny resemblances to ideas of neuro-linguists Eleonora Russo and Alessandro Treves, who propose in their article “An Uncouth Approach to Language Recursivity” that a neural-circuitry phase shifting may have occurred to usher in our unique language-processing abilities.²⁷³ Moreover, Gazzaniga’s use of another iceberg metaphor, which just keeps rearing its pointy head, is a particularly interesting one in this context. His image of ice, water, and fog—the same chemical elements existing side-by-side in three manifestly different forms—might provide the keenest analogy yet for the dynamics of second-order symbolic art, too: first-order cues and meanings reify as the visible hard ice; while the amorphous mists and fluid waters surrounding that ice reify as the phase-shifted, second-order meanings and cues of ambiguity (mist) and polysemy (water). Perhaps

²⁷² Gazzaniga, *Human*, 2–3.

²⁷³ Eleonora Russo and Alessandro Treves, “An Uncouth Approach to Language Recursivity” *Biolinguistics* vol. 5, 1–2 (2011): 133–150.

a smaller-scale, on-the-fly phase shift in our cognitive modes and circuitry must occur for these kind of arts to be both created and understood.

Tallis also weighs in resolutely in favor of human exceptionalism, staking a claim that humanity has indeed self-untethered itself from the natural biological substrates from which we have emerged. A former physician and professor of geriatric medicine, Tallis now practices what he terms *philosophical anthropology*:

Doing philosophy may be seen as a means of coming upon oneself as from afar and alighting upon what one is, in the most usefully general sense. Out of this encounter may arise an enriched, more critical, less habit-prisoned, less parochial attitude to our life; a stronger feeling for its possibilities, its duties, its station in the wider scheme of things. [...] We might arrive at a better understanding of what is good for us; of what our ends truly are; and how better to order our affairs in our individual and collective pursuit of them. [...] We might arrive at a sharper awareness of the miraculous, complex, mysterious creatures we are. That is what, ultimately, philosophical anthropology may be about.²⁷⁴

On humanity's alleged transcendence beyond our biology, Tallis posits that "we are distanced from our condition, and from our material, biological, and ethical limitation, if only by virtue of our being aware of them, as Pascal proclaimed from the heart of his own suffering. The thinking reed is nobler than the universe because he, unlike the universe, knows that he is being crushed."²⁷⁵ Reinforcing his position, Tallis reasons, "Thus have we distanced ourselves from a state deemed to be natural, or the initial condition of the human

²⁷⁴ Raymond Tallis, *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 4.

²⁷⁵ Tallis, *The Hand*, 6.

animal [...] and in this respect we are not captured by the naturalistic viewpoint that understands us as a piece of nature. Whereas it is something of an exaggeration to say that (some of) humankind has ‘spoken itself free of organic constraint,’ it is no exaggeration to assert that we have, through a multitude of faculties, become insulated from this putative natural state, a state that we may observe even in our nearest relations among the higher primates.”²⁷⁶ Pivoting and bringing himself back down to earth, and biology, Tallis hedges himself in his subsequent passages: “Granted, at any moment, these distances, howsoever advanced our technologies, however stable and beneficent our social and political and economic institutions, may be rescinded.” Tallis acknowledges that “we are not entirely free of our organic constraints and we are far from having left our animal state behind us; nor would we necessarily want to become purely and entirely human on any interpretation of the meaning of this term. We would not, for example, wish to be etherealized into words; or live in a world where all interactions are mediated through symbol or electronic or optotronic communication systems. The lightness of our being would become ‘unbearable.’” Thus, we have three men of the human biosciences making independent cases for humankind’s distinctive place within the biosphere that transpired it.

However, there are good reasons to quiet, or at least qualify, the celebrations of such exceptionalisms. In a prevailingly positive review of Tallis’s most recent book, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (2014), for instance, philosopher of religion and ethics Willem Drees points to several shortcomings with Tallis’s ideas and approach, which “suffer on occasion from the failing that Tallis ascribes to his opponents: overstatement.” The same indictment might be leveled against

²⁷⁶ Tallis, *The Hand*, 6. Tallis here quotes George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

Gazzaniga's most categorical statements of exceptionalistic rectitude. Drees counters Tallis's strong version of human exceptionalism with the following reprieve:

In seeking to ensure that humans are not degraded to the level of animals, he emphasizes the distance that separates us from animals—*other* animals, one might say, although Tallis avoids such degrading terminology. One might argue that an explanatory relationship in itself does not decide on issues of value. Thus, it is possible to decouple the fight over moral and political issues from the outcome of the controversy over the possibility of a neuro-evolutionary understanding of consciousness.

And why would insight into our own animality be a justification for despair? It might just as easily enhance our admiration for our fellow living beings, and also increase our appreciation of sociality among apes. Tallis is fighting for a good cause, but surely there is still potential for gain in cooperation between the humanities and neuro-cognitive and evolutionary studies.²⁷⁷

Drees's more rounded-off sense of humans as special animals, but animals nonetheless, rings truer than Tallis's more dogmatic provisos of exceptionalism. Ultimately, Drees provides a better mirror of my own philosophy and ethic for viewing our species in the grandest scope. It's a lump and a split. Our modern cladistics models and phylogenetic nomenclature further attest to this point: the various branches and nodes of speciation, and the reasons for those divergences, become rather fuzzy upon strictest philosophical and metric scrutiny; and yet there are pragmatic reasons for drawing these trees—for lumping and for splitting.

²⁷⁷ Willem B. Drees, Review of *Aping Mankind* by Raymond Tallis, *Times Higher Education*, June 30, 2011, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/416631.article>.

Finally, for his part, Hogan weighs in not only on the lump/split issues of humanity's exceptionalism, but also on the wider issue of how we judge generalities and particularities, especially when it comes to the work of literature proper and its relationship to cognitive studies. In a section titled "Literature as Human Act," Hogan opens with the following remarks:

One reason literature has played such a limited role in cognitive study is that science seeks generalities while literature seems to be tied to narrow particularity. In connection with this, even humanists have been resistant to the idea that there are universal patterns in literature. [...] Both literary critics and readers from other disciplines tend to think of literature in terms of nations and periods, genres, schools, and movements. [...] Literary historians and interpreters categorize works of literature by groups, opposing the groups to one another and scrutinizing these groups for differences. What distinguishes Romanticism from Neo-Classicism?, Post-Modernism from Modernism?, western lyric from Chinese *tz'u*? [...] Asking these questions leads one to find answers, and thus find differences. [...] Distinguishing features become salient, while commonalities fade into the background. The result is a disproportionate sense of discrepancy and opposition.

But in fact there are far more numerous, deeper, more pervasive commonalities than there are differences. In [Donald] Davidson's words, "disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement." Put differently, literature—or more properly verbal art—is not produced by nations, periods, and so on. It is produced by people.

And these people are incomparably more alike than not. They share ideas, perceptions, desires, aspirations, and [...] emotions. Verbal art certainly has national, historical, and other inflections. The study of such particularity is tremendously important. However, literature is, first of all and most significantly, human. It is an activity engaged in by all people at all times. [...] The professional division of literature by nationality, ethnicity, and so on, tends to occlude this fundamental, human condition of verbal art [...]: something people do, and always have done, in all parts of the world, at all time.

Thus, even though he focuses on the generality/universality of literary creation rather than the particularity/specialness of human speciation, Hogan provides an interesting counterpoint nonetheless to the prior perspectives. The broader epistemic problems of how and when to divide, and who and when to collect the features of our world, are shared amongst all.

Torching the Wayward Path Ahead (and Behind)

I bring this chapter to a close (yes, finally) with metaphors of the wandering hunter and drifting *flâneur*, and further citations of Goodman and Tallis. These metaphors and passages are basically optimistic proclamations about how wayward paths can create useful knowledge. Thus, to light my and the reader's way through the rest of this project, Goodman's opening paragraph in *Ways of Worldmaking* can provide first torch:

This book does not run a straight course from beginning to end. It hunts; and in hunting, it sometimes worries the same raccoon in different trees, or different raccoons in the same tree, or even what turns out to be no raccoon in

any tree. It finds itself balking more than once at the same barrier and taking off on other trails. It drinks often from the same streams, and stumbles over some cruel country. And it counts not the kill but what is learned from the territory explored.²⁷⁸

Tallis, meanwhile, provides the following apologia of method in *The Hand*:

“Although I shall rove far and wide in developing my thesis, readers will find many facts set down here that are already known to them, which is exactly as it should be, and entirely inline with Wittgenstein’s description of philosophy as ‘assembling reminders [of what everyone knows] for a purpose.’” Tallis also states his case for a mode of writing that “unites the lyrical, the analytical, the argumentative, and even the narrative modes. Or—if that is too ambitious—that the book moves easily between these modes.” I hope my ways and means are similar.

Lastly, I wish to reproduce a passage from Tallis’s *The Hand*—with one interpolation: I swap out each instance of “the hand” with “symbolism.” Doing this, I hope, is suggestive of how closely these two genetic gifts resemble each other in status of influence in our evolutionary speciation. Moreover, as will be broached in the next chapter, there may be deeper biophysical/biopsychological connections between hands and symbols—between manual articulation and communicative articulation—than readily apparent. So the following exercise should prove itself more than an arbitrary, strained shoehorning of term-substitution:

I am not concerned about the patchiness of this book’s coverage.

[...]

There is simply too much to say about [symbolism]: I realized, soon after deciding on my subject, that its scope was potentially boundless. Anyone who

²⁷⁸ Goodman, *Worldmaking*, ix.

writes about [symbolism] is condemned to be a butterfly. If, as I believe, what we humans are capable of doing with [symbols] lies close to the root of what set us apart from (and, yes, above) the rest of creations, then tracing the ramifications of [symbolism] leads ineluctably into the boundless ocean of the human world.

[...]

In the pages that follow, the many-dimensional and almost limitless versatility of human [symbolism] is offered as a key to the awakening of the cultured human being out of the natural pre-human animal, opening up the vast distances between human culture and the natural worlds. Through [symbolism], human culture waves away animal nature.²⁷⁹

Unfortunately, to “wave away animal nature” is a bit of a bio-philosophical contradiction. But Tallis’s general spirit here is well-taken. And his premise of how the human hand has differentiated humans from our nearest genotypic relatives, and from other forms of highly intelligent non-primate animal life, could be said for the human symbolic faculties. Moreover, this project also shares some organizational spirit with Tallis’s patchwork stitched together by a fluttering butterfly. (Can you tell yet?)

The formulations here and in the Preface, which expounds on the false dichotomy of the fox-hedgehog model, should help explain my writerly and intellectual tendencies to oscillate between energy levels: flitting *flaneur* particles drawn to the firmer gravitational centers of the replicative evolved mind-brain of *homo sapiens*. At the same time, I would hope this project at least gestures toward more systematic theoretical outputs. To do this, I have liberally distributed intellectual tasks to other more qualified minds, rely (perhaps too

²⁷⁹ Tallis, *The Hand*, 12.

excessively) on their battle-tested expertise, and admit and entertain multiple perspectives to calibrate my trajectory system. As Adam Gopnik profoundly observes, “it takes all kinds to run a starship.” Thus, in the next chapter, I try to navigate this *Enterprise* through the asteroid fields of the rocky, well-trafficked, always-in-motion topic of symbol theory in the arts.

CHAPTER 4

A Symbol Survey: The Ghosts of Symbol Present

The great writers all used symbol as a means of controlling the form of their fiction.

— Ralph Ellison²⁸⁰

I'm sure that there's something in the human personality which resents things that are clear, and, conversely, something which is attracted to puzzles, enigmas, and allegories.

— Stanley Kubrick²⁸¹

The very nature of the poet's language is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations. I do not mean connotations as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand.

— Cleanth Brooks²⁸²

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.

— Rene Magritte²⁸³

Overture: Trajectory and Guiding Principles

Chapters 4 and 5 together trace a broad *ad hoc* historical lineage of symbol theory from ancient to present times. In the present chapter, contemporary textbook definitions and

²⁸⁰ Ralph Ellison, response to Bruce McAllister, *The Symbolism Survey*, 1963. See Sarah Funke Butler, "Document: The Symbolism Survey," *The Paris Review* December 5, 2011: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/12/05/document-the-symbolism-survey/>.

²⁸¹ Stanley Kubrick, interview with Alexander Walker (spring 1971), printed in Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director: A Visual Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1999), 38.

²⁸² Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 8–9. Some sentences from the original passage have been elided without bracket ellipses.

²⁸³ Rene Magritte, radio interview with Jean Neyens (1965), cited in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Millen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 172.

histories of the literary symbol are aggregated and considered at the outset. This is followed by a synthesis of statements from a selection of modern-day narrative artists who have weighed in, in some way or another, on the place of symbolic or symbol-related devices in their work. Chapter 5 then circles backwards in time to survey some of the major historical junctures and benchmarks of symbol theory as fomented by the Western tradition's more canonical artists, critics, philosophers, and their historiographers. The contents of the present chapter, thus, compose a target of sorts for that older history to march towards.

A prefatory note from Goodman's *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* mirrors the critical attitudes and networking of ideas of these chapters. Capturing a snapshot of several key figures in symbol-theory history, Goodman notes his indebtedness to and distinctions from their thinking; and he prepares his reader for encountering certain unoriginal or recycled ideas: recitations, reformulations, repackagings of the thoughts of others before him. He self-reports, "I repeatedly had to assail authoritative current doctrine and fond prevailing faith. Yet I claim no outstanding novelty for my conclusions. I am by no means unaware of contributions to symbol theory by such philosophers as Peirce, Cassirer, Morris, and Langer; [...] most of my argument and results may well have been anticipated by other writers." He dampens the historical function of his rhetorical purpose further, acknowledging that "any attempt to trace the complex pattern of my agreement and disagreement with [...] these writers would give a purely historical matter disproportionate and distracting prominence."²⁸⁴ Much of the same could be said about my approach.

Before parsing the component mechanisms and interlocking theories of a biopoetics of second-order symbolism—i.e. identifying some of those innate, internested suites of

²⁸⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), xii–xiii.

cognitive structures recruited for aesthetic-symbolic activities—it must be stressed that any evolved mind-brain structures we posit never operate in cultural-historical vacuums. Rather, our mental adaptations intertwine with localized historical ecologies and sociocultural factors, which constrain, amplify, or otherwise channel those cognitive adaptations toward achieving certain effects in the world. And it is only from this sometimes resistant, sometimes mutually reinforcing play of interactions—between evolved mental structures and cultural structures, between intuition and learning, between nature and nurture—that we can get a handle on the loosely affiliated set of aesthetic narratives falling along my generic continuum of symbolic realism. Some cataloguing and sketching of the benchmarks and pivot points of Western symbol theory is, thus, compulsory. The long history of artistic practices, religious rituals, and philosophic traditions that have fed into and fed off of supranormal symbolic activities is neither complete nor cohesively integrated. Partial as it is, this history adduces to the persistence and intensity of the symbolic impulse within *homo sapiens*—an impulse that has, crucially, been nurtured and amplified by certain knowledge tools and mental-extension technologies invented in post-agrarian societies. This material history will bolster a basic claim of this dissertation: that modern *homo sapiens* are supranormal symbolic stimuli seekers (SSSS or S⁴). Furthermore, it will help unfold an endemic and peculiarly dichotomous state of mind of the human symbolic animal, a mental state that artists like Rene Magritte must have experienced powerfully in their lives while reifying it in their art: the human mind’s “interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us,” the intense and conflicted interest “between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.”²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Magritte, radio interview, Neyens. See footnote in this chapter’s epigraph.

Regrettably, the tangled ever-branching intellectual history of symbol theory has led to what professor of classics and psychology Agnes Petocz calls “much confusion and disorganization in the field.”²⁸⁶ In her reassessment of Freud’s symbol theory in *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* (1999), Petocz draws several thumbnail sketches of these historical and theoretical brambles, internal and external to her home field of psychology. For example, she encapsulates the current state of the transdisciplinary “field” of symbol study as follows, noting differences in the volume and kind of literature available in the scientific, social scientific, and humanistic domains:

Human behavior and mental life being the specific concerns of psychology, it would seem reasonable to look to that discipline for an account of symbolism. But mainstream psychology has disappointingly little to say about the subject. As Bertalanffy observes, “In spite of the fact that symbolic activity is one of the most fundamental manifestations of the human mind, scientific psychology has in no way given the problem the attention it deserves.” In contrast, outside mainstream psychology, there is no shortage of material on symbolism. Leaving aside psychoanalysis (for the moment), the humanist, phenomenological, and existentialist movements, on the periphery of mainstream psychology because of their opposition to science, devote considerable attention to symbolism; and their contributions are joined by an even more extensive body of literature which spans the whole range of the social sciences: general philosophical treatments of the symbol, hermeneutics, sociology, anthropology, semiotics, aesthetics, and so on, each either

²⁸⁶ Agnes Petocz, *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), x.

appropriating symbolism as its own proper subject matter, or, at least, claiming to reveal valuable insights into symbolism.

This vast literature, however, is disorganized, confusing, and riddled with disagreements. Perhaps we should not be surprised by the enormous range of phenomena encompassed by the concept of “symbol,” from the consciously formed and completely transparent symbols of, say logic and mathematics, to the unconsciously formed and quite opaque symbols of the dream. But almost all of the controversial literature on symbolism is concerned with only one end of this continuum; [...] what is contentious, what has been disputed for hundreds of years, is the explanation of symbols in myths, fairy tales, dreams, ritual, religion, art, psychopathological symptoms, and so on.²⁸⁷

Despite the brambles, thorns, and dark overgrowth of symbol theory’s historical forest—particularly symbol theory in art, narrative, myth, and religions—a flyover is necessary both to survey and then to make some sense of the accumulated disarray on the ground. Only then can we fairly hypothesize how our genetic predispositions, innate mental architectures, and symbol-constructing cognitive mechanisms both recursively determine and get tuned by the cultural currents of symbol theory and practice.

After I map out this abbreviated historical genealogy of symbol theory, Theodosius Dobzhansky’s dictum—nothing in biology making sense except in the light of evolution²⁸⁸—inflects the arc of my arguments thereafter. And in a sociobiological turn, I tender one step further than Dobzhansky to posit that nothing in culture makes much sense except in the light

²⁸⁷ Petocz, 1–2.

²⁸⁸ See epigraph in Ch. 3.

of evolution either. More precisely, nothing in culture makes much sense, in a *grounded* theoretic sense, without recourse to a relatively stable human cognitive architecture and its nested componentry: an architecture derived from and shaped by the long, slow accretions of biological evolution (i.e descent with modification through natural selection, acting through genetic units within individual organisms, producing the larger scale of our phylogenetic heritage). Hence, the deepest, richest, most satisfying understanding of our cultural products requires *some* effort to connect these products (and their narrative worlds, if any are represented) to the ev-cog profiles of the human mind-brain and our evolved human nature. No matter how flexible and unconstrained those evolved mechanisms of mind and their products might appear to us in the present-tense world, these mechanisms are forever rooted to foundational organic materials; materials that combined to enable reliable patterns of action in motile human bodies; bodies that exist in order to move, survive, reproduce, and parent within a relatively stable gradient of geoclimatic environmental forces. These basic ingredients reach far back beyond our current historical moment and conscious psychological selves. The flexibilities inherent in our actions and cognitions arose *out of* and are *enabled by* complex suites of genetic and behavioral constraints, adapted to environments that changed over long temporal scales but that remained relatively stable in terms of the individual human life cycle. If humanists and arts scholars continue to remain agnostic in their work about the biological and psychological realities of our evolved cognitive architectures and the material foundations from which they emerged, that means capitulating to a certain pathology of intellectual deafness. Choosing to be disconnected from, or shy to assimilate, the knowledge and theories accreting through the advance of the empirical human sciences (no matter how provisional that knowledge and those theories might be) is an intellectually vapid, if not

dishonest, response. This compromises the credibility and integrity of the humanities while diminishing the empirical human sciences, which could themselves be reciprocally benefitting from humanistic expertise. The latter part of this chapter, then, is written in the spirit of linking up the “base” biopsychology of our evolved symbolic faculty with the culturally inflected, historically situated “superstructures” of modern symbolic arts.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Adversaries to these kinds of axioms and critical attitudes are likely to echo the sentiments of scholars like Johanthan Kramnick. Kramnick has labored across several articles and rejoinders in *Critical Inquiry* to formulate quarrels with evolutionary and cognitive approaches to the arts, or at least their straw-man versions. Kramnick’s writings aim to deflate the bluster he perceives coming out of some sectors of ev-cog science and criticism, a trend he characterizes as mostly a public-relations boondoogle that has falsely enhanced the academic reputations of these precincts. See especially Kramnick, “Literary Studies and Science: A Reply to My Critics,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 431–460, <http://english.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Kramnick-CI-Reply.pdf>.

To his credit, Kramnick is a rigorous writer who does wage formidable counterpoints and proddings in his pieces, which should push the still-nascent ev-cog schools of criticism into some valuable if uncomfortable introspections. All the better. Knowledge crystallizes through adjustments to the smartest and most engaged counter-arguments.

But to push against Kramnick here, neo-Darwinian and neo-cognitive fields are young by any stretch of the imagination, despite some recent inroads and growth as measured by spikes in scholarly books and ev-cog-inflected academic conferences. Secondly, the roster of ev-cog faculty who have attained secure positions in humanities departments is rather negligible, if rising (slowly). After reading Kramnick’s invectives of this small-if-growing, often-marginalized-yet-committed niche of scholars, however, one might be seduced into believing there is actually a mutiny afoot in humanities departments everywhere. These hyperbolic characterizations make the rest of his arguments look like so much windmill-titling.

Kramnick seems to be fundamentally if inexplicably xenophobic about literary critics who might venture to make any *explicit* top-down connections between an evolved psychology and its expressed cultural products at any stage of the critical process (whether the meaning/interpretation phase or even in the significance/criticism phase). He pays lip service to the principle of consilience, or what he prefers to call “horizontal integration” and “traffic” between disciplines, where scholars do a lot of “looking over the shoulders” of their peers (a favored trope of Kramnick). But he apparently does not think evolutionary theory is a valid idea to pursue within the hallowed, sacrosanct grounds of the eternally flexible literary work—an artform that Kramnick, again to his credit, clearly adores and is devoted to understanding deeply. Evolution, and its behavioral ramifications, should apparently be tucked away in the background, never to rear its nasty head within the flexible open worlds of art, artists, and art consumers. The following claim—formulated almost as an afterthought, sandwiched within crowds of verbiage and overdrawn paragraphs—is telling in this regard; in it he is contending with Blakey Vermeule’s rather innocuous yet sharply formulated positions negotiating between the ev-cog sciences and traditional literary studies:

The theoretical assumptions, terminological persuasions, and aesthetic sensibilities propping up the second half of this chapter intersect with many of Nancy Easterlin's. Her critical-theoretical trajectories in *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and*

Vermeule's agnosticism [about how valuable ev-cog science will end up being for literary criticism] extends only to the relevance of evolutionary psychology for the humanistic disciplines. She is a believer when it comes to the psychology itself. She states this in two crisp formulations, each corresponding to a distinct horn of the dilemma. Here is the first: "evolution is undisputedly the scientific ground on which academic psychology proceeds. In a broad sense, all psychology is now evolutionary psychology." Here is the second: "As a story about the mind [evolutionary psychology] is true; more details are emerging all the time to buttress its central claims." We may classify the first as an historical claim about the state of play in psychology departments and the second as a metaphysical claim about the science itself. All academic psychology (in a broad sense) is evolutionary psychology, she says, and evolutionary psychology provides a true picture of the mind. Vermeule is right to think that I'm not comfortable with either claim. But that matters only with respect to the interdisciplinary landscape they sketch. Vermeule's worry is that an agreed-upon and true description of the mind might have little bearing on literary study. Any reach from literary study to the sciences of mind, on this view, would have to be to some version of evolutionary psychology since that psychology is at once pervasive and true. I think this view both undersells the diversity of cognitive science, much of which proceeds independently of any evolutionary framework, and oversells the verdict on evolutionary psychology, at least some of which has proven tremendously controversial. Interdisciplinary scholarship might well progress on topics ranging from perception to consciousness to neurophysiology to the emotions and beyond while keeping the principles of evolutionary biology no closer than the laws of physics. (452–3)

Putting aside the author's pejorative slights—e.g. casting Vermeule as a "believer" in evolutionary psychology, as if she were an unreflective vessel drinking the cultish Kool-Aid of some Other discipline—this passage more importantly reveals a fundamental flaw in Kramnick's understanding of the project of consilience generally and evolution specifically. Assuming a scientist, critic, or thinker can or simply should ignore the laws of physics and evolution because they're way over there and we are now over here, is troubling. Critics and scholars of the arts need not reinvent the wheel of evolutionary laws, or deny that emergent phenomena operate by many *other* interesting and valid laws that we should emphasize as we inspect them. But to simply bracket them off, to assume they no longer need to be dealt with in any way, is intellectual treason to most thinkers who partake in the enterprises of consilience or, as Kramnick prefers, "horizontal integration." (I presume Kramnick privileges his metaphorical model of intellectual lateralization over verticality due to fears of disciplinary subordination/dominance).

Rather than scoffing at fundamental principles constituting the lower rungs of the consilient ladder, thinkers will only benefit themselves and their field of knowledge by striving to remain explicitly cognizant of pertinent laws "underneath" where they stand. If a thinker postulates claims that contradict these more fundamental empirically justified laws, they will be essentially describing an alternate world that operates according to alternate laws. That is science fiction. Serious criticism must be, at least in the main, science nonfiction. Humanities scholars should thus be obliged, and I would hope excited, to run *toward* not away from the shadows (and substance) of evolution.

Cultural products such as artworks are complex, recursive, emergent systems. Thus, they will abide by new laws not reducible to those below them. But this does not disqualify their initial states from being heavily influenced by lower laws, or from their outputs as being divorced from the effects of the history of the system or those original laws. (For summary explanation of the properties of complex emergent systems, see Alan Randall, *Risk and Precaution* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011], 65). In short, evolutionary principles are not *ex nihilo* made obsolete by emergent laws. Literary-critical equations are better off grappling with rather than ignoring the ev-cog sciences—even when details in the principles of evolution, mind, and human nature are still being formulated.

That said, I have attempted to avoid having any one ev-psych principle or totalizing theory of human nature dominate the tones of this dissertation. Rather, the special laws, principles, and cadences of literary and cinematic texts are front-forward. But evolution is the background music, to be appropriated or turned up as needed.

Interpretation parallel my own, and she introduces several terms that are close, although not exact, to the ones I deploy.²⁹⁰ In the broadest sense, Easterlin provides a thoroughgoing account of “why the time is right for such a biocultural approach within the historical development of literary studies as a discipline and in the context of the more recent rise of cognitive and evolutionary approaches to literature.”²⁹¹ Accepting the legitimacy and enfranchisement of the biopoetic perspective is *sine qua non* to deriving validity from the claims that follow. More specifically, Easterlin pins her critical practice to a flexibly functionalist account of aesthetics, pointing out that “although functionalist hypotheses about the arts began emerging soon after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the predominant approach to aesthetics has been essentialist or idealist throughout human cultural history.” Easterlin’s aesthetic ledger mirrors my own in striking a balance between: the consecrated contours of idealist/essentialist aesthetic theory, the prevailing view of Western art criticism by Easterlin’s measure; the most pedestrian forms of aesthetic utilitarianism, which one might ascribe to the Steven Pinkers of the world; and the strong forms of aesthetic relativism, which buck too hard against the obvious psychobiological parameters set by the evolved universal architecture of the human mind. Easterlin gingerly steers her critical practice between these poles, reinscribing the biological *zeitgeist* of Dobzhansky while never failing to calculate for the tidal influences of culture and history: “The anxious desire to hastily spirit

²⁹⁰ Note on term use: On one hand, I liberally borrow certain terms and conceptual models from proven authorities, especially when their expertise is far beyond my own disciplinary reach, building upon the core claims, discoveries, and vocabulary of the various fields I traverse, whether in the sciences or the traditional humanities—there is a lot of creating through compilation and synthesis; on the other hand, to resolve novel problems I carve out novel terms or models. As those in any emerging field should be able to commiserate, half the battle for legitimacy can be arriving at a commonly shared set of terms, while not becoming too beholden to concepts that fail or terminology that clunks and bogs down. I hope what emerges is a balanced mix of old and new, familiar and innovative.

²⁹¹ Nancy Easterlin, “Preface,” *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2012), ix.

the artwork out of the human arena in which it was so painstakingly crafted and intended for use itself only makes sense in the contexts of evolved human needs and cultural history.”²⁹²

As previously discussed, I deploy “ev-cog” as a shorthand reference to the cocktail of principles, methods, and disciplines implied through a linkage between evolutionary and cognitive science. Ev-cog happens to be the syntactic inverse of Easterlin, who prefers cognitive-evolutionary. I elected for ev-cog on basis of its soundbite quality. (Incidentally, I began applying this term at the first stages of this dissertation, which preceded the publication of Easterlin’s work.) Either way, a portmanteau of these words is apt for stressing the interconnectiveness between these two fields of study. When investigating the components of cognition—from emotions to higher cortical functions to the conation patterns they induce—it becomes difficult not to speculate about what their ultimate (as opposed to peripheral) functions and points of origin are. Similarly, when investigating human evolution, it is difficult not to invoke the cognitive programs that guide the real-time behaviors of organisms, which ultimately enable the survival, reproduction, and possible evolution of a species.

I also opt against adopting Joseph Carroll’s “literary Darwinism,” a term Carroll himself tends to substitute with “adaptationist studies” or “evolutionary criticism” in his recent work. Innocuous at first blush, literary Darwinism does project an appeal-to-sacred-guru criticism that is best avoided. Brian Boyd agrees:

I rather object to the term “literary Darwinism” because it seems a little like going back to “literary Marxism,” setting up a guru whom you have to acknowledge and derive all your validity from. So I just tend to use “literature and evolution”—it’s not very satisfactory but somebody will come up with a

²⁹² Easterlin, *Biocultural*, ix.

better term someday—partly to stress that so much has been discovered *since* Darwin in evolutionary thinking, and that much of the work we do is build on very, very recent advances in the theories thinking.²⁹³

Surely Carroll, in his coining of this label for a newly emergent subfield, was intending the reference to Darwin more as an honorific marker not an epistemological fiat. Nonetheless, it is wise to trade it in for something less potentially incendiary. Ev-cog may not become that “something” in the long run, but it suffices for present purposes in this dissertation.

Finally, an obviatory note on issues of tastemaking and aesthetic judgment is expedient. The intention behind this chapter and dissertation as a whole is not to strike a normative position about whether a “good” artist does or does not deploy second-order symbolic forms within their art, or whether a “good” critic is hyper-attentive to potential second-symbolic forms within an artwork. It may be true that intertextual allusions, implicit metaphors, and other symbolic devices will add extra layers of “work” to the meaning-making process, complicating the aesthetic transaction to some greater or lesser degree. Sometimes those meanings can multiply into open-ended interpretations; sometimes they can help to close interpretations. But layered meanings and complex effects do not good art make. Any technique, any application of second-order symbolisms, can be executed with ham-handed inelegance. The multilayered multidirectional paths of second-order symbols do not magically bestow intellectual enlightenment, moral wisdom, sociopolitical solutions, or aesthetic bliss upon their interpreters. Second-order symbolism might just as readily yield up intellectual pomposity, socio-ethical benightedness, emotional vulgarity, fallacious philosophy, gratuitous decoration, or any other contrived aesthetic effect we can think to

²⁹³ Brian Boyd, *On Literature and Science*, Part 5, YouTube video series, 0:00–0:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhFbRLTE-gU>

object to. Any meaning or “message” that a symbol announces could be banal, unfounded, logically incoherent, ethically revolting. So *res ipsa loquitur*, in casting any critical-aesthetic adjudication, an artwork’s symbolic components will have to be judged against other formal, conceptual, and philosophical components of the work, the surmised intentions of the artist, and the combined effects of the finished product. This much, however, is beyond refute: good or bad, elegant or gratuitous, second-order symbolism applied within an art object’s replete aesthetic field (RAF) is a special tool artists can press into service for communicating with and shaping the experiences of their audiences. It is, decisively, a tool that our more squarely discursive modes of communication, code work, and information transmission give little quarter to.

Toward the end of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth addresses some of the difficulties that arise when formulating criteria and protocols for arbitrating the normative values of literature. Most pertinent, he considers the place of “deciphering” in “difficult” literary works, as well as the exquisite pleasures that can be derived from entering into an aesthetic transaction of “collaboration” and “collusion” between author and reader. In the passage quoted at length below, Booth also broaches the topic of reader effort, especially in relation to these difficult, collusionist works. Specifically, he considers how much effort can and should be expended, and to what ends, when “calculating” allusions or unraveling layers of narrative irony. Though he never mentions *symbol* by name, Booth’s impressions on these literary devices can be applied with equivalence to the nature of second-order symbolologies. Booth acknowledges the rightful place and irrefutable value of these high-effort devices. At the same time, he rejoins that a work’s artistic value or canonical worth is not somehow directly proportional to its quantity or quality of allusions or its degree of ironic cleverness,

echoing my views stated above on the non-binding relationship between second-order symbolism and artistic value. Booth submits that some of our most powerful artworks demand a more holistic imaginative-ethical sensibility: a more nonlinear interpretative setpoint, less inclined toward crunching atomistic sign after sign in hope of resolving a meaning puzzle. Such works may contain little to no traces of allusion, irony, or elaborate polysemy. They may not be concerned with conscripting their audiences into colluding with their artists in order to gain access to their full effects. In short, “good” art does not always or necessarily demand heavy doses of deciphering obscure signs, or tracking threads of multiply embedded representations of human consciousnesses and points of view (theory-of-mind scoping).

On the other hand, these special-access collusionist devices do exist. And they fall out of a long, rich tradition of artistic commerce and experimentation. Conventions like irony, allusion, and symbolism have been developed and refined with sophistication over many years, and they are amply acknowledged in both the tradecraft literatures and academic criticism. Today more than ever, they remain affordances for artists to draw on. After figuring prominently in the various modernisms and postmodernisms of the 20th century West, they will be found in the toolkit of any craft-conscious artist working today. Any of these formal devices, together or by themselves, can be welcome and powerful additives to—if not primary ingredients of—an artwork’s constitution and complexity. Most critics and “good” artists will demand, however, that they get deployed with proper finesse to “fit” an individual work’s distinct RAF. And they are certainly not requisite specifications for quality-control protocols (in case any readers are presently trying to reverse-engineer the program for manufacturing good art).

The following passages from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* reinforce the points above, while previewing important features of narrative art that the remainder of this chapter will cast its gaze upon. As Booth understands it, and I concur, certain kinds of art are made to summon audiences into a private or semi-private world of idiosyncratic codes and communications. These simulated, specially coded worlds prime audiences for an experience of secretive collaboration between artist and audience. Of course, not all narrative art proceeds in this direction; however, it seems not unlikely that some of our most compelling and/or enduring artworks share certain traits of this gene pool of enigmatically coded imagined worlds. Enumerating some of these “special” qualities of literary art is Booth:

The pleasure of collaboration—The true value of forcing the reader to decipher lies in what such activity does to his attitude toward the story and its author. In his early *Atlantic Monthly* review [...] on the art of “making the reader,” [Henry James’s] whole emphasis is on this one aspect. “When he makes him well, that is makes him interested, the reader does quite half the labor.” James is not thinking here simply of giving the reader a sense of his own cleverness. He is making his reader by forcing them onto a level of alertness that will allow for his making subtle effects.

The trouble with most talk about the good and bad of asking the reader to decipher—usually under the terms “difficulty,” “obscurity,” “complexity,” or “allusiveness”—is that it is entirely general, as if there were some abstract law which says that this or that degree of difficulty is too much or too little. We are all familiar with innumerable badly informed attacks on the obscurity of modern fiction, seemingly based on the assumption that it is wrong to

expect any knowledge in your reader whatever. There are almost as many general defenses that seem to suggest that unless literature is difficult it is bad. Writers on both sides seldom talk precisely about particular works, being far more interested in attacking the ignorance of the public or the willfulness of poets and novelists.

Yet if there is anything that should be obvious about such a matter, it is that different works will give rise to different standards in this regard, that a degree of allusiveness fatal to one kind of work might even be too straightforward for another. [...].

Perhaps the most obvious misapplication of general principles to the question of difficulty comes precisely on the matter of making the reader work. It is no doubt true enough that the reader must be made to apply himself. The claim that Ewald makes about Swift, that the required hard work “doubtless accounts for much of the intellectual and emotional force his writings have,” applies to many novelists, but it does not solve any problems for us. [...] To praise a difficulty—whether it makes us work or not—that results simply from the author’s own failure to fully write his work is as fatal to the critics as to condemn a difficulty that is actually a necessary part of the whole.

More important, such a claim may lead us to forget that to decipher allusions and subtleties is only one form of active collaboration by the reader—and not the most important form at that. There are many things a reader can be asked to do besides guessing about who is doing what to whom

or about whether it is good or bad that he does. I must work at the very height of my powers to experience King Lear. I must make every step of the way extremely complicated responses to extremely complicated signs; my imagination and my ethical sensibility are stretched to their utmost. But I am not required to decipher much of anything. [...] I work at this play as I work at few artistic experiences, but my work is not that of figuring out, of calculating allusions, of unraveling intentions. It is the work of the imaginative and emotional complexities of Lear's tragedy.

Secret communion, collusion, and collaboration—All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work. Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included [...] cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. [...]

Our pleasure is compounded of pride in our knowledge, ridicule of the ignorant narrator, and a sense of collusion with the silent author who, also knowing the facts, has created the trap for his narrator and for those readers who will not catch the allusion. [...]

I notice of course only those clues that I am prepared to notice, and I am therefore usually not aware of irony as something that gives me real

trouble. We always think of the *other* reader as the one who is taken in.

Indeed we are likely to reject simpler forms of irony, because they are too obvious—which is to say that number excluded from the joke is too small.

[...] It is too easy. But the fun is increased as the privacy increases.²⁹⁴

Importantly, Booth hints at both rewards and costs that such idiosyncratically coded, densely allusive, or otherwise difficult works can incur. With their implicit demand for effortful attention, calculating, deciphering, vertical and lateral associating, and engaging of short- and long-term memory, these cognitively taxing works ask their audiences to become virtual dynamos of serial and parallel processing. If nothing else, such works demand their audiences engage in mental and affective activity beyond effortless immersion—beyond luxuriating in mostly familiar, if mildly alternative, fictional worlds the works also simulate.

Spinoff questions, thus, include the following:

- Why would (some) artists and audiences be drawn to effortful pleasures and artistic situations of exclusivity, secretive collaborations, specially coded symbolic activities?
- What predisposes some artists and audiences to seek out experiences in which they must toggle between the pains of deliberative cognitive effort and the more immersive pleasures of release, escape, and resolution; between work and leisure; between figuring and feeling; between consciously attending/analyzing and unconsciously escaping/immersing in a simulated world? What are the ev-cog mechanisms at play?

²⁹⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric*, 302–4.

- What are the cultural-learning supports that might be needed to “include” the uninitiated into certain “exclusive” coteries of the arts of effortful pleasure?
- As Booth says, we are only prepared to notice those clues and secrets that we are prepared to notice. Thus, as critics and teachers of art, how can we *prepare* students and art audiences to better orient themselves for noticing and deciphering these clues?

The unstated (though fairly obvious) assumption here is that devices of second-order symbolism—from implicit metaphor to intertextual allusions and polyvalent signs of any kind—constitute one potential component of these arts of effortful pleasure.

A Current (Symbolic) Affair: Institutional Texts and Authorial Statements

Contemporary Handbooks and Glosses: A Symbolic First Encounter

Before mapping some of the linguistic and historical roots of the literary-artistic symbol, some charting of the contemporary moment can provide that historical trajectory with a target. To that end, a brief survey of definitions found in major literary handbooks and glosses follows. These texts function as an approximation of the literary vocabularies getting circulated, in some permutation or another, across high schools and universities in North America and other Anglophone regions of the world. We can infer from their entries a quick-and-dirty baseline for the current status of symbol in today’s academic and educational climes. Moreover, this exercise will roughly simulate a typical student’s “first encounter” with symbolism—with art’s special brain-tapping of our second-order symbolic faculties.

In its gloss on *symbol*, *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (1997)²⁹⁵ opens by

²⁹⁵ Sheridan Baker, Northrup Frye, and George Perkins, “Symbol” and “Symbolism,” *The Harper Handbook to Literature*, 2nd edition (New York: Pearson, 1997), 451–53.

acknowledging the “bewildering” background and current uses of the term. The authors then proceed to reductively define symbol as “any unit of any verbal structure that may be isolated for critical attention.” Bewildering as the term’s definitional and etymological background might be, this fuzzy catchall definition should strike teachers and students alike as deeply unsatisfying. The entry continues with a more useful paragraph on *signifiers* and *signifieds* and another that discusses the French Symbolist movement in relationship to *realism* (usefully glossed as *externalized mimesis* to set it apart from the *internalized mimesis* of stream-of-consciousness technique). A peculiar definition of *archetype* (conflating common understandings of this term with other technical literary terms like *motif* or *intertextual allusion*) is followed by a more valuable addition to symbol’s definitional repertoire: here, the authors propose that certain words in a text “may appear to us as keys to a whole complex of verbal meaning,” and that, at that point, readers can rightly think of themselves as being in the presence of symbol. Conceptualizing symbol as a shibbolethic “key” to the kingdom of a work’s “complex” of meaning cuts to the core of second-order symbologies. The authors conclude the entry by adducing symbol as evidence for the *polysemous* qualities of literary structures in general. Literary polysemy, we are told, involves “many aspects of meaning” that can be “approached from many points of view.” A true, if toothless, definition. The language here is again catastrophically imprecise and conceptually nebulous, and explanations of origin and function are effectively absent. Handbook authors would do their communities of colleagues and students a service by fine-tuning such entries with deeper, more probing explanatory accounts about what “many aspects of meanings” entails; and *why* this situation of multiplied meaning would ever be desired or even possible within any system of animal communication shaped by an evolutionary logic.

The Harper entry on *symbolism*, falling directly after their essay on *symbol*, is less uneven and more productive. The authors begin making the crucial point that *symbolism* is “a term ordinarily applied to self-conscious uses more common in literature than in written or oral communication generally.” They designate symbolism as “a heightened use of symbol, presenting the word first for its ordinary signification [...] and then for some idea lying behind the ordinary signification.” This characterization of literary symbol as a self-conscious, heightened, and hidden (“lying behind”) form of ordinary signification cores into the DNA of second-order symbolic identity. And it hints at the special status and clout that second-order symbolism can wield in the aesthetic imagination. Less productively, the authors attempt a classification system that slices symbol too neatly into classes of *natural*, *conventional*, and *literary*. The urge to divide the ungainly notion of symbol into manageable units is understandable, but the questionable definitional boundaries the authors erect are far from rigorous. The British Romantics, American Transcendentalists, and French Symbolists are then introduced as representative groups of symbol-deploying agents in European literary history, with passing mention of their influences on Yeats, Pound, and Eliot.

Between their two essays on *symbol* and *symbolism*, the Harper authors establish an operable, if brittle, skeletal frame for introducing literature-learners to symbol theory. Their scope is broad enough to be applicable across a variety of literary and pedagogical contexts. But ultimately the authors’ points of contact are both too wide to bite and too narrow to be of much use to those unfamiliar with the authors’ specific datapoints. Their definitions are likely to strike symbol scholars, and even literary novices who crave deeper more satisfactory philosophical explanation, as inadequate and oversimplified: key operational features of symbol are missing, too many terms are left confused or vague, and there is virtually no

discussion or reasoned speculation about how the human mind is particularly suited (or sometimes not suited) for making these peculiar mental-aesthetic moves of second-order symbol construction and interpretation. At best, such forays into symbolism will prove of middling value to students and teachers of literature. This is not entirely discouraging, however, considering this latest edition of the *Harper Handbook* is now 20 years old.

In William Harmon's more recent *A Handbook to Literature* (2013),²⁹⁶ the essay on *symbol* opens on an unfortunate tautology, veers down a few unproductive roads, but does offer its share of incisive definitional moments. The entry begins, "A symbol is something that is itself and also stands for something else." What thing, one might be wont to ask, is *not* itself? In defense of the authors, the tepid language and conceptual vagueness of their opening gambit may be read as symptomatic of *the* inherent problematic of the literary symbol: its simultaneous existence as being *there*, as a verbal object and a simulated object within a fictional narrative world; yet *not* there, in its oblique pointing(s) to something beyond that existence. A few unsystematic references to Coleridge's symbol theory are cited, which confuses more than clarifies the issue. Some rough-hewn comparisons are made between symbol and allegory, citing Paul de Man as chief authority—perhaps not the best choice for initiates, despite de Man's noteworthy intervention in the symbol/allegory historical debate. The authors then come perilously close to conflating symbol with metaphor: their fuzzy bid that "metaphor evokes an object to illustrate an idea or demonstrate quality" is closer to the definition of *exemplification* than *analogy* and *metaphor*.²⁹⁷

In a more redemptive passage, the authors describe symbol as "an image that evokes

²⁹⁶ William Harmon, "Symbol" and "Symbolism," *A Handbook to Literature*, 12th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2013).

²⁹⁷ The definitional terrains of *metaphor* and *analogy* have been enriched and sharpened by a technically precise body of literature informed by recent advances in cognitive science and conceptual-metaphor studies. Literary handbooks that ignore, or hesitating to integrate, the fruits of such research do a disservice to their field.

an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to *suggest another level* of meaning.”²⁹⁸ They also provide a taxonomy, more productive than Harper’s classification system, that divides symbol into two broad categories. One type “includes those embodying universal suggestions of meaning, as flowing water suggests time and eternity, a voyage suggests life. Such symbols are used widely (and sometimes unconsciously) in literature. The other type of symbol acquires its suggestiveness not from qualities inherent in itself but from the way in which it is used in a given work.” This typology teases apart a key ontological design feature of symbolic structures—a feature that even the most advanced, perceptive readers can struggle to identify and negotiate with: i.e. determining whether a symbol’s foundation for meaning-making is universal or contextual, conscious or unconscious, or some combination thereof. The author, regrettably, understates the salience and complexity of this facet of symbol-decoding, remaining a bit too presumptuous in this cut-and-run approach about what his readers already know and what they need to know. Surely this problematic deserves special emphasis and further discussion when teaching students about the power and variable mechanics of second-order symbolologies.

The Harmon entry then lists *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *A Farewell To Arms*, and Pynchon’s *V.* as paradigms of the symbol-deploying American novel. These canonical texts are representative master works of symbolic narrative art; they are worthy of citation. But aside from an Aristotelian urge to classify for the sake of classification, the important *what*, *how*, and *why* questions remain unattended. *What* are the major symbols of these novels? *How* exactly did these authors integrate them within their narrative and thematic arcs? *How* might these authors have consciously or unconsciously appropriated these symbolic devices? *Why* would these artists want to deploy symbols for building meaning in the first place? And,

²⁹⁸ Harmon, *Handbook*. Italics mine.

finally, *what* are the deeper structures of mind and human nature that might enable and provoke these special aesthetic trends? Such questions are never raised, so answers cannot be surmised.

In the subsequent essay on *symbolism*, Harmon glosses some of the literary movements that crystallized around, or expounded some particular viewpoint about, symbol theory. The entry begins with a constitutive definition: “In its broad sense *symbolism* is the use of one object to represent or suggest another; or, in literature, the serious and extensive use of SYMBOLS [a cross-reference to the prior entry].” Harmon then adds a compelling comment: “Recently, the word [*symbolism*] has taken on a pejorative connotation of mere rhetoric without reality, surface without substance, speciousness and tokenism, all smoke and no fire, all hat and no cattle.” Harmon is unusual (and perfectly right) in revealing a propensity for symbol-deprecation in today’s literary circuits and pedagogical trends. Regrettably, he fails to offer explanations or plausible conjectures about how this trend came to pass. Furthermore, artists, teachers, and students often advance arguments for rejecting symbol that are not captured by his “all hat and no cattle” quip: e.g. ongoing refutations against authorial intention often underwrite such arguments, thereby presenting fertile ground for interesting discussion. Harmon’s entry then proceeds to trace an abbreviated trajectory of the symbolist tradition, where we are met by the American Romantics (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Poe), the French Symbolists (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Laforgue, and Valéry), and the Modernists (Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Eliot, Rilke, and O’Neill). Other concepts and qualia are introduced as key nodes within the network of literary effects that merge with, or emerge directly from, symbolism: personal emotion, indefiniteness, the musical qualities of words, the relationship between the material and immaterial worlds, and

synesthesia. However, their presence feels arbitrary within the scope of the essay's organization, and their connections to the nature of symbol remain undeveloped.

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2011),²⁹⁹ M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham provide another digestible accounting of *symbol*. Their essays are marginally more robust and rigorously formulated than the others, though not without their own fissures. They cross-reference *symbol* with an entry for *semiotics*, which situates symbol within C.S. Peirce's triad of icon, index, and symbol. And they include an informative standalone entry on *The Symbolist Movement*. A bibliography provides a manageable archive of symbol theory and history. Of interesting note, the most recent work they cite there is from 1960: this indicates not as much a gap in the authors' own research as a gap in contemporary scholarship on literary symbol.³⁰⁰

Abrams and Harpham's initial definition parses the semantic difference between symbol generally and symbol in the special sense of the literary-artistic symbol: "In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term 'symbol' is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself." Phrases like "in turn" give some subtle hint of Barthes's tripartite recursively nested sign complexes, without the technical rhetoric obviously; while "beyond itself" echoes those common tropes for boring into the soul of second-order symbolism (or even Magritte's fascination with the potentially visible lurking beyond the actually visible). The authors compare certain differences between conventional/public versus private/personal

²⁹⁹ M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 12th edition (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 393–97.

³⁰⁰ That said, a few works deserve mentioning here, the most glaring oversight being Tzvetan Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol* (1984) and Peter Struck's *Birth of the Symbol* (2004).

symbols. They illustrate the former with some rather obvious, borderline banal examples: the Christian cross, the peacock, the eagle, the rose. More productively, they assert that some writers and poets “repeatedly use symbols whose significance they largely generate themselves,” which “can pose a more difficult problem in interpretation.” This interplay between the conventional and personal represents perhaps the most pivotal hermeneutic twist in the fabric of symbolic literature. In attempt to exemplify this, the authors offer brief explications for some famous symbolic roses of English poetry: those of Burns, Dante, Blake. It is a serviceable learning aid, although average students might find the frames of reference a bit obscure or uninspiring to light much of a symbolic fire in their literary bellies. This is followed by the mandatory comparison between allegory and symbol. Here the authors cite the orthodox passages from Goethe and Coleridge, who privileged symbol for its alleged particularity and translucence over allegory’s alleged generality and abstraction; and de Man, who later inverted that orthodoxy, favoring allegory for its candidness over the supposedly cryptic, mystified nature of symbol.

Some of Abrams and Harpham’s most compelling bids on symbol come in their entry on the Symbolist Movement.³⁰¹ They present, for instance, some rich fodder in their historical contextualizing of French Symbolism proper:

Various poets of the Romantic Period, including Novalis and Hölderlin in Germany and Shelley in England, often used private symbols in their poetry (see symbol). Shelley, for example, repeatedly made symbolic use of objects such as the morning and evening star, a boat moving upstream, winding caves, and the conflict between a serpent and an eagle. William Blake, however,

³⁰¹ Abrams and Harpham, *Glossary*, 397–8.

exceeded all his romantic contemporaries in his recourse to a persistent and sustained symbolism—that is, a coherent system composed of a number of symbolic elements—both in his lyric poems and his long prophetic, or epic poems. In nineteenth-century America, a symbolist procedure was prominent in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, the prose of Emerson and Thoreau, and the poetic theory and practice of Poe. (See Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature*, 1953.) These writers derived the mode in large part from the native Puritan tradition of typology (see *interpretation: typological and allegorical*), and also from the theory of “correspondences” of the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).

Then, regarding the French Symbolists:

The techniques of the French Symbolists, who exploited an order of private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness rather than explicit signification, had an immense influence throughout Europe, and (especially in the 1890s and later) in England and America on poets such as Arthur Symonds and Ernest Dowson (see *Decadence*) as well as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, e. e. cummings, and Wallace Stevens. Major symbolist poets in Germany are Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke.

The *Modern Period*, in the decades after World War I, was a notable era of symbolism in literature. Many of the major writers of the period exploit symbols which are in part drawn from religious and esoteric traditions and in part invented. Some of the works of the age are symbolist in their settings,

their agents, and their actions, as well as in the objects they refer to. Instances of a persistently symbolic procedure occur in lyrics (Yeats' "Byzantium" poems, Dylan Thomas's series of sonnets *Altarwise by Owl-light*), in longer poems (Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Wallace Stevens's "The Comedian as the Letter C"), and in novels (James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*).

Their commentary here might in a certain sense be better organized as a component within their entry on *symbolism* proper. Nonetheless, their highlighting of the suggestive and the esoteric over the explicit is key. And their concrete examples can start to point students in more productive directions to have contact with that literature. But a reader will still be left longing for some further explications of these poems and their symbolic images/concepts; for some further speculations about the artistic choices, methods, reasons, and deep mind-brain structures that might be informing these choices and methods; and some further evidence showing how they have spilled into and influenced contemporary narrative arts.

The British *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*³⁰² covers similar territories as the American publications, some fecund, some arid. Some of its stronger assertions include:

In the semiotics of C. S. Peirce, the term denotes a kind of sign that has no natural or resembling connection with its referent, only a conventional one: this is the case with words. In literary usage, however, a symbol is a specially evocative kind of image; that is, a word or phrase referring to a concrete object, scene, or action which also has some further significance associated

³⁰² *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Boldface type indicates cross-references. Online version: <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-1109?rskey=Twq86m&result=1114>

with it: roses, mountains, birds, and voyages have all been used as common literary symbols.

[...]

A symbol differs from a metaphor in that its application is left open as an unstated suggestion.

[...]

Similarly, in the systematically extended metaphoric parallels of allegory, the images represent specific meanings: at the beginning of Langland's allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* (c.1380), the tower seen by the dreamer is clearly identified with the quality of Truth, and it has no independent status apart from this function. But the symbolic tower in Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855), or that in W. B. Yeats's collection of poems *The Tower* (1928), remains mysteriously indeterminate in its possible meanings. It is therefore usually too simple to say that a literary symbol "stands for" some idea as if it were just a convenient substitute for a fixed meaning; it is usually a substantial image in its own right, around which further significances may gather according to differing interpretations.

[...]

One of the important features of Romanticism and succeeding phases of Western literature was a much more pronounced reliance upon enigmatic symbolism in both poetry and prose fiction, sometimes involving obscure private codes of meaning, as in the poetry of Blake or Yeats.

[...]

Many novelists—notably Herman Melville and D.H. Lawrence—have used symbolic methods: in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) the White Whale (and indeed almost every object and character in the book) becomes a focus for many different suggested meanings. Melville’s extravagant symbolism was encouraged partly by the importance which American Transcendentalism gave to symbolic interpretation of the world.

Some fertile ground is covered in a short span here. But once again, the hermeneutic questions get evacuated. The case of “differing interpretations” and “many different suggested meanings” is put on the docket, then skirted. Readers can only be left to wonder: *What* might some of these “different interpretations” and “suggested meanings” be? *How* are they construed? *Who* arbitrates them? And *why* are they there?

A perennial powerhouse text in English courses in the U.S. and Canada, *The Norton Introduction to Literature* typically devotes at least one of its special sections to symbol. The latest edition (2016) includes two: one called “Symbol and Figurative Language” in its Fiction/Understanding the Text partition, and one called “Symbol” in the Poetry/Understanding the Text partition. Much of this material is robust and supportive of new learners, other parts more feeble. The authors include one critical text (Charles Collins’s “Symbolism in ‘The Birth-Mark’ and ‘The Thing in the Forest’”) and one “Authors on Their Work” text on symbol (remarks by Brian Turner). Both texts would prove profitable if taught in concordance with other learning aids. These tools get sandwiched (ineluctably) within Norton’s superfluity of other sections, tools, selections, and literary texts primary and secondary. So the potency, pleasures, and specialness of the second-order symbolic faculty risks getting whitewashed, depending on pedagogical decisions and context. And, as per

usual, the authors provide no scientific or speculative discussion on the deep cultural-historical structures and mind-brain mechanisms that facilitate the existence, engineering, propagation, and refinement of the second-order symbol across the literary tradition.

In the younger but now firmly established discipline of film studies, Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art*³⁰³ remains the gold-standard introductory text in cinema studies programs across North America. The continually evolving editions of *Film Art* have never devoted a designated section to *symbol* or *symbolism* proper. But much of the authors' discourse, particularly their sections that relate style to interpretation, gets shot through with implied notions about symbolic conventions of the cinematic form. Another typical requirement in film survey courses is Bordwell's hallmark essay on the art-cinema's special modes of meaning-making. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, Bordwell's essay explores, in both explicit and implicit ways, how art-film auteurs ply symbolical tactics for generating surplus and/or ambiguous meanings.

As a final node in this circuit of our survey, the institutional instruments of American creative-writing programs should be considered. Thus, a very unsystematic selection of commonly used creative-writing manuals and tradecraft texts follows. It reveals that symbolic technique tends to make mostly muted, cameo appearances, tentatively discussed if discussed at all. But there are some noteworthy outliers.

In his classic text *The Art of Fiction*, for instance, John Gardner³⁰⁴ has more to say about symbol than most other tradecraft-oriented texts. He bears the literary symbol both as a writer's cross to bear and as a useful tactical technique—if and only if those symbols are properly derived more from the writer's unconscious and the organic “hot” act of writing

³⁰³ David Bordwell, Jeff Smith, and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2017).

³⁰⁴ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

than from the colder preconscious acts of “planting” symbols. Problematically, Gardner seems to assume that readers should be able to naturally key into the symbolic implications of narrative fiction. Commenting on an expository passage from Ivan Bunin’s “The Gentlemen of San Francisco,” Gardner quips, “One can see at a glance that the details are symbolic” (30). Perhaps. Although the presumption here is that it is simply *prima facie* knowledge, that any reader should be capable of “seeing” these particular descriptive details as symbolic of the thematic and narrative containers in which the symbolic elements live—all without any provocation from any external mediator, without any prior education about or experience with “literary” works. It sounds like Gardner expects any reader’s mind to run a default lateral-association program across any text it might encounter in order to detect any symbolic overtones present. But this is probably not going to be the case, at least for average readers and those unfamiliar with literature’s unstable, idiosyncratic traditions of second-order symbolic coding.

More insightful, though far from theoretically satisfying, are Gardner’s speculations on the origins and nature of symbolic narrative description:

To the layman it may seem that description serves simply to tell us where things are happening. [...] Good description does far more: It is one of the writer’s means of reaching down in to his unconscious mind, finding clues to what questions his fiction must ask, and, with luck, hints about the answers. Good description is not symbolic because the writer plants symbols in it but because, by working in the proper way, he forces symbols still largely mysterious to him up into his conscious mind where, little by little as his fiction progresses, he can work with them and finally understand them. To put

this another way, the organized and intelligent fictional dream that will eventually fill the reader's mind *begins as a largely mysterious dream in the writer's mind*. [...] Discovering the meaning and communicating the meaning are for the writer one single act. One does not simply describe a barn, then. One describes a barn as seen by someone in some particular mood, because only that way can the barn—or the writer's experience of barns combined with whatever lies deepest in his feelings—be tricked into mumbling its secrets.³⁰⁵

Gardner's anti-planting stance sounds like a direct descendent from Hemingway's anti-raisin-bread stance (see Chapter 1). Though not as philosophically coherent or scientifically informed as a symbol theorist must demand, Gardner nevertheless breaches pertinent topics on the ontology of symbol: e.g. conscious meaning-making processes getting derived from unconscious discovery processes; a writer's presumed preference for "mumbling the secrets" of narrative objects and events, as opposed to discursively articulating their significance; and the peculiar kinds of dream logic that so much successful fiction has relied on or accommodated for.

Gardner later advances that character "is created partly by an assembly of facts, including actions, partly by symbolic association. The first needs no comment." He contends that "often our deepest sense of character comes from symbolic association." To conjure these symbolic associations, Gardner's writer "may use metaphor directly, as when he tells us Paris is like a dapper, slightly foolish fox, or he may work for symbolic association in subtler ways." He gives examples of situating a character in a particular weather-scape that reflects a psychological or emotional state or that "metaphorically expresses his nature, so

³⁰⁵ Gardner, *Art*, 36.

that unwittingly we make a connections between the gloom of Menelaus and the gloom of the weather at his back. Or the writer may subtly incline us to identify Helen's character with the elegantly wrought knife with which she carves."³⁰⁶ This "unwitting" reader is left unexplained, however, as is the cause-effect of this "subtle inclination" for identifying connections between verbal or narrative objects that are not explicitly connected in the text.

Gardner then surmises that "the writer does not ordinarily think out every implication of every image he introduces at the time he introduces it. He writes by feel, intuitively, imagining the scene vividly and copying down its most significant details, keeping the fictional dream alive, sometimes writing in a thoughtless white heat of 'inspiration,' drawing on his unconscious, trusting his instincts, hoping that when he looks back at it later, in cool objectivity, the scene will work."³⁰⁷ These pronouncements beg the question of what exactly "intuition," "instincts," and "inspiration" are, and where these phenomena might derive in the human mind-body or its external environment. Importantly, however, we are introduced to a phase of the creative process that too often gets short shrift in literary textbooks and our discussions of authorial intention and meaning origins: the "cool objectivity" that ascends with editing and advanced drafting. Gardner, in fact, re-emphasizes this phase in his next passage: "But at some point, perhaps when he's finished his first draft, the writer beings to work in another way. He begins to brood over what he's written, reading it over and over, patiently, endlessly, letting his mind wander, sometimes to Picasso or the Great Pyramid, sometimes to the possible philosophical implications of Menelaus's limp." The writer "discovers odd ties his unconscious has sent up to him" and "curious accidental repetitions of imagery." Channeling orthodox Freudian views of dream logic and symbol psychology,

³⁰⁶ Gardner, *Art*, 67.

³⁰⁷ Gardner, *Art*, 68.

Gardner proposes, “Just as dreams have meaning, whether or not we can penetrate the meaning, the writer assumes the accidents in his writing may have significance. He tries various possibilities. [...] He makes tiny alterations. [...] Slowly, painstakingly, with the patience that separates a Beethoven from men of equal genius but less divine stubbornness, the great writer builds the large, rockfirm thoughts that is his fiction.”³⁰⁸ Forgiving him his periodic rhetorical grandiosity, his subscribing to an anachronistic Great Man/Great Writer model of genius, his wistful Freudian theory, and his outdated masculinist diction, Gardner manages nonetheless to present some useful, writerly-point-of-view nexus points for a biopoetic model of second-order symbolologies to connect up with.

Gardner’s candid discussions of the tactical methods available to a symbol-minded writer are perhaps most pertinent. In his chapter “Technique,” under a subsection on “Vocabulary,” he presents the following practicum:

For the writer who handles difficult or obscure words well, giving the appearance of introducing them smoothly and effortlessly, violating neither the authorial tone nor fidelity to characters, ornate vocabulary can extend the writer’s ranges of tone and give textural richness, to say nothing of increased precision. For symbolists and allegorists, such as Hawthorne and Melville, ornate vocabulary may be an absolute requisite. In effective writing—normally—the writer slips in symbols and allegorical emblems with the cunning of a flim-flam man gulling his country victim. The symbol that stands out too sharply from its matrix may distract the reader’s eye from the fictional dream, with the unpleasing effect of making the writer seem frigid and his story disingenuous, more sermon than honest presentation of imagined

³⁰⁸ Gardner, *Art*, 68.

events—a work, in short, in which the reader feels manipulated, pushed toward some opinion or view of the world not inherent in the fictional materials but imposed from above.

“Normally,” I’ve said. In a certain kind of fiction clunky symbolism, or the appearance of wooden allegory, can be a source of delight, and a vocabulary of extremely odd words [...] that function like baubles or textural blisters, calling attention to the story’s artificiality, can give interest. [...] By making one’s symbolism unusually obvious, as in the best moments of Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*, one can sometimes get a pleasing effect of artifices without in fact sacrificing the symbolic load. We smile at the clunkiness of the allegory but at the same time follow the allegory out, much as in puppet shows or Noh plays [...]

Normally, however, the symbolist or allegorist works more subtly.³⁰⁹

Gardner biases himself here toward the allegedly “natural” forms of vernacular language, linear narrative, and immersive verisimilitude, which produce for him the kind of fictional dream that is every writer’s highest priority and every reader’s principal desire. And he is vague in his glib dismissals of “extremely odd words” and symbolic/allegorical devices that “stand out” too obviously from their “matrixes,” leading presumably to a “wooden” and “clunky” artificiality or even reader manipulation. (He does bargain that such techniques can be competently employed for comical, ironical, metafictional effects.) Gardner’s impatience with artificial symbols that “stand out” echoes, once again, Hemingway’s distaste for raisins—those detested symbolic fruit-baubles—that “stick out” in the breadloafs of fictional prose. While Gardner’s positions here could benefit from some further nuance and

³⁰⁹ Gardner, *Art*, 145–6.

explanatory unpacking, what they do infer is the crystallization of a tradition in American symbolism. This “tradition” prescribes a balancing act of technique and convention: a careful calibration between 1) the vernacular clarities and mimetic realisms of character-driven, story-first prose; and 2) the more abstracted, intrusive simulation-disturbers of symbolic artifice. Isomorphic to this would be the Bordwellian art film’s calibrating between 1) the classical Hollywood style, and 2) an auteur’s rupturing of this style and its immersive effects, in order to present a symbolically coded commentary upon or personal vision of the simulated world or the real world. The parameters of these calibrations, of course, will fluctuate depending on any one author’s or critic’s subjectivity, sensibilities, experience, even variations in mood. But it is safe to say that *some* degree of symbolic subtlety and complexity is the default preference among creators and tastemakers of modern symbolic-realist prose today. With that, the same questions re-emerge: Why would that be? Why has the tradition converged on *these* conventions and taste preferences, and not some others?

Other tradecraft texts are more subdued on the topic of symbolic technique. Some are totally silent, in fact, while others can turn vocally antagonistic. Three passing references to *symbol* and *symbolism* can be found in Damon Knight’s *Creating Short Fiction: The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction* (1997).³¹⁰ The classic text *Handbook of Short Story Writing* (1970),³¹¹ prefaced by Joyce Carol Oates, bears no mention of symbol or a symbolic method. Nor does Mark Baechtel’s *Shaping the Story: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Short Fiction* (2004).³¹² In *Creating the Story: Guides for Writers*, Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler devote a two-page section called “Forget Symbols” advising, writers to evacuate thinking

³¹⁰ Damon Knight, *Creating Short Fiction: The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 26, 174, 200.

³¹¹ *Handbook of Short Story Writing*, ed. Frank Dickson and Sandra Smythe, preface by Joyce Carol Oates (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1970).

³¹² Mark Baechtel, *Shaping the Story: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Short Fiction* (New York: Pearson, 2004).

about symbol altogether.³¹³

Creative-writing manuals are no longer a sole-proprietary good of the juggernauts of the commercial and educational publication houses, of course. Many can be found circulating online. Though typically more amateurish in content and style, some are not entirely inept. And one can assume they are getting accessed as much, if not more, often than the print books of the tradecraft canon, which get distributed in the brick-and-mortar MFA programs. As one example, in a website called *Novel Writing Help*, aspiring British writer Harvey Chapman has created “The Complete Guide to Symbolism,” which provides the writing novice with a substantial amount of coherently rendered, linear instruction on symbolic technique. Its elementary advice tends to get redundant and remains devoid of any real theoretical pulse. But it does sample many of symbol’s greatest (handbook) hits. If nothing else, sites like these adduce further evidence of symbol’s presence in the circulatory system of the creative-writing tradition and the popular imagination at large.³¹⁴

* * *

A truly rigorous survey of symbol in literary handbooks and manuals demands a wider, more exhaustively researched collection of information. Future motivated researchers could accumulate and organize a host of datapoints on the handling of symbol across the vast swath of literary and cinema handbooks, survey texts, course syllabi, and creative-writing manuals available in English letters. And if we scope that research outward to encompass texts in the non-Anglophone regions of world literature and film, we could attain a more global, cross-cultural perspective on the status of symbolism in both the academy and the

³¹³ Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler, *Creating the Story: Guides for Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1993), 213–4.

³¹⁴ Harvey Chapman, “The Complete Guide to Symbolism,” *Novel Writing Help*, website: <http://www.novel-writing-help.com/symbolism.html>.

trade professions. With the power of computer-generated word searches across massive book databases, there is potential to produce a living archive with rich resources for further investigations. The survey sketch provided here, I hope, functions as a stopgap placeholder until such research is conducted.

Artists on Symbol: Some Firsthand Accounts

Occasionally authors will leave meta-commentary about how and why they chose to deploy symbolic strategies, indicating at least some conscious desire to tap their readers' kindred symbolic faculties. Others have been forthcoming about why they choose *not* to deploy symbolic devices. Most tend to remain silent on the subject, keeping their craft techniques proprietary and leaving few traceable footprints into how their symbolic imaginations operate: a decision that could be part romantic, part marketing strategy, part impatience, and possibly even part unawareness or insecurity about their own creative process. Any valid symbol theory—whether based in deep evolutionary history, recent sociocultural contexts, or otherwise—is obliged to take into account these authors' words and viewpoints when available. They are, after all, the benefactors of and reactionaries to the cultural and evolutionary currents of our aesthetic symbolic faculties. If we agree to invest power in the originary intentions of textmakers and their conscious, semi-conscious, or circuitously unconscious control over their symbolic landscapes; then logically we are obliged to examine and try to accommodate the expressed viewpoints of practicing authors, filmmakers, and artists, not just the high abstractions of philosopher-critics and theorists.

First, some remarks from symbol cynics. Arguments against *allusive* and *elusive* art, and the effortful reading needed to cope with such features, are not uncommon. As noted in

Chapter 3, Wayne Booth recounts two in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: Mary McCarthy and her outrage at the alleged institutional manufacturing of symbol hunters in English classes; and Saul Bellow and his admonitions to the “deep readers of the world.”

Several of the authors who responded to Robert McAllister’s 1963 symbolism survey³¹⁵ voiced similar concerns about symbolic literature, or remain reluctant to confess to intentional symbolizing. As a high school student in San Diego, McAllister, who would go on to become a professional fantasy/sci-fi writer, fashioned a project to gauge the presence and reliability of author-imparted symbolism. His project consisted of mailing a four-question survey, unsolicited, to 150 eminent authors around the country. Paraphrasing, the questions were as follows:

1. Do you consciously, intentionally plan or place symbolism in your writing?
2. Do your readers ever infer symbolism in your writing you had not intended?
3. Do you think the writers of our great, classic literatures consciously or intentionally planned or placed symbolism in their writing?
4. Do you have any added remarks about this subject?

McAllister fielded 75 typed or handwritten replies. Answers ranged widely. As such, they comprise a document that could be cited by both proponents and detractors of symbol’s place in the literary tradition to defend their respective positions. Proponents can cherry-pick responses to adduce that authors do deliberately, or at least subconsciously, deploy symbolic devices in their works. Detractors can focus on different answers to argue that authors

³¹⁵ Bruce McAllister, The Symbolism Survey, four-question survey of writers on symbolism, conducted in 1963, 65 responses. See Sarah Funke Butler, “Document: The Symbolism Survey,” *The Paris Review* December 5, 2011: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/12/05/document-the-symbolism-survey/>

emphatically do not. Facsimiles of the two most acrimonious responses are pictured below:
those of Jack Kerouac (first) and Saul Bellow (second).

Questionnaire for fiction writing:

* My definition of the word "symbolism" as used in this questionnaire can be understood from the following example: In the Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, there are four main characters. Some people say that Hawthorne meant those four to be symbolic of nature, science, religion and other symbols in disguise and in conflict. The same people compare the actions of the four to what has happened, is happening and will happen to science, religion, nature, etc.

1. Do you consciously, intentionally plan and place symbolism in your writing? If both yes and no according to instance, please give an example of each. If yes, please state your method for doing so.

Do you feel you sub-consciously place symbolism in your writing?

No

2. Do readers ever infer that there is symbolism in your writing where you had not intended it to be? If so, what is your reaction and feeling to this type of inference? (Annoyance? That it is humorous? Indifference?)

Both, depending how busy
I am.

3. Do you feel that the great writers of classics consciously, intentionally planned and placed symbolism in their writing? (I am of course researching the question, but I should like your opinion). If both yes and no according to instance, please give an example of each.

Do you feel that they placed it there sub-consciously?

Come off of it —
There are all kinds of "classics"
— Sterne used no symbolism,
Joyce did

etc.

4. Do you have anything to remark concerning the subject under study, or anything you believe to be pertinent to such study?

Symbolism is alright in "Fiction"
but I tell true life stories
simply about what happened
to people I knew

Jack

Questionnaire for fiction writing:

*My definition of the word "symbolism" as used in this questionnaire can be understood from the following example: In the Scarlet Letter, there are four main characters. Some people say that Hawthorne meant those four to be symbolic of nature, science, religion, and other symbols in disguise and conflict. The same people compare the actions of the four to what has happened, is happening and will happen to science, religion, nature, etc.

1. Do you consciously, intentionally plan and place symbolism in your writing? If both yes and no, according to instance, please give an example of each. If yes, please state your method for doing so.

Do you feel you sub-consciously place symbolism in your writing?

A "symbol" grows, in its own way, out of the facts

2. Do readers ever infer that there is symbolism in your writing where you had not intended it to be? If so, what is your reaction and feeling to this type of inference? (Annoyance? Amusement? Indifference?)

They most certainly do. Symbol-hunting is absurd. But it is encouraged by teachers of Lit.

3. Do you feel that the great writers of literature classics consciously, intentionally planned and placed symbolism in their writing? If both yes and no, according to instance, please give an example of each.

Do you feel that they placed it there sub-consciously?

4. Do you have anything to remark concerning the subject under study, or anything you believe to be pertinent to such a study?

Let me refer you to an
article in the *NY Times*
Book review called
"Deep Readers of the *Love's Labour's Lost*!"

SB.

Figures: Facsimiles of Bruce McCallister's author survey, replicated courtesy of Sarah Funke Butler's "Document: The Symbolism Survey," *The Paris Review*, December 5, 2011: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/12/05/document-the-symbolism-survey/>.

Jack Kerouac's churlish response is perfectly in character for the Sixties countercultural icon. His curt "no" to Question 1 is followed by an odd response to Question 2, which mostly conveys how busy he is while failing to give a clear answer about whether he's noticed readers inferring unwarranted symbolism into his works. (Perhaps he was too busy to read the question closely.) He next advises McAllister to "come off of it" and recognize that some writers might gravitate toward symbolic strategies (Joyce) while some do not (Sterne). With that, he actually grouses out some incidental testimony for the pro-symbolist camp. The final assessment here—symbolic fiction is "alright"—favors Kerouac's chosen mode of writing, which he claims "tells true life stories" about personal acquaintances. It is a wonder Kerouac did not send his response back on a toilet paper roll, but we have to assume his prior engagements prevented him from transferring his answers.

Most apoplectic of all is Saul Bellow, who once again performs his snarls against the symbol hunters and deep readers of the world. He casts aspersions on English teachers for creating "absurd" symbolically attuned students, skips one of the questions, and advertises his own article that demotes the value of deep reading. Nonetheless, he promptly grants that symbols can and do "grow" out of the fictional landscape itself—a supposition that aligns him, discordantly enough, with some vestige of a Romantic symbolic sensibility, in which a symbol and its representational image are perfectly inseparable.³¹⁶

Veering away from McAllister's symbol survey into a more contemporary moment, poet and memoirist Mary Karr in her 1991 essay "Against Decoration"³¹⁷ inveighs against poetry that occupies itself with surplus ornamentation or deliberate obscurity. Karr's personal

³¹⁶ For more on this, see the impending section on the history of symbol theory.

³¹⁷ Mary Karr, "Against Decoration," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 16, no. 2 (Nov. 1991): 277+.

aversion to such poetic modes of opaqueness bespeaks a deeper suspicion toward literatures that set out to 1) break the creature comforts and naturalistic illusions of simulated worlds created in more mimetic modes of poetry and narrative, 2) challenge or warp familiar conventions of syntax and semantics, and/or 3) cause the reader excessive extratextual work and cognitive efforting. Karr prefers language, narrative style, and representational devices that are normatively conventional and accessible to average readers—but that also produce lucid imagery and complicated fabrics of emotional meaning in those readers. One reviewer summarizes Karr’s claims and the ripples they sent across certain literary circles thusly:

The essay set off a controversy in the hothouse world of American poetry when it first appeared in the journal *Parnassus*, partly because Karr names some of the most revered figures in the field, including James Merrill, Amy Clampitt, Brad Leithauser, and the influential critic Helen Vendler, as among the chief offenders. It also won Karr a distinguished award, the Pushcart Prize.

By “decoration,” Karr means poetry that displays a surface expertise but which is willfully obscure as a means to highlight the poet’s brilliance and, not coincidentally, the dullness of the general reader. An entire movement has arisen in the past 20 years called “neo-formalism,” which ostensibly returns to the discipline of rhyme and meter, but which, according to Karr is really a dead end of emotionally vacant virtuosity.

“I always thought that poetry’s primary purpose was to stir emotion, and that one’s delight in dense idiom or syntax or allusion served a secondary one. I don’t mind, for instance, working hard to read *Paradise Lost*, because I return to Milton for the terror and hubris Satan embodies. If, as Vendler

suggests, the sport of decoding a poem is its central pleasure, then one would no more reread such a poem than one would bother reworking an acrostic already solved.”

One of the most charming things about Karr's argument is her frank, blue-collar willingness to admit she doesn't understand certain poems, and she cheerfully declares she can't comprehend the works of deconstructionist critics Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man; she doesn't seem worried about it, either. Yet she also displays deep familiarity with Western poetry back to the Greeks. “Against Decoration” is not the diatribe of a yahoo.³¹⁸

Definitely no yahoo, Karr is incisive and refreshing in her confessed bewilderment at deconstructionist criticism. And her askance gazes at neo-formalist, over-intellectualized poets have equal place in matters of poetic valuations. Karr does grant a certain legitimacy to “secondary” “delights” that can be reaped from “decoding” the “acrostics” of “dense” poetic form; however, it is clear she privileges representations or evocations of emotion begotten through crisp language and transparent narrative simulations of human (or mythic) characters. The word choice here is telling: even though Karr subordinates their place in her preferred aesthetic hierarchy, these secondary delights of decoding make their presence felt as the co-starring antagonists in her dialectic. So while she never mentions symbolism *per se*, it is no leap to infer Karr would be equally ill-disposed to second-order symbolic techniques. Interestingly, however, in a later interview (1998), Karr will grant that poetry is “a much harder form” than memoir. “It’s much easier to fail [in poetry],” deems Karr. “There’s a great line from James Joyce, ‘Everybody starts out being a poet and then realizes it’s too hard.’

³¹⁸ Chauncey Mabe, “A Rant At What—And Who—Is Wrong With The Genre,” *Sun-Sentinel*, April 12, 1998: http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1998-04-12/entertainment/9804080207_1_mary-karr-viper-rum-poems.

You're trying to get to create an entire emotional experience in a piece of language the size of your hand. Who can do that? It's just impossible.”³¹⁹ Here, we have Karr citing the technical wisdom of perhaps the greatest master of (consciously intentional) allusive narrative and symbolic imagery in the English language, in Joyce. Does this not, by mere honorific and affiliation, suggest that Karr senses the cognitive-linguistic skill and legitimacy of creating highly condensed, intellectually demanding, symbolically explosive literature?

Additional symbol cynics could be aggregated and analyzed. Future research might embark on another comprehensive database of such artist statements. At this juncture, however, we should move on to inspect testimonials from authors more pro-symbolist, pro-intentionalist in stance. Circling back to the McAllister survey offers a good reentry point. As before, I reproduce the most relevant, potent illustrations of authors striking symbol-friendly poses below: (in order of appearance) Ray Bradbury, John Updike, Norman Mailer, and Ralph Ellison.

³¹⁹ Mary Karr, interview with Emma Winsor Wood, *The Rumpus*, Sept. 30, 2015: <http://therumpus.net/2015/09/the-rumpus-interview-with-mary-karr/>.

Questionnaire--Fiction writing

*My definition of symbolism as used in this questionnaire is represented by this example: In the Scarlet Letter there are four

major characters. Some say that Hawthorne meant those four

to be Nature, Religion, Science or other similar symbols in disguise. They apply the actions of the four in the story to what

is presently happening or will happen to Nature, Religion, Science, &

1. Do you consciously plan and place symbolism in your writing?

If both yes and no, please be specific. If yes, please state your method of doing so.

Do you feel you sub-consciously place symbolism in your writing?

No, I never consciously place symbolism in my writing. That would be a self-conscious exercise and self-consciousness is defeating to any creative act. Better to let the subconscious do the work for you, and get out of the way. The best symbolism is always unsuspected and natural. During a lifetime, one saves up information which collects itself around centers in the mind; these automatically become symbols on a subliminal level, and need only to be summoned forth in the heat of writing. Thus locomotives can be dragons, or dragons locomotives, at will, if one desires. I trust my subconscious implicitly. It is my good pet. I try to keep it well fed with information through all my senses, but never look directly at it. If I did, it would refuse to do its creative tricks for me. So I pretend to look off at the horizon and the next thing I know my subconscious is giving me stories, actions, and... by God, now... symbols!

2. Do readers ever infer that there is symbolism in your writing where you had not intended it to be? If so, what is your feeling about this type of inference? (Humorous? annoying? etc.?)

One critic once thought my vampire family story HOME COMING was intended as a parable on mankind in the atomic age, under the ~~xxx~~ threat of the Atom Bomb. I was mostly amused. After all, each story is a Rorschach Test, isn't it? and if people find beasties and bedbugs in my ink-splotches, I cannot prevent it, can I? They will insist on seeing them, anyway, and that is their privilege. Still, I wish people, quasi-intellectuals, did not try so hard to find the man under the old maid's bed. More often than not, as we know, he simply isn't there.

3. In your opinion, have the great writers of classics con-
sciously placed symbolism in their writing? If both yes and
no according to instance, please give an example of each if pos-
sible. Have they placed it there sub-consciously? If both yes
and no, please give an example of each if possible.

This is a question you must research yourself. But, for
an example of subconscious symbolistic writing, MOBY DICK
suggests itself. Some of it may have been thought out,
ahead, but I prefer to believe Melville gleaned from his own
sea experiences which, fused with Shakespearean high-rhetoric,
exploded into The White Whale. Where his symbolism is
self-conscious, it is strained and uninteresting. Where he
takes off and flies and lets the symbolistic chips fall where
they might, he is endlessly fascinating.

4. Do you have anything to remark concerning the subject under
study, or anything you believe pertinent to such a study?

Not much to say, except to warn you not to get too serious
about all this, if you want to become a writer of fiction
in the future. If you intend becoming a critic, that is
a Whale of Another Color. Still, your own opinion, finally,
when you have read and re-read is what you must search for.
When I wrote the screenplay of MOBY DICK for John Huston
I asked him if he wanted me to read all the critical studies
of Melville. Huston wisely cried "NO! I want YOUR creative
re-creation of the Whale! to hell with the critics!! Pretend
you are Melville and write me the Whale into screenplay form!"
... which is what I did.

Playing around with symbols, even as a critic, can be
a kind of kiddish parlor game. A little of it goes a long
way. There are other things of greater value in any
novel or story...humanity, character analysis, truth on
other levels, etc., etc. Good symbolism should be as
natural as breathing...and as unobtrusive.

Good luck and best wishes from,

RAY BRADBURY
GUY FAWKES' DAY, 1963
11/5/63

Questionnaire for Fiction Writers

* My definition of the word "symbolism" as used in this questionnaire can be understood from the following example: In the Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, there are four main characters. Some people say that Hawthorne meant those four to be symbols of nature, science, religion and other symbols in disguise and in conflict. The same people compare the actions of the four to what has happened, is happening and will happen to science, religion, nature, etc.

1. Do you consciously, intentionally plan and place symbolism in your writing? If both yes and no according to instance, please give an example of each. If yes, please state your method for doing so.

Do you feel you sub-consciously place symbolism in your writing?

① yes - I have no method; there is no method in writing fiction; you don't seem to understand

② yes

Do readers ever infer that there is symbolism in your writing where you did not intend it to be? If so, what is your reaction and feeling to this type of inference? (Annoyance? That it is humorous? Indifference?)

once in a while - usually they do not infer symbols not all there.

3. Do you feel that the great writers of classics consciously, intentionally planned and placed symbolism in their writing? (I am of course researching the question, but I should like your opinion). If both yes and no according to instance, please give an example of each.

Do you feel that they placed it there sub-consciously?

more of them did (Joyce, Dante) more than
me, (Homer) but it is impossible to think
of any significant work of creative art
without a symbolic dimension of some sort

4. Do you have anything to remark concerning the subject under study,
or anything you believe to be pertinent to such study?

I agree with you completely that
it would be better for you to do
your own thinking on this sort of
thing.

Best,

Allen Tate

142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn 1, New York
March 12, 1964

Dear Mr. McAllister,

I'm awfully sorry, but I simply don't have the time to answer your questions on symbolism. They're too thorough-going and would cost me the best part of a day's work. Besides, I'm not sure it's a good idea for a working novelist to concern himself too much with the technical aspects of the matter. Generally, the best symbols in a novel are those you become aware of only after you finish the work.

Yours,

Norman Mailer
Norman Mailer

RALPH ELLISON

730 Riverside Drive
New York 31, N.Y.
April 26, 1964

Mr. Bruce McAllister
577 Rosecrans Street
San Diego, California 92106

Dear Mr. McAllister:

Please find below answers to the questions listed on your questionnaire concerning Symbolism:

1. Symbolism arises out of action and functions best in fiction when it does so. Once a writer is conscious of the implicit symbolism which arise in the course of a narrative, he may take advantage of them and manipulate them consciously as a further resource of his art. Symbols which are imposed upon fiction from the outside tend to leave the reader dissatisfied by making him aware that something extraneous has been added.
2. Yes, I think symbolism arises initially out of the sub-conscious.~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
3. Yes, readers often infer that there is symbolism in my work, which I do not intend. My reaction is sometimes annoyance. It is sometimes humorous. It is sometimes even pleasant, indicating that the reader's mind has collaborated in a creative way with what I have written.
4. Man is a symbol-making and -using animal. Language itself is a symbolic form of communication. The great writers all used symbols as a means of controlling the form of their fiction. Some placed it there sub-consciously, discovered it and then developed it. Others started out consciously aware and in some instances shaped the fiction to the symbols.

I hope this is of some assistance to your work.

Sincerely yours,

Sincerely yours,

Figures: Facsimiles of Bruce McCallister’s author survey, replicated courtesy of Sarah Funke Butler’s “Document: The Symbolism Survey,” *The Paris Review*, December 5, 2011: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/12/05/document-the-symbolism-survey/>.

Compared to Bellow and Kerouac, Bradbury shows exceptional generosity in both his word count and his more affirmative valuations of literary symbol. Though he claims to “never consciously place symbolism in [his own] writing,” Bradbury freely discusses, even guardedly celebrates, the subconscious causes and effects of the literary-symbolic imagination. He endorses “unsuspected,” “natural” symbols that emerge from a lifetime of gathering sensory data, emotional experiences, and intellectual knowledge. Such “information” gets “saved up” and “collects itself around centers of the mind.” Then, during the “heat of writing,” these mental “centers”—which today’s mind-brain scientists might be moved to correlate with more precise neural components or cognitive circuits—transubstantiate this accreted information into symbolic shadows best detected at “subliminal levels” in the reader. Bradbury considers his subconscious a “good pet,” which he keeps well-fed and yet “never looks directly at,” lest conscious attention vanquish its powers.

To exemplify these points, Bradbury turns to the paradigmatic symbolic novel of American Romanticism, *Moby-Dick*. Bradbury posits that Melville’s symbolic structures, at least the most effective and aesthetically well-apportioned ones, must have derived organically *after* and *out of* the arrangement of *other* narrative concerns or formal structures. It is presumed these other structures constitute a fiction writer’s foremost priorities in creating story-centric art. The symbolic functions of the White Whale, the second-order assignations a reader might vest in the *Pequod*, or any other potentially symbolic component of Melville’s novel—these are, in Bradbury’s view, incidental: serendipitous and organic, but certainly not deliberative or premeditated. Though “real,” such symbols are best understood as subconscious noise emanating from episodic memories of Melville’s personal experiences,

combined with the creative process of organizing a narrative into a coherent saleable story. According to Bradbury, wherever Melville's "symbolism is self-conscious, it is strained and uninteresting." One might wonder what divine gift allows Bradbury to correctly identify which parts of *Moby-Dick*'s symbolic landscape are "self-conscious" and which are not. But assuming he can conjure such knowledge, his statement is fundamentally a judgment of taste: a matter largely based on a reader's threshold and preference for symbolic opacity.

Circling back to Bradbury's response to Question 2, we see the prodigiously successful genre writer recognizing the following reality about the commercial writing industry and, by extension, art generally: that any piece of fiction gets orphaned upon public circulation and consumption, and that its raw materials will inescapably form, to one degree or another, a "Rorschach Test" for its readers. Though he recognizes an author cannot "prevent" this outcome, one can't help but hear in Bradbury's remarks a cranky resignation: a muffled signal that he wishes writers *could* control such unrestrained "gristing" of the reader's mill. Indeed, in his next sentence he lampoons "quasi-intellectuals" who scavenge voraciously for a story's symbolic scraps, for the hidden "man under the old maid's bed." The apopheniacs and undisciplined symbol hunters of the world do not garner sustained respect from Bradbury's corner.

Bradbury closes with more of a flippant, world-weary response to Question 4. He pointedly instructs McAllister not to take such questions and issues too seriously. And he uses the opportunity to cast doubts about the value of the lit-crit enterprise, citing an exchange with John Huston. Huston, who was at the time directing Bradbury's *Moby-Dick* screenplay, counseled the writer with this simple advisory: "to hell with the critics!" Bradbury then warns of how too much "playing with symbols" can degenerate into "kiddish

parlor games.” The gaze of readers and critics should be focused on the other great virtues of literature: imaginative representations of character, human nature, truth, and “etc. etc.” Yet, in his terminal sentence, Bradbury swings back to grant that “good symbolism should be as natural as breathing” and—crucially for the arguments of this dissertation and the validity of a symbolic realism—that good symbolism should be “unobtrusive.”

Updike, meanwhile, answers McAllister’s survey with sweet concision. He affirms the presence of symbolic structures in his own art, both conscious and subconscious in derivation. At the same time, he eschews any identifiable “method” to his symbologies and to his creative process more generally. This method-less approach to the art of fiction is universalized to writers everywhere. Updike registers the variability of symbolic activity and density in our canonical works of literature, from Joyce and Dante at the high end of the spectrum to Homer at the lower end. He then presents one of the stronger advocacy statements for symbolism’s pervasiveness and import in the narrative arts: “it is impossible to think of any significant work of narrative art that does not have some symbolic dimension of some sort.” Updike closes by encouraging McAllister to pursue his “own thinking” about the values and ramifications of symbolic fiction.

Also concise, though not as sweet, in his response is Norman Mailer. Like Kerouac, Mailer plays his “too busy” card here. But unlike the Beat maverick, Mailer is more receptive to the thrust of the inquisition, suggesting McAllister’s questions demand a more “thoroughgoing” and nuanced accounting than Mailer has time to provide. The author’s stunted reply does, however, supply further testimony of a roiling symbolic sensibility that percolates the writer’s imagination, below consciousness or otherwise. Like so many writers cagey to divulge their proprietary trade secrets, Mailer balks at discussing the “technical

aspects” of his writing process, symbolic strategies included. And while he does acknowledge some vague existence of “the best symbols,” Mailer refrains from specifying any criteria or metrics we might use to calibrate between the bad, good, better, and best kinds of symbols. By the end of his letter, he simply situates himself in the after-the-fact, subconscious symbolic camp: simpatico with Bradbury and others, Mailer suggests that the most effective, most acceptable symbols are “those you become aware of only after you finish the work.” Underwhelming in its theoretical power, Mailer’s response nonetheless tips the scales further toward the positive existence of second-order symbolic devices—even if those devices are not fully susceptible to an author’s conscious control.

Ralph Ellison might be the most open and (ever-so-faintly) theoretical of McAllister’s respondents. In a separate type-written letter, Ellison provides a well-measured yet crisply penetrating account of the literary-symbolic imagination—all without expressing any of the cantankerous ignominy at the student’s queries common among other author-respondents. (That persistent pattern of exasperated authorial crabbiness could seed a separate psycho-biographical research project of some interest.) Ellison’s replies to Questions 1 and 2 paint a picture in which the subconscious works in conjunction with other constraints of the formal/narrative problems of fiction to become the proper, primary originator of symbolic effects—a dual machinery that sows the symbolic landscape: “Symbolism arises out of action and functions best in fiction when it does so. Once a writer is conscious of the implicit symbolisms which arise in the course of a narrative, he may take advantage of them and manipulate them consciously as a further resource of his art.” Ellison elaborates that “imposed” symbolism will “leave the reader dissatisfied by making him aware that something extraneous has been added.” Here again we have an inference, not incompatible

with Bradbury's, that imposition and conscious awareness *ipso facto* leads to reader dissatisfaction. Let us keep that point fresh in mind.

In Question 3, Ellison discloses a few canny personal reactions about when audiences read unwarranted symbolism into his work: annoyance, amusement, gratification that readers are engaging in *some* form of collaborative, creative energy-exchanges between themselves and his work. But it is the responses Ellison gives to Question 4 that key us into some special critical territory. For in these passages we finally see an author extending himself beyond the safe talk of industry craft, commerce, and tradition; and making *some* theoretical gesture toward ascertaining a deeper force that fuels and binds together the symbolic impulses of artists and audience across human history and culture. Ellison doesn't venture much beyond this key lead phrase: "Man is a symbol-making and -using animal." But that is all that is needed, really, to gin up certain connections and concatenations. It provides enough of a heuristic to begin examination of the human species' biopsychological predispositions for symbolic behavior and how these predispositions and behaviors have been baked into the cultural practices and artifacts of our artistic traditions. Ellison comments on the latter next. He claims, quite boldly and in some contradiction to his previous comments, "The great writers all used symbols as a means of controlling the form of their fiction. Some placed it there subconsciously, discovered it and then developed it. Others started out consciously aware and in some instances shape the fiction to the symbols." Here, we have Ellison crisply distilling down the Goethe-Coleridge/de Man debates about the proper ontologies and sequentiality of allegory and symbol, image and narrative, generality and particularity (a debate which will be explored further in the historical section below). Ellison essentially contends that symbol's directionality can go both ways: arising first in the artist's mind or

secondarily out of other components of the artform, consciously or subconsciously. Any of these directions can be effective. Most important, in Ellison's eyes, "all" the "great writers" have used, or been used by, the cognitive-emotional-narrative power of symbol.

The McAllister symbol survey ought not be consigned to The Dungeons of The Peculiar Footnote, or cast off as extraneous relic into the vast seas of literary flotsam-and-jetsam. It proves itself, retrospectively, to be a fruitful exercise that produced results worthy of considered reflection on multiple dimensions. One can imagine replicating it in the future, using more rigorous and scientifically informed survey methods, for an even more edifying picture of authorial opinion on the subject. For now, let us turn to some other sources for further artist commentary on symbolic technique.

Thomas Mann's essay "The Making of *The Magic Mountain*" was first published in *The Atlantic* in 1953,³²⁰ ten years before the McAllister survey materialized. This essay would be reproduced as the "Author's Note" at the end of all Knopf editions of Mann's novel. It remains a vigorous pro-symbol doctrine written by a modern master of German literature reflecting on his *magnum opus* and benchmark of the Western canon, *The Magic Mountain*. In conjunction with pitching his novel's symbolic menu, Mann promotes multiple readings if readers wish to dine on the full effects of its symbolic fare.

Mid-essay, Mann asks, "what is there that I can say about the book itself and the best way to read it?" The answers most pertinent to this discussion follow:

I begin with a very arrogant request that it be read not once but twice. A request not to be heeded, of course, if one has been bored at the first reading.

³²⁰ Thomas Mann, "The Making of *The Magic Mountain*," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1953: 41–45. This essay would be reproduced as the "Author's Note" in all future Knopf editions of Mann's novel. See Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism: Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst/Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 108.

A work of art must not be a task or an effort; it must not be undertaken against one's will. It is meant to give us pleasure, to entertain, to enliven. If it does not have this effect on the reader, he must put it down and turn to something else. But if you have read *The Magic Mountain* once, I recommend that you read it twice. The way in which the book is composed results in the reader's getting a deeper enjoyment from the second reading. [...] Music has always had a strong formative influence upon the style of my writing. Writers are very often "really" something else; they are transplanted painters or sculptors or architects or what not. To me the novel was always like a symphony, a work in counterpoint, a thematic fabric; the idea of the musical motif plays a great role in it.

People have pointed out the influence of Wagner's music on my work. Certainly I do not disclaim this influence. In particular, I followed Wagner in the use of the *leitmotiv*, which I carried over into the work of language. Not as Tolstoy and Zola use it, or as I used it myself in *Buddenbrooks*, naturalistically and as a means of characterization—so to speak, mechanically. I sought to employ it in its musical sense. My first attempts were in *Tonio Kröger*. But the technique I there employed is in *The Magic Mountain* greatly expanded; it is used in a very much more complicated and all-pervasive way. That is why I make my presumptuous plea to my readers to read the book twice. Only so can one really penetrate and enjoy its musical association of ideas. The first time, the reader learns the thematic material; he is then in a

position to read the symbolic and allusive formulas both forwards and backwards.

[...] The book itself is the substance of that which it relates: it depicts the hermetic enchantment of its young hero within the timeless, and thus seeks to abrogate time itself by means of the technical device that attempts to give complete presentness at any given moment to the entire world of ideas that it comprises. It tries, in other words, to establish a magical *nunc stans*, to use a formula of the scholastics. It pretends to give perfect consistency to content and form, to the apparent and the essential; its aim is always and consistently to be that of which it speaks.

But its pretensions are even more far-reaching, for the book deals with yet another fundamental theme, that of “heightening,” enhancement (*Steigerung*). This *Steigerung* is always referred to as alchemistic. You will remember that my Hans is really a simple-minded hero, the young scion of good Hamburg society, and an indifferent engineer. But in the hermetic, feverish atmosphere of the enchanted mountain, the ordinary stuff of which he is made undergoes a heightening process that makes him capable of adventures in sensual, moral, intellectual spheres he would never have dreamed of in the “flatland.” His story is the story of a heightening process, but also as a narrative it is the heightening process itself. It employs the methods of the realistic novel, but actually it is not one. It passes beyond realism by means of symbolism, and makes realism a vehicle for intellectual and ideal elements.

All the characters suffer this same process; they appear to the reader as something more than themselves—in effect they are nothing but exponents, representatives, emissaries from worlds, principalities, domains of the spirit. I hope this does not mean that they are mere shadow figures and walking parables. And I have been reassured on this score; for many readers have told me that they have found Joachim, Clavdia Chauchat, Peeperkorn, Settembrini, very real people indeed.

Mann's self-aware "confessions" of second-order symbolic strategies are refreshing. By promoting, for instance, interpretations of his characters as representing both "real" people and "heightened" archetypes, he prompts his readers toward navigating his text using a double-scoped map: a toggled focus between the particular and the general, the mimetic and the allegorical, the perceptually present and symbolically abstracted. Mann also unveils his tactic to seed an otherwise realistic narrative-driven work with pervasive, complex musical leitmotifs. These leitmotifs function as cues for circulating associational ideas, to be digested symbolically and allusively. Full digestion, however, obliges a "forward and backward" reading method: a method that allows for processing textual information serially and laterally, linearly and recursively, mimetically and conceptually. Together, this demands a special cognitive framework and mode of attention; and pragmatically it demands multiple readings—or at least one very slow, halting, deliberative reading.

A brief sidenote (and preview of the terminal chapter) is in order here. In *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust*, professor of European history Geoffrey Cocks ascribes some likely influence of Thomas Mann on the filmmaker's aesthetic sensibilities and certain philosophical/ideological stances. As both Cocks and Kubrick

biographer Vincent LoBrutto note,³²¹ a young Kubrick, after quitting as staff photographer at *Look* magazine, began auditing courses at Columbia in the late 1940s—and reading voraciously. Kubrick attended the lectures of eminent Columbia literary professors and critics, including Charles Van Doren, Moses Hadas, and Lionel Trilling, whose syllabi were heavy on classics and “the great books,” as well as the more recent modernists. Kubrick was thus exposed, both autodidactically and through these professors’ formal curricula, to a wide selection of canonical writers and thinkers. He would become particularly drawn to the literary modernists, the psychological theories of Freud, as well as German philosophy, history, and fiction. This intellectual brew would set the stage for many of his lifelong interests and obsessions. In conjunction with his own Jewish heritage and marriage into a prominent and controversial German family, it would particularly stoke his enduring fascination with the inscrutable contradictions apparent between the German arts and high culture, on the one hand; and the insatiable, often cataclysmically violent imperialist political aspirations of German leadership (and many of their *volk*) on the other.

Cocks suggests that Kubrick’s *Shining* can be viewed on one level as a partial reimagining of Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. And upon comparative inspection, it becomes undeniable that the film wishes to connect itself, obscurely or overtly, to certain qualities of its literary predecessor. *The Shining*’s setting, narrative structure, and “heightened” aesthetic methods for handling time, character, theme, and symbol share too many family resemblances with *The Magic Mountain* to be mere coincidence alone (see Cocks for further elaboration). Cocks sums up the interconnections like this: “The greatest effect Trilling had on Kubrick was his teaching the modern literature upon which Kubrick would base much of

³²¹ Geoffrey Cocks, *The Wolf at the Door: Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 64–5. Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1999).

his cinema. It was certainly Trilling who, along with Van Doren, introduced Kubrick to the deeper understanding of the work of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann, authors who had a deep effect on Kubrick that would manifest itself most trenchantly and specifically in *The Shining* thirty years later.”³²²

Circling back to Mann’s essay, the German author’s ideas resonate not only forward into the future but backward into the past. Certain of his claims echo Horace’s double-forked edict that good art must 1) entertain/give pleasure and 2) teach/convey knowledge or wisdom. For Mann, the pleasure/entertainment principle remains primary, with expectations of reader effort/work carefully regulated against that tentpole. This sensitivity—toward gratifying an audience’s desires for first-order narrative pleasures, above all—once again suggests an active system of balancing acts, which writers of symbolic realisms, “difficult” literature, and popular fictions seem forever striving to calibrate. Horace’s maxim, however, proves too reductive and theoretically limited; its lack of analytical rigor only gets us so far.

Perhaps more valuable here is Barthes’ bifurcated division of text types and their attendant reading experiences, which Mann adumbrates and gives probative value to:

- 1) the *plaisir* (quasi-erotic pleasure) elicited by conventionally coded *lisible* (readable) texts, which enact cognitive-aesthetic programs keyed to immersive, vicarious, transportive experiences;
- 2) the *jouissance* (orgasmic bliss/ecstasy) derived from cognitive-aesthetic processes of confronting and puzzling out *illisible* (unreadable) texts and their enigmatic

³²² Cocks, *Wolf at the Door*, 65.

constellations of open signifiers³²³—a state of literary mind Jonathan Culler reframes as “a rapture of dislocation produced by ruptures or violations of intelligibility.”³²⁴

Judging by the statements and tenor of his essay, we infer that Mann’s hope, transliterated into Barthean terms, was to deliver both *plaisir* and *jouissance* in his work. Furthermore, we see that Mann felt *plaisir* must be made available first. That is, the inductors of *plaisir*, like acts of readerly foreplay, generate immediate gratifications and insights that must stand on their own as valued commodities. But this *plaisir* functions also as bait, for enticing the reader into a “second” state of mind: a more delayed, liminal state of paused reflection, rapt wonder, imaginative associating, conceptualizing, resolving enigmatic connections, etc. The more powerful peak experience of *jouissance* follows from there. This is a refrain we hear often from authors and filmmakers employing techniques of second-order symbolism, implicit metaphorical complexes, and enigmatic meaning structures.

³²³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), cited in Abrams and Harpham, “Structuralist Criticism” and “Text and Writing (Écriture),” *Glossary of Literary Terms*. Abrams and Harpham summarize further below:

“Readable” texts are traditional or “classical” ones—such as the realistic novels by Honoré Balzac and other nineteenth-century authors—which for the most part conform to the prevailing codes and conventions, literary and social, and so are readily and comfortably interpretable and naturalizable in the process of reading. An “unreadable” text (such as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, or the French *new novel*, or a poem by a highly experimental poet) is one which largely violates, parodies, or innovates upon prevailing conventions, and thus persistently shocks, baffles, and frustrates standard expectations. In Barthes’ view an unreadable text, by drawing attention in this way to the pure conventionality and artifice of literature, laudably destroys any illusion that it represents social reality. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (published 1973), Barthes assigns to the readable text the response of mere “*plaisir*” (quasi-erotic pleasure), but to the unreadable text the response of “*jouissance*” (orgasmic ecstasy).

The “readerly” text such as the realistic novel that tries to “close” interpretation by insisting on specific meanings, and the “writerly” text that aims at the ideal of “a galaxy of signifiers,” and so encourages the reader to be a producer of his or her own meanings according not to one code but to a multiplicity of codes. And in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) Barthes lauds, in contrast to the comfortable pleasure offered by a traditional text that accords with cultural conventions, the *jouissance* (or orgasmic bliss) evoked by a text that incites a hedonistic abandon to the uncontrolled play of its signifiers.

³²⁴ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (1975) (London: Routledge, 2002), 224.

Moving back across the pond, we have in American short story writer Flannery O'Connor another artist who "confesses" to conscious acts of second-order symbolism. (Considering O'Connor's robust Catholicism, perhaps the scare quotes are unneeded here.) Known for her unnerving Southern gothic narratives and fictional worlds populated by the pungently grotesque and weirdly consecrated, O'Connor is canonized as a leading American literary voice and a universally acknowledged master of the postwar short-story form. In this author's opinion, her fiction's aesthetic-intellectual staying power is derived in no small part from its redolent symbolic landscapes. We can see O'Connor openly discoursing on symbolism across several passages of "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" and "Writing Short Stories," two of her part-instructional, part-reflective essays collected in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1957).³²⁵

O'Connor is most vocal about these matters in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction." The following passage, for instance, begins with a proclamation about the death of naturalism, and thus an implicit nod to what I call symbolic realism. It then ranges through several more key conceptual motifs: from the privileging of a lean economy of style and a classical dramatic unity, to importation of biblical exegetical methods into the hermeneutics of literary fiction; from the multi-directional explosion of meanings produced by symbolic details not immediately or consciously registered, to the implication that more than a single perfunctory reading of a work is required to ignite those explosions; from metaphors of sinkage and below-the-surface meanings, to the supposition that a multileveled symbolical/allegorical register of meaning is a *sine qua non* for any enduring work of literature:

³²⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1957), ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).

This is one reason that strict naturalism is a dead end in fiction. In a strictly naturalistic work the detail is there because it is natural to life, not because it is natural to the work. In a work of art we can be extremely literal, without being in the least naturalistic. [...]

The novel works by a slower accumulation of detail than the short story does. The short story requires more drastic procedures than the novel because more has to be accomplished in less space. The details have to carry more immediate weight. In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself, and when this happens, they become symbolic in their action.

Now the word *symbol* scares a good many people off, just as the word *art* does. They seem to feel that a symbol is some mysterious thing put in arbitrarily by the writer to frighten the common reader—sort of a literary Masonic grip that is only for the initiated. They seem to think that it is a way of saying something that you aren't actually saying, and so if they can be got to read a reputedly symbolic work at all, they approach it as if it were a problem in algebra. Find x . And when they do find or think they find this abstraction, x , then they go off with an elaborate sense of satisfaction and the notion that they have “understood” the story. Many students confuse the process of understanding a thing with understanding it.

I think that for the fiction writer himself, symbols are something he uses simply as a matter of course. You might say that these are details that,

while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction.

[...] In a good novel, more always happens than we are able to take in at once, more happens than meets the eye. The mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest. This is what is meant when critics say that a novel operates on several levels. The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it opens up. To take an example from my own book, *Wise Blood*, the hero's rat-colored automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as well as something he thinks of as a means of escape. He is mistaken in thinking that it is a means of escape, of course, and does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by the patrolman. The car is a kind of death-in-life symbol, as his blindness is a life-in-death symbol. The fact that these meanings are there makes the book significant. The reader may not see them but they have their effect on him nonetheless. This is the way the modern novelist sinks, or hides, his theme. The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this

was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature. [...]

Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.

[...] The novelist makes his statements by selection, and if he is any good, he selects every word for a reason, every detail for a reason, every incident for a reason, and arranges them in a certain time-sequence for a reason. He demonstrates something that cannot possibly be demonstrated any other way than with a whole novel.

Art forms evolve until they reach their ultimate perfection, or until they reach some state of petrification, or until some new element is grafted on and a new art form made. But however the past of fiction has been or however the future will be, the present state of the case is that apiece of fiction must be very much a self-contained dramatic unit.

This means that it must carry its meaning inside it.³²⁶

O'Connor's symbolic sense is one of largess and permanence—a munificence that emerges from the unseen or unregistered, from the compressed or submerged, from the transient experiencing of fictional elements in perfect combination with each other. It is a sense that

³²⁶ O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, 70–74. Some author italics in the original have been removed for clarity purposes.

carries a highly spiritualized charge for the devout Catholic. But this is not altogether dissimilar to the symbolic sense described by *secular* readers and artists of the second-order symbol: a subjective experience of focused contemplation, fleeting numinosity, and potential insight, just without any attendant god figures supplying those psychological states of symbolic sublimity.

In “Writing Short Stories,” O’Connor reflects on her creative process in composing “Good Country People.” At the center of this widely anthologized short story is protagonist Joy/Hulga Hopewell, an unattractive 32-year-old woman, atheist, and PhD student, who lives with her mother in a small country town and is hobbled by a wooden leg. An alleged Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, pays the family a visit one day. The following afternoon, Manley reveals his true persona as a vulgar atheist and nihilistic con man. He tricks Joy/Hulga and absconds with her leg, which will be added to his collection of stolen prosthetics. Commenting more on technique than interpreting the story’s possible meanings, O’Connor makes sure to emphasize the primacy of the literal/surface elements of narrative, but also simultaneously underscores the import of their secondary symbolic depths:

As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. [...]

By the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl’s personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.

If you want to say the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as

well as on the surface. It increases the story in every direction, and this is essentially the way a story escapes being short.

[...] I wouldn't want you to think that in that story I sat down and said, "I am going to write a story about a PhD with a wooden leg, using the wooden leg as a symbol for another kind of affliction. I doubt that many writers know what they are going to do when they start out."³²⁷

The sense here is that symbolic structures will arise out of, during, or sequentially after the writing of the narrative proper. They are neither premeditated nor imposed, like Hemingway's raisins, into the bread of the fictional landscape. Nonetheless, those structures do indeed arise. And their existence imparts an "accumulation" of "loaded" subterranean significance, which the reader is responsible for registering at some point in the reading process.

For a less sacred but equally self-aware perspective on the appropriate role and ontology of symbolism in the writer's tradecraft, we might consider the handbook advice of Stephen King. In his hybrid memoir-manual *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000),³²⁸ the horror/sci-fi author deemphasizes the power and place of symbol, at least in the commercial prose-fiction King privileges. Like most features and possibilities of fiction in King's bailiwick, symbolism is held subservient to the more pressing demands and componentry of the well-told story. Symbols get compartmentalized to second drafts. They are assigned (consigned?) a status of ornamental grace-notes. While symbolic devices remain subordinate, dispensable technologies for King, that does not mean they are entirely written off as unimportant or feckless. In fact, the author devotes several pages to parsing out their

³²⁷ O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," *Mystery and Manners*, 99–100.

³²⁸ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000).

coordinates in the creative process, and their proper parameters within the horizons of a writer's fictional universe. His key passages on the subject are presented below.

I most often see chances to add the grace-notes and ornamental touches after my basic storytelling job is done. Once in a while it comes earlier; not long after I began *The Green Mile* and realized my main character was an innocent man likely to be executed for the crime of another, I decided to give him the initials J.C., after the most famous man of all time. [...]

Mostly I don't see stuff like that until the story's done. Once it is, I'm able to kick back, read over what I've written, and look for underlying patterns. If I see some (and I almost always do), I can work at bringing them out in a second, more fully realized, draft of the story. Two examples of the sort of work second drafts were made for are symbolism and theme.

King follows this passage with some glib remarks about learning symbolism in high school, specifically referencing *Moby-Dick* and Hawthorne. He sympathizes with (panders to?) his audience who may have felt like "stupidniks" if they did not connect to such teachings. King's statements flirt with coarse frivolity when they are not currying a sense of Everyguy bonhomie. But he continues with some kinder, more considered discussion here:

But wait. Symbolism doesn't have to be difficult and relentlessly brainy. Nor does it have to be consciously crafted as a kind of ornamental Turkish rug upon which the furniture of the story stands. If you can go along with the concept of the story as a pre-existing thing, a fossil in the ground, then symbolism must also be pre-existing, right? Just another bone (or set of

them) in your new discovery. That's if it's there. If it isn't, so what? You've still got the story itself, don't you?

If it is there and if you notice it, I think you should bring it out as well as you can, polishing it until it shines and then cutting it the way a jeweler would cut a precious or semi-precious stone.

[...]

When I read *Carrie* over prior to starting the second draft, I noticed there was blood at all three crucial points of the story: beginning (Carrie's paranormal ability is apparently brought on by her first menstrual period), climax (the prank which sets Carrie off at the prom involves a bucket of pig's blood— "pig's blood for a pig," Chris Hargensen tells her boyfriend), and end (Sue Snell, the girl who tries to help Carrie, discovers she is not pregnant as she had half-hoped and half-feared when she gets her own period). There's plenty of blood in most horror stories, of course—it is our stock-in-trade, you might say. Still, the blood in *Carrie* seemed more than just splatter to me. It seemed to mean something. That meaning wasn't consciously created, however. While writing *Carrie* I never once stopped to think: "Ah, all this blood symbolism will win me Brownie Points with the critics" or "Boy oh boy, this should certainly get me in a college bookstore or two!" For one thing, a writer would have to be a lot crazier than I am to think of *Carrie* as anyone's intellectual treat.

Intellectual treat or not, the significance of all that blood was hard to miss once I started reading over my beer- and tea- splattered first-draft

manuscript. So I started to play with the idea, image, and emotional connotations of blood, trying to think of as many associations as I could. There were lots, most of them pretty heavy. Blood is strongly linked to the idea of sacrifice; for young women it's associated with reaching physical maturity and the ability to bear children; in the Christian religion (plenty of others, as well), it's symbolic of both sin and salvation. Finally, it is associated with the handing down of family traits and talents. We are said to look like this or behave like that because "it's in our blood." We know this isn't very scientific, that those things are really in our genes and DNA patterns, but we use the one to summarize the other.

It is that ability to summarize and encapsulate that makes symbolism so interesting, useful, and—when used well—arresting. You could argue that it's really just another kind of figurative language.

Does that make it necessary to the success of your story or novel? Indeed not, and it can actually hurt, especially if you get carried away. Symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity. None of the bells and whistles are about story, all right? Only story is about story. (Are you tired of hearing that yet? I hope not, 'cause I'm not even close to getting tired of saying it.)

Symbolism (and the other adornments, too) does serve a useful purpose, though—it's more than just chrome on the grille. It can serve as a focusing device for both you and your reader, helping to create a more unified and pleasing work. I think that, when you read your manuscript over (and

when you talk it over), you'll see if symbolism, or the potential for it, exists. If it doesn't, leave well enough alone. If it does, however—if it's clearly a part of the fossil you're working to unearth—go for it. Enhance it. You're a monkey if you don't.

[...]

Not every book has to be loaded with symbolism, irony, or musical language (they call it prose for a reason, ya know).³²⁹

Not unlike O'Connor and so many other writers discussed in these pages, King privileges narrative first, symbolism thereafter. Good symbolism for King is that which is not conscious initially; although after rising to consciousness, it should be polished like a precious stone (another interesting nod to this dissertation's conceptual motif of symbol as gemstone-treasure). Symbolism can and must be functional, but it is regarded by King as more of a bell-and-whistle grafted on to the chassis and more robust machinery of Story Proper. And like any bell-and-whistle, symbol can enhance—but also bog down—that machinery.

A contemporary of King, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood provides another authorial voice for calibrating the place, pleasure, and use-value of symbolism in fiction. In a recent audio interview discussing her latest work *Hag-Seed* (2016)—a novelistic reimagining of *The Tempest*—Atwood is forthright about her intentions and the effects she hopes to achieve with her text. One of those effects is directly linked to her symbolic designs. First, it should be noted that *Hag-Seed* is the first entrée of a Hogarth Press series that contracts authors to reimagine a work of Shakespeare. Authors are invited to retell a Shakespearean original using any means and through any perspectival prisms they might choose. The resulting works will be living enactments (even if preordained by a publishing house) of

³²⁹ King, *On Writing*, 196–200.

palimpsest texts. More technically, according to Genette's taxonomies, they will be paradigms of *hypertexts* that are built deliberately on the *hypotexts* of Shakespeare's original plays.³³⁰ However we deem to label such texts, the outcome will be this: a series of works that achieve their meanings, at least partly, via some fundamental principles of second-order meaning-making. These finished products will be necessarily and explicitly based on another *not-there* text. They will all rely, to some degree or another, on effortful calculations to effect second-order levels of meaning. They will incur the classic serial+parallel cognitive processing costs of second-order interpretation: efforts to compare, associate, look backwards and forwards, dig inside and outside the text at hand.

About halfway through their discussion, interviewer Jason Gots asks Atwood about the textual inconsistencies and narrative gaps in the extant versions of Shakespeare's dramas. Speculating about Shakespeare's intentions could be, and whether there might be hidden wisdom in the ambiguities that arise from those gapped cues, Atwood responds pragmatically: because of these gaps, coupled with that hard fact that Shakespeare is long dead and cannot step out of the grave to go on the interview circuit, he remains in a very real sense "infinitely interpretable." Atwood conjectures, with tongue halfway in cheek, that if Shakespeare "had six layers of editors to go through," some of these dramatic gaps may have been filled, some textual inconsistencies ironed out. But, she says, "We don't know. And one of the things about Shakespeare is, you'll never get him on a talkshow. You'll never get to ask him those questions. And that means he's infinitely interpretable because the author will never step out and say, 'That isn't what I meant at all, and I hate this production [...], and I

³³⁰ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 3.

forbid you to do that.”³³¹ Atwood’s commonsense faith in authorial intention is quite clear here. These remarks, coupled with observations about her own work that follow, speak to the prudence and necessity of integrating biographical research into interpretative practices, at least when available.

During the same line of questioning, Atwood is—not unlike Mann, O’Connor, or King—open and plainspoken about her symbolic intentions with at least one particular set of characters and descriptive details of *Hag-Seed*. A plot summary of Atwood’s novel is not necessary here. It is enough to know the author personifies one of her protagonists, Estelle, to embody the attributes of Auspicious Star and Benevolent Fortune: two goddess signifiers who receive little more than passing reference in *The Tempest*. Despite their subdued signification in Shakespeare’s original text, Atwood considers them critical subtextual “characters” of the play’s narrative and philosophical-cosmological arcs. Atwood claims Shakespeare’s readers would have instantaneously recognized these entities, and marked them as important forces influencing the imaginative world of *The Tempest*.

Atwood: In *The Tempest* there is a character who never appears on stage but is very important for the action. And that is Auspicious Star. [...] An “auspicious star” has brought [Prospero’s] enemies within his reach. And “benevolent fortune,” which they thought of being as a goddess—Benevolent Fortune is helping out. So Auspicious Star and Benevolent Fortune I telescoped into one character in my book, and her name is *Estelle*.³³² And she is a person who has influence and is helping Felix [the Prospero character of

³³¹ Margaret Atwood, interview with Jason Gots, Big Think: Think Again, no. 70: ~20:30+. See podcast link: <http://bigthink.com/think-again-podcast/margaret-atwood-nil-the-good-the-bad-and-the-stupid-nil-think-again-podcast-70>.

³³² Atwood’s inflection on “Estelle” here suggests the listeners (and her readers) should be recognizing the etymological connections between this character’s name and “star.”

Hag-Seed] behind the scenes. [...] So she's raining rays of benevolent rays upon over him, and she wears very twinkly earrings.

Gots: I hadn't picked that up, that that was a synthesis of them there.

Atwood: Well, I give her all of the symbols of those goddesses. For instance, there are a couple of symbols of Fortune, the goddess: one was the cornucopia and one was the wheel, like Wheel of Fortune. So if you look at her jewelry, you'll see that it is all represented.

Gots: That is subtle.

Atwood: Well, it's not *that* subtle! [laughs] But it's all there.³³³

Atwood neither belabors her symbolic tells nor pretends they are the dazzling results of her mad genius. She strikes one of the only publicly sanctioned pose an artist is allowed to take when discussing or reflecting on their technique: self-deprecating, slightly cryptic, while never alienating the mass markets. But her "confession" to working within a certain symbolic economy is, in itself, a significant testament to the imaginative, associational, and philosophical fields on which a creative writer can choose to play if they so choose.

A reviewer of Atwood's memoir *On Writers and Writing* (2013) reinforces the author's affinities for designing her fictional architectures with shadowy corners, inscrutable edges, and (porous) walls erected between the surfaces and substances of self:

As one of literature's luminaries, surely Margaret Atwood possesses a magical secret we can truffle out. *On Writers and Writing* [...] is an absorbing book, which you read with pleasure and benefit, although afterwards you wonder what precisely you've learned.

³³³ Atwood, interview with Gots, ~14:50+.

What remained with me was the sense of an agile mind revolving sophisticated ideas, partly revelatory, partly evasive. Writing seems to Atwood to issue from dark, inscrutable regions: Borgesian self-division (“The mere act of writing splits the self into two”); the gnomic (“Where is the story? The story is in the dark”); the mythic (“writing ... is motivated ... by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld”). *On Writers and Writing* is sibylline and cryptic, the teasing trail left by a dazzling *dea abscondita*.³³⁴

The language of this encapsulation strikes common chord with the appeals of second-order symbolism, enigmatic art, and the authors who gravitate toward such approaches. In it we hear semantic resonances of properties of a symbol-decoding, knowledge-seeking human mind: the enchantment of the hidden “magical secret” and the deeply mythic; the feeling of things absent-yet-present; the sense that imminent resolution or gnomic insight is possible; the “partly revelatory, partly evasive” stylistics and narrative worlds of certain fictional universes. The reviewer describes Atwood’s memoir itself as “sibylline and cryptic.” These are apt descriptors of the greater emotional-intellectual complex that second-order symbolotics appeals to and taps into: the slyly nuanced and the possibly prophetic, the something “more” awaiting in the darkness that asks to be brought to light upon closer, intelligent inspection of the text, deeper empathic connection with the artists, and wider imaginative association with the various elements of the simulated fictional-poetic world.

³³⁴ Stevie Davies, “Cryptic Musings of a Literary Superstar,” review of Margaret Atwood, *On Writers and Writing* (London: Virago, 2013), *The Independent*, January 6, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/on-writers-and-writing-by-margaret-atwood-book-review-cryptic-musings-of-a-literary-superstar-9961285.html>.

A quick sidebar is in order at this point. The mind-to-text-to-mind relationships³³⁵ that second-order symbolism relies on are ripe for certain sociopolitical and psychological analysis. The “mystical,” affective, cognitive dimensions of second-order symbolisms, which Atwood’s words especially invoke, ramify with implications that cross into Marxism and consciousness studies. Marxist critics, for instance, will be disposed, not without warrant, to tease out the appeals—and thus the lurking threats or downsides—posed by obscurantist, sleight-of-hand poetic techniques. Artists deploying such techniques might be viewed as indulging in some of the very techniques and traditions that capitalists and the political systems that support them use to exploit the consumer, the worker, the disempowered. Consciousness critics, meanwhile, will be keen to identify compelling parallels between a hermeneutics of second-order symbolism and the psychological-phenomenological interplays between the unconscious and conscious parts of our minds.

Both lines of thinking are developed in later sections of this dissertation. Very quickly, though, one can understand why these schools of criticism might be naturally motivated to analyze the salience of concealment, obfuscation, ambiguous or doubled meanings, subtlety, and subterfuge at play here. Such qualities are, after all, some of the defining traits of second-order symbolism. At the nexus of the mind-to-text-to-mind relationships that emerge from a second-order hermeneutics, we basically have a mind aching for resolution or enlightenment from an narrative-aesthetic field of opaqueness and ambiguity. But in a further twist to the story, that same human mind will almost always prefer to—or at least likes to think it can—reach these resolution-enlightenment states *independently on its own*. And if it must be coached toward that state, it will prefer the least

³³⁵ That is, the movement from the artist’s mind and all its historical/materialist contexts > to the artwork > to the audience’s mind and various contexts affecting the work’s reception.

invasive aid or “tells” from external agents: a quiet instruction that subtly encourages or cribs, that avoids didactic indoctrination, that refrains from pedantically domineering us with a condescending superior knowledge or vulgarizing us with a pedestrian obviousness.

One should furthermore consider the mental acts and efforts required to untangle the branching trees of causalities explaining 1) the complex and often brutalizing economic systems that have taken root in our byzantine civilized world, capitalism in particular, and 2) the equally if not more complex transit systems that relay signals between the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious parts of our mind-brains. These acts and efforts certainly recruit some of the same cognitive mechanisms used for untangling the tangles of art objects—especially art objects replete with hidden, suppressed, lateralized, associational devices of symbolic-mythical resonances.

Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion, as well as his ethical and political philosophies more generally, pivot around a dialectic of conceal/reveal, the veiled/unveiled, the masked/unmasked. The strongest forms of Ricoeur’s critical orientation can, of course, devolve into unwarranted cynicism about artistic intention, while dubiously elevating the power of the critic-audience in the aesthetic transaction. (To be fair, Ricoeur’s model is more about situating an artwork’s significance rather than capturing intentional verbal meaning proper—or the meanings that artists are seldom aware of due to their ensnarement within a domineering system of politics, cultural hegemony, and/or the unconscious mind.) No matter how useful or harmful one deems a hermeneutics of suspicion to be for art criticism, the greater psychological phenomena and processes, which Ricoeur filters his hermeneutic philosophies through, are most salient. In this passage from “The Critique of Religion,” for

instance, Ricoeur marries the workings of consciousness generally with the act of hermeneutics generally:

Consciousness, far from being transparent in itself, is at the same time what reveals and what conceals...but a relation of conceal/reveal which calls for a specific reading, a *hermeneutics*. The task of hermeneutics....has always been to read a text and to distinguish the true sense from the apparent sense, to search for the sense under the sense. There is then, a proper manner of uncovering what was covered, of unveiling what was veiled, of removing the mask.³³⁶

What captivates Ricoeur, critics, audiences, artists, and humans generally are certain recurring dialectical tensions: tensions between the concealed and the manifest, between problems and solutions, between confusions and resolutions, between the strange and the familiar, between the gaps of openness and the bridges of closure, between the muddle of incomprehensibility and the relief of translation, between the seemingly evident yet just out of reach, between the (reasonably) known Self and the (radically) unknown Other. These tensions get reproduced with a certain kind of intensity and imaginative play in second-order symbolic fictions. The complexity and play intensify further when the artist's underlying symbolic messages comment *on* things like political economies and the relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness itself.

The purpose of this digression is to underscore the insistent fascination with the *hidden*, as shared by artists, thinkers, and exegetes of life and art in all its manifestations.

When interacting with language, texts, and artworks specifically, this fascination feeds an

³³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion," *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 215. Cited in Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 27.

expectation to discover a deeper sense that lurks underneath a surface sense. These orientations—whether political, psychosocial, linguistic, aesthetic, or otherwise—must be reflective of a more elemental drive of the human mind to seek out concealed objects or events, a drive ginned by *some* hope that the search will resolve into a bearing of *some* fruit. (The pleasure of the bromidic “journey” would soon become moot if all such searching turned out fruitless.) The fruit-hunt is more than mere metaphor here: an evolutionary theorist could posit, rather unproblematically, that these orientations and behaviors are motivated by a hierarchic cognitive adaptation for driving the human animal to seek, hunt, track, dig, unsheathe, and finally ingest (“resolve”) some *literal* fruit or hidden prey.

Another function of this digression was to adduce that, at least according to some critical/aesthetic sensibilities, submerged senses and meanings are most effectively revealed when whispered, not shouted like a brute into the exegete’s ears. In such cases, a communication field gets initialized by an attentive yet non-imperious confidant: a (hopefully) wise yet unobtrusive conversant who invites a co-creative experience and who wishes, at most, to illuminate something softly and humbly, to pose questions and parallels, present experiences and possibilities. It is a mode of communication that wants to differentiate itself, too, from the power-seeking demagogue and the graceless ignoramus. With such asides in mind, let us redirect back to some final words from the artists—the makers of our stories and (sometimes) the symbolic arts of myth, allusion, elusion, and subtle subterfuge.

A recent panel discussion convened by *The New York Times*’ A.O. Scott offers some pertinent insights into the creative processes of a group of successful artists working in America today. The conversation, published as “Race, Class, and Creative Spark” in late

2014, assembled a musician, a practitioner of the culinary arts, and several narrative artists of print, stage, and screen.³³⁷ The dialog never veers into the domains of symbolism proper. But what we do hear about are conscious artistic strategies for negotiating the demands of *story* within the constraints of imitative realism—the mode of representation more-or-less favored by the panel discussants; and for marrying those demands with broader ideas, themes, or abstractions—particularly those related to present-day sociopolitical issues of race, class, sex, and political economy. Virtually all the discussants, whether narrative artists or otherwise, expressed some conviction to galvanize their projects around the first-principle of producing a “good story.” Aggregating the group’s ideas on the subject, we can surmise that a good story entails some combination of the following: a set of human (or human-like) characters who are believable yet memorable, identifiable yet psychologically complex, moving through an emotionally and/or intellectually engaging event-arc; those events take place within socio-cultural-geographical settings that are recognizable but perhaps exotic, stable but perhaps varying; at the same time, abstract arguments or observations about present-day issues, historical forces, or future outcomes of the real world are rarely if ever off the radar within these well-formed story structures. Producing some iteration within this story model becomes the chassis for their works.

In the excerpt below, the discussants’ statements shimmer between the mirrors and the lamps of M.H. Abrams’s model of the artist function. Across the conversation, the reader gets glimpses into the minds and methods of working artists who are tasked with nothing less

³³⁷ A.O. Scott, “Race, Class and Creative Spark: David Simon, J. Cole, Patricia Lockwood, and Others on Social Issues as Manifested in Art,” roundtable interview, *The New York Times*, November 30, 2014. The panel consisted of documentarian Ken Burns, hip-hop artist J. Cole, playwright Lisa D’Amour, filmmaker Debra Granik, restaurateur Eddie Huang, poet Patricia Lockwood, filmmaker Justin Simien, television writer/showrunner David Simon, and novelist Justin Torres. See these links: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/arts/david-simon-j-cole-patricia-lockwood-and-others-on-social-issues-as-manifested-in-art.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/arts/whos-who.html>.

than strategically navigating the flux of the mind-brain's PECMA flows of attention-orienting, perceiving, cognizing, and emoting—idiosyncratic currents that are relentlessly merging and diverging not only inside their own riverine minds, but also inside those of their audiences implied and real. We glimpse how these artists navigate between things general and specific, the concrete and the abstract, the social and the personal, the imagined and the real, type and token, historical memory and present experience, categorical classifications and perceptual distinctness.

Justin Simien: The best stories hold a clean mirror up. They take the chaos in our experiences, strain them through the point of view of a storyteller, and give context and insight to our lives. Race and class issues especially need this mirror, as more and more of culture seems reticent to even admit these issues still exist, let alone address them.

David Simon: If anyone undertaking an artistic work feels moved to address socially or politically relevant themes, they should allow heart and soul to gambol freely. It's as plausible a reason as any to make a creative statement. And for some—maybe I ought to include myself here—they don't have much of a choice.

Patricia Lockwood: I would never tell artists that they had to address social issues in their work, because as soon as you tell artists that they have to do something, they turn around and poop on the floor. Tell them, instead, that these questions are difficult, that the story is missing something without them, that they are another dimension, and then see what happens.

Debra Granik: It's very hard to address social issues in fiction. Often, things

become clunky and reductive. Critical portrayals of upper-class people can lack nuance.

Lisa D'Amour: I can't say I wake up every morning and think about how these issues drive my work. But when I look at my major projects of the last five years, issues of economic anxiety, gentrification and the vast chasm between urban and rural America hover over all of them like hungry birds.

Justin Torres: I think about the intersections of class with race and gender and sexuality and the ways in which we fail each other in society and what needs to change. These issues are the obsessions driving my work. But I focus on the poetic, and the human, and always I try to avoid preachiness. I'm not interested in creating literature that functions as a rant.

Simon: *I find an argument in which to engage*, and I look for a story that can address the argument, first by being a good story worth the telling, and then by using that story to raise questions or [make] statements about the core social or political issues.

Granik: My first impulse is to tell an engaging story. Looking at facets of life that don't usually show up on screen is part of what draws me into a story in the first place. When you take on themes that address existing social issues, you open up the possibility of being part of a larger conversation. I want my work to participate in some of those discussions.

Simon: I'm strangely as interested in whatever public debate and policy consideration might result from good storytelling as the story itself. That stance is, if not anti-artistic, certainly not conducive to anyone's idea of

artistic purity. If care isn't taken to love characters and plot as their own reward, then my journey easily ends in bad polemics. That's always the risk.³³⁸

For these commercial narrative artists, "story" reigns supreme, at least as their publicly discussed credos would have it. Indeed, the "story is king" mantra is such a common refrain of the American writer/filmmaker/showrunner, it verges on cliché if not outright dogmatism.

Whether these artists genuinely consider story to be the dominant note of their craft or not—over theme, symbol, style, sociopolitical content, or something else entirely—the craft decisions commercial artists face often come down to alternating-currents of choices running between sets of dipoles. That is, creative decisionmakers have to decide for each project, and each segment of their individual projects, whether to emphasize one or perhaps both of the following: the particular or the general, the observation or the induction, the instance or the idea, the specimen or the theory, the singularity of experience or the propositionality of conceptual argument, social regularities or individual subjectivities, the immediacy of present experience or the time-intensive process of digested thought and reflection. They must decide how to navigate between their mirrors and their lamps, and then how to triangulate their mirrors and lamps with other parts of their cogitating brains—their philosophical visions of life and human nature; their understandings of history, both personal and sociopolitical; their reflections on current society and politics; their value systems; etc.

None of the discussants ventures a mention of the craft or technique of symbolism. While not surprising, there is something curious about its absence. For in this author's view, second-order symbolic devices provide one kind of pragmatic craft solution out of the artistic problems that arise from dissonance and interference between the dipoles enumerated above.

³³⁸ Scott, "Race, Class and Creative Spark," *Italics mine*.

A symbolic program can empower an artist to do two things virtually at once: 1) to depict the singularities and subjectivities of a simulated narrative world—thereby providing a rich felt experience that can enthrall audiences (and markets) to suspend their disbelief and feel transported, tapping our mental capacities for empathy, voyeurism, and the (safe) thrill of living in exotic-yet-familiar imaginary world; and 2) to offer a portal for proposing broader arguments or pointing to more abstract ideas about human nature or psychosocial conditions—thereby supplying a multichannel bundle of meaning pathways over a single signal carrier (the art object), all without necessarily breaking the fourth wall in any heavy-handed or overtly Brechtian way. That is, second-order symbolic portals can often be hidden between the lines, lying in wait yet capable of potentiating rhetorical force fields that could be subversive, comforting, or otherwise intriguing in their messages. Importantly, these dormant force fields can only be triggered or unlocked by an exegete who has developed some mental-aesthetic simpatico with the artistic traditions of second-order symbol and/or with the individual artist at hand. Receptive audiences will understand, and embrace, that meaning-making cues that travel through such second-order symbolic portals are going to be more indirect than direct, more suggested than denoted, more whispered than shouted. In plainer words, a second-order symbologic can enable an artist to sell the “good story” first and foremost, while smuggling in authorial comments on or abstract notions about what is being told more immediately on the page or screen. It can allow an artist to point in several conceptual directions or to several objects at once—without necessarily sacrificing the first-order meanings and pleasures that fall out of experiencing the mimetic events and emotional evocations of a narrative proper. This is a not-unremarkable feat of art and the human mind.

Another common cause that emerges from this panel’s conversation reflects a

mission-critical principle of most artists of the modern West. Such a principle holds that the artist's job is not to directly solve the gravest ethical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, and political conundrums of the human condition. At best, artists might shine some brief light on those conundrums, pose questions about them, cause those questions to sit and sift in their audience's minds. Barring any of this, artists are tasked with nothing more—and nothing less—than supplying their audiences with subjectively valued aesthetic-somatic experiences or transportive pleasures, none of which might elucidate The Big Problems of the Human Condition. One senses among these panelists a uniform modesty in their presumptions about what the artist's office can do. They are cognizant of their limits for delivering or creating assured knowledge about the true state of the world as-is or as-it-could-be. Their observations suggest artists today are no longer, if they ever were, charged with providing programmatic solutions to the eternal problems of humanity, or even to the current problems of sociopolitical structures. These fall more in the remit of scientists, academics, politicians, lawmakers.

At the same time, their remarks suggest that practitioners of the narrative arts are expected to have *some* compelling, decently well-informed vision of humanity and the state of the real world. Imaginative artists are surely expected to be tacticians at representing captivating details of sensuous felt experience, if not the larger sweeps of life and its problems as well. The artists here understand their key responsibilities as supplying their public with appealing stories and aesthetic pleasures within their chosen media. And while the panelists gathered by Scott have all made some conscious choice to reflect and grapple with sociopolitical tensions of their current worlds, they also remain mostly agnostic about the causal forces that could release those tensions if manipulated just so in that real world.

And when an artist *does* venture such ideas or possible solutions, those advisories seem to work best when presented sideways, partly obscured, sunken, or unfinished. They are left to be re-discovered by the audience, refracted through the filters of their minds.

Stanley Kubrick embraced comparable, if more complicated, views about the artist's function vis-à-vis the commercial, aesthetic, psychological, sociopolitical, and epistemological objectives he set for himself and his films. Statements made by Kubrick in rare interviews and in short published articles he authored early in his career, coupled with supporting testimonials from critics and colleagues who knew his work best, reveal a director whose preferred methods for meaning-making privileged a photographic visual language and poetic indirections. They also reveal Kubrick's fraught relationship with story and script within his cinematic art, a point we will take up first. Kubrick understood that narrative artists—or at least himself, as a filmmaker working in the cracks between popular and art cinema—must be, first-and-foremost, competent storytellers. And from inception to preproduction, production to post, Kubrick was intensely concerned about the script and the story his camera would eventually tell. However, Kubrick also viewed the linear narrative conventions and character/plot-driven motivations of Classical Hollywood Cinema highly suspect, if not plainly anathema, to his artistic mission-principles.

In narrating how a 16-year-old Kubrick shot and sold his first photograph to *Look*—of a New York newspaper vendor holding an edition announcing the death of FDR—biographer Vincent LoBrutto indexes the moment as a storytelling venture: “Stanley didn’t just take the man’s picture. He made the situation into a piece of photojournalism. As he looked through the viewfinder, he carefully composed the frame to tell a story.”³³⁹ This storytelling urge and intuition would not diminish. Indeed, it would only increase as

³³⁹ LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick*, 19.

Kubrick's narrative and conceptual toolkits became more complex as he grew into a mature man and filmmaker. Kubrick scholar and friend Alexander Walker claims that the young director's experiences making his first feature-length film, *Fear and Desire* (1953), "provided Kubrick with formative experiences. One was the overriding necessity of a realistic and engrossing story. The other was the value of creative freedom."³⁴⁰

But the "story is king" philosophy/economic model, which we hear about so often today in our story-centric media cultures, was clearly not the preferred model of Kubrick. And in many ways his films were attempt to both satisfy and undermine these unavoidable of the commercial landscape he found himself working in and, more universally, of the human mind he was appealing to. Walker goes on to eloquently capture not only the calculated interest Kubrick had in shaping his films around the bones of a saleable narrative, but also the fraught relationship Kubrick cultivated between story and his audio-visual art:

The importance of the story was to become a fundamental aspect of Kubrick's working methods. He was a filmmaker who put his trust in the old atavistic appeal of a story, in its ability to focus his own talent, retain the attention of his audience, and at the same time underpin his exploration of the areas of special interest within his story. In this respect, he was a traditionalist compared with avant-garde filmmakers who have freed themselves from the tyranny of the story by abolishing it. Kubrick acknowledged this a was a strong temptations; but he was fond of quoting the passage in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* in which this novelist and critic writes: "Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the camp-fire,

³⁴⁰ Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director: A Visual Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1999), 15.

fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him.”

For Kubrick, finding a story he wanted to film was probably the most important yet least successfully dealt with part of his work. The question “How did you find the story?” was to him like asking, “How do you fall in love?”³⁴¹ “I have always found it to be an accidental process, and never one which can be attacked head-on.” He would ponder the opportunities a potential story contained for months before even beginning to do anything about it. [...] When pushed, he conceded that a story is a film’s most artificial aspect, too, since a well-organized narrative is seldom met with in life. But naturalism, as we know, was not the frontier of Kubrick’s interests; he continually crossed it. The story is one device for doing so. It satisfies the primal curiosity, a point often lost sight of in films; if the magical ingredients are present, the story also extends the imagination into the director’s own sphere of concern. The excitement that the discovery of the right story released in Kubrick was intensely creative, as it drew on, added to, and became converted into whatever other thoughts and interests obsessed him at that particular time. He set immense store on it. “Just as actors have nightmares that they’ll never get another part, I have a recurring fear that I’ll never find another story I like well enough to film.”

James Naremore further elucidates the director’s complicated relationship with story.

³⁴¹ Walker, *Stanley Kubrick*, 17–18.

Throughout his critical retrospective *On Kubrick* (2007), Naremore contends Kubrick shares aesthetic kinship with the literary High Modernists. Analyzing Kubrick's first commercially and critically viable feature, *The Killing*, he associates Kubrick's narrative approach with the poetic techniques that T.S. Eliot celebrates in his essay " 'Difficult' Poetry." The role Kubrick's narratives play within his hierarchy of aesthetic-emotional-conceptual objectives, suggests Naremore, is often that of the smuggler, "functioning rather like what T.S. Eliot once described as 'meaning' in poetry: in the guise of offering rational information, it helps to keep the viewer's mind 'diverted and quiet, much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.'" ³⁴² Thus, it might not be too coarse to distill Kubrick's commercial-aesthetic pitch to his audiences down to something like this: "Come for the story. Stay for the cinema."

Writer Brian Aldiss worked with Kubrick on and off for many years on his adaptation of *AI*, the film Kubrick was set to shoot before his death in 1999. ³⁴³ According to Aldiss, story was a subordinate, if functional, player in the end product of a Kubrick film. Bringing to light the very Kubrickian notion of narrative film's "non-submersible units," Aldiss reflects, "Stanley would have none of my reliance on narrative. He pointed out that a movie can contain at most 60 scenes, whereas a novel can contain any number, one fading into another. A film needed only about eight 'non-submersible units,' as he called them." ³⁴⁴ Reinforcing the salience of non-submersibles in Kubrick's filmmaking logic and his fabula/syuzhet configurations, Aldiss goes on to say,

³⁴² James Naremore, *On Kubrick* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 33.

³⁴³ *AI* was eventually produced and directed by Kubrick's friend and colleague, Steven Spielberg.

³⁴⁴ Brian Aldiss, "Though We Often Rocked With Laughter While Working, We Made No Progress," *The Guardian*, July 16, 1999: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/jul/16/3>.

One of the many sensible and perceptive comments he made over the years was that a movie consists of, at most, say 60 scenes, whereas a book can have countless scenes. So, he said, it's very difficult to boil down a novel to make a film, as he found with *The Shining*. Much easier to take a short story and turn that into a major movie. "All you need is six non-submersible units," [Kubrick would say]. "Forget about the connections for the moment."³⁴⁵

Basically, non-submersibles can be understood as a core group of indispensable elements of a film's *syuzhet*, whose interconnections are often withheld from the spectator's immediate grasp. Critic Zachary Wigon formulates them like this: "six to eight sequences that function independently of one another, with their own beginnings, middles, and ends. These sequences can function on their own, but when placed in order together in a narrative film, what one ends up with is an entire narrative that draws its strength from the fact that the audience is forced to draw connections between the various units."³⁴⁶ The choice of words Kubrick used here is also revealing: if there are a set of "non-submersible" units in his films, one must infer that conversely there must be all kinds of "submersibles" as well.

A panelist in the roundtable discussion "Stanley Kubrick and Modernism" draws compelling parallels between Kubrick's non-submersible units and the literary modernists' techniques of parataxis and juxtaposition put on high display by poets like Eliot and Pound: "Like the Modernist-Imagist classics," Kubrick's films "consist of several 'non-submersible units' that are juxtaposed in series rather than linked in a conventional narrative form, and the

³⁴⁵ Brian Aldiss, in *The Last Movie: Stanley Kubrick and Eyes Wide Shut*, dir. Paul Joyce (London: Lucida Productions, 1999), documentary film.

³⁴⁶ Zachary Wigon, "Under The Hood: 'The Congress' and Kubrick's Non-Submersible Units," official website of the Tribeca Film Festival, <https://tribecafilm.com/stories/under-the-hood-the-congress-kubrick-non-submersible-units>.

elements have the minimalist sense one finds in Imagism.”³⁴⁷ In the same discussion, another panelist, Fernando Burjato, adds this:

We can find some [Modernist] characteristics in Kubrick’s films, referring to form. Most of the meaning in his films is given by images. This is similar to Modernism in painting[,] getting free of the literary elements. [...] Even though all of Stanley Kubrick’s films are based on books, almost none of them (except maybe *Lolita*) are “literary.”³⁴⁸ [...] Maybe the last three Stanley Kubrick films are the most “Modern” (in this sense). Somebody wrote that *The Shining* is “about watching *The Shining*,” and I think the same could be said about *Full Metal Jacket* or *Eyes Wide Shut*. I’m not saying they don’t have stories (very good ones in my opinion), but it seems that the story is secondary to the images, and not the other way around.

This image-first mode of filmmaking is not exactly complementary to the “story is king” Hollywood orthodoxy. Fortunately for Kubrick (and his viewers), he was one of the few directors to have total control and full cut over his projects, working both alongside yet outside the Hollywood machines.

Kubrick himself was known to talk about the secondary/marginal status of the script in his filmmaking process—despite revising pages relentlessly and at great length both with his co-writers and on his own during shooting schedules. In one interview with Michel Ciment, Kubrick professes, “Thinking of the visual conception of a scene at script stage can be a trap that straitjackets the scene. I find it more profitable just to try to get the most

³⁴⁷ “Stanley Kubrick and Modernism: A Discussion,” *The Kubrick Site*, ed. Rod Munday, <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0092.html>.

³⁴⁸ The term *literary* is used quite loosely here, probably meant to indicate a reliance on a driving plot and the primacy of language for audience effect.

interesting and truthful business going to support the scene and then see if there's a way to make it interesting photographically. There's nothing worse than arbitrarily setting up some sort of visual thing that really doesn't belong as part of the scene."³⁴⁹ While this statement does not signal a categorical will to subvert any and all conventions of classical Hollywood storytelling, Kubrick is quite clear in prioritizing his photography over extraneous demands of a well-told story. Depicting narrative events in service to rendering a coherent, conventional story arc was in the end ancillary to the filmmaker's other aesthetic objectives and modes of meaning-making. Ciment chooses to refer to Kubrick's co-writers as "scenarists," further suggesting the centrality of imagistic scene in the director's craft, over and above any need for supplying comfortable narrative progression or "snappy" dialogue to his audiences (which Hollywood screenwriters are wont to parade out for other directors).

We thus sense in Kubrick an internal dialectic: between story and image, script and scene, verbal prompts and sensory experience, surface cues and submerged co-creative meaning. He would grapple, and exploit, this tension throughout a career that set out to bridge mainstream popular entertainment and an art cinema of a distinctly modernist sensibility. For instance, the preliminary choice of literary material to film was agonized over. Then, initial screenplays would be vetted, scrutinized, and conferred about for months if not years before any production began, only to become unrecognizable after the director's interventions. Kubrick always knew, perhaps resignedly, that he needed that "good story" to hook his audience—even if that story was in the end more of a frontispiece to his cinematic architecture, the bait that could lure eyeballs and brains into experiencing a less orthodox brand of aesthetic-emotional-intellectual event.

³⁴⁹ Stanley Kubrick, quoted in Michel Ciment, *Kubrick* (1982), excerpted from "Biographical Notes," The Kubrick Site, ed. Rod Munday, <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/milestones.html>.

The selection to film Stephen King's *The Shining* was Kubrick's boldest bid to give his audiences something they would feel immediately familiar with, something that would seem accessible without special skills of interpretation or narrative comprehension. Coming on the heels of *Barry Lyndon*—which performed modestly at the box office and whose appeal did not much pique the middlebrow tastes of mainstream American filmgoers who had just been introduced to the market of the blockbuster—the decision to film *The Shining*, a massively popular piece of genre fiction, made good business sense and good narrative sense. Of course, in typical Kubrickian form, the director proceeded to gut and modify King's original at virtually every turn, keeping the bones but dressing it completely as his own, while taking several jabs at King's own performance with the novel along the way. Kubrick's *Shining* became a film replete with ramifying meaning potentiality and unforgettable audio-visual images; King's novel in comparison seems destined as a footnote within the overcrowded genre of horror fiction. With his choice and reimagining of such literary materials, Kubrick proved himself not only a shrewd businessman and showman but a consummate filmmaking artist: and one of his desires as an artist was to exhibit his art products to as *many* people as he could, not the least.

Kubrick must have believe that, beyond delivering satisfying mimetic stories, the best filmmakers—the true artists—could also deliver powerful conceptual insights and, to use a term he would often default to, “poetic” experience. Crucially, such poetical moments and conceptual visions would be most effective when expressed gingerly: through suggestion and indirection. Backgrounded objects and events, undeclared intertextual cues, and the residues of visual and aural images spread across the filmic frames of space and time—these were the proper containers for suppressed authorial commentary about the foregrounded narrative

unfoldings, and for co-creative puzzle play between audience and filmmaker. The invisible forces of consciousness and our sociopolitical systems, thus, get reflected in the formal strategies and communicative techniques of Kubrick's films, the best of which turn out to be highly suggestive if not openly symbolic. Indeed, critics like Thomas Allen Nelson, Philip Kuberski, Naremore, and Walker³⁵⁰ pepper their book-length critical analyses of Kubrick's oeuvre with references to his symbolic-mythic approach and his use of the power of suggestion to convey meaning. Kubrick, they say, was above all a conceptual artist who worked in a cinematic language of submerged meaning, the same language of the myth, the allegory, the fairy tale. Both Freud and Jung are observed to be influencing Kubrick's oeuvre heavily, if not in the details of their psychological theories then in their own fascination with how symbolic structures communicate in art and life. Their books would be rendered lifeless without recourse to an implied hermeneutic fueled by second-order symbolics.

Meanwhile, other critics and perceptive viewers of Kubrick's films write convincing monographs or sprawling online analyses incorporating intensely creative allegorical-symbolic readings of the Kubrickian universe. There is, for instance, Leonard Wheat's *2001: A Triple Allegory*, which systemically attempts to untwine the intertwined allegorical layers that Kubrick's *2001* is presumed to be built upon: the understories being Homer's *Odyssey*, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and an evolutionary narrative about the speculative progression of human-machine symbiosis.³⁵¹ There is Rob Ager's rich online collection of sharp-eyed scene decodings that run syntagmatically across individual Kubrick films and

³⁵⁰ Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000). Philip Kuberski, *Kubrick's Total Cinema: Philosophical Themes and Formal Qualities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). Naremore, *On Kubrick*. Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director*.

³⁵¹ Leonard Wheat, *2001: A Triple Allegory* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000).

paradigmatically across the director's oeuvre.³⁵² And there is the relentless archive of popular and academic criticism on Kubrick, which are fed in so many ways by the aesthetic-critical inspiration to crack the filmmaker's seemingly endless symbolic/creative codes: to take just one example, a recent piece in *Senses of Cinema*, "Kubrick Creator: Alchemy in Stanley Kubrick's Films," impressively argues a case for construing "alchemy as a mythological metaphor for [Kubrick's grand] project, the structure and symbolism of which strongly affect the narrative and appearance of his films."³⁵³ And as already mentioned, critics like Bill Blakemore and Geoffrey Cocks have formulated compelling symbolic/allegorical interpretations of works like *The Shining*, which becomes understood not as a horror genre film but as an intricate, submerged essay on historical holocausts and the entrenched brutalisms fed by nationalism, patrimony, and the political economies of the West. But to hedge ourselves against the hermeneutic fallacy of over-gristing one's mill, let us turn to Kubrick himself for *some* semblance of verbal affirmation about such readings.

Kubrick granted few public interviews during his lifetime, and when he did he was usually reticent to talk about his own films or his craft. Early-career interviews and statements do exist, however. And observing in combination four short declarations Kubrick made in 1957, 1961, 1964, and 1971, we have enough to form a skeleton key into the filmmaker's dominant aesthetic and epistemological orientations:

I think that for a movie or a play to say anything really truthful about life, it has to do so very obliquely, so as to avoid all pat conclusions and neatly tied-up ideas. The point of view it is conveying [...] has to be got across through a

³⁵² Rob Ager, *Film Analysis and Collative Learning*, websites: <http://www.collativelearning.com/FILMS%20reviews%20BY%20ROB%20AGER.html> and <http://www.collativelearning.com/CLS%20FAQ.html>.

³⁵³ Rutger H. Cornets de Groot, "Kubrick Creator: Alchemy in Stanley Kubrick's Films," *Senses of Cinema*, Sept. 2012, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/kubrick-creator-alchemy-in-stanley-kubricks-films/>.

subtle injection into the audience's consciousness. Ideas which are valid and truthful are so multifaceted that they don't yield themselves to frontal assault. The ideas have to be discovered by the audience, and their thrill in making the discovery makes those ideas all the more powerful. You use the audience's thrill of surprise and discovery to reinforce your ideas, rather than reinforce them artificially through plot points or phony drama or phony stage dynamics put in to power them across.³⁵⁴

If you really want to communicate something, even if it's just an emotion or an attitude, let alone an idea, the least effective and least enjoyable way is directly. It only goes in about an inch. But if you can get people to the point where they have to think a moment what is it you're getting at, and then discover it, the thrill of discovery goes right through the heart.³⁵⁵

I like the slow start, the start that goes under the audience's skin and involved them so that they can appreciate grace notes and soft tones and don't have to be pounded over the head with plot points and suspense hooks.³⁵⁶

I'm sure that there's something in the human personality which resent things that are clear, and, conversely, something which is attracted to puzzles, enigmas, and allegories.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ Stanley Kubrick, "Words and Movies," *Sight and Sound* 30 (Winter 1960/61), 14.

³⁵⁵ Stanley Kubrick, "Stanley Kubrick and Joseph Heller: a Conversation" (1964), transcription from taped discussion with Heller after completion of *Dr. Strangelove*, excerpted in *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, ed. Alison Castle (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), 364–5.

³⁵⁶ "Kubrick Dissects the Movies," *Newsweek*, Dec. 2, 1957: 96–7.

Only the most jaded of critics could write off meta-remarks like these as disingenuous or irrelevant to how we ought to construe meaning from that artist's work.³⁵⁷ A preference of aesthetic style and communication is clearly enunciated here. Moreover, these statements were uttered early on in a career that would only see meanings get pushed further and further below the rippling surfaces of this filmmaker's narrative forms. Conceptually and philosophically, they ride on certain unspoken assumptions about the validity of truth and the proper form truth-bearers should take within narrative cinema. Kubrick's epistemology understands that truth is complex, "multifaceted," and must be felt to be ascertained by self-discovery. Most interestingly, perhaps, and certainly most crucial for this dissertation, these truths are also understood to be most effectively delivered through "subtle injection into the audience's consciousness," and not by "pounding" the audience "over the head" with "phony" plot effects, inelegant moralizing, or authoritarian indoctrination. Cinematic art, for Kubrick, was not the proper harbor for Aristotelian *claritas*. Indeed, he sensed that "the human personality"—in consort with aesthetic objects if not in real life—was in certain respects repelled by clarity, while inherently "attracted to puzzles, enigmas, and allegories." Kubrick's films, particularly his later oeuvre, are manifestations of and variations upon this aesthetic mode: an approach animated not only by the technics of indirection, puzzles, grace notes, and mythic-symbolic intertextualization, but also sharp moments of discovery—the

³⁵⁷ Stanley Kubrick, interview with Alexander Walker (spring 1971), printed in Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director: A Visual Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1999), 38.

³⁵⁸ Contending that statements like this amount to nothing more than throwaway lines or a deceptive artist's false flags would be the hallmark of intellectual dishonesty, critical paranoia, and hopeless cynicism about good-faith human communication. Critics in the anti-author/anti-biographical-evidence camps might be wont to do so. I would counter that authorial declarations like this must be considered as attempts at communicating with fidelity—especially from an artist worked tirelessly to critique dishonesty and evasion in human communication, representing the disasters that unfold from intentional duplicity or accidental communication errors.

cathartic clarity that comes after exposing the self to the mental-emotional jostling of such allusive, elusive, aesthetic enigmas.

As his remarks indicate, Kubrick aimed to induce his audiences toward states of deep thought and discovery—thought and discovery not just about the world, or themselves, or the art at hand, but about the artist, too. He wanted to “get people to the point where they have to think a moment what is it you’re [i.e. the artist] getting at, and then discover it.” And that “thrill of discovery goes right through the heart”—an image we might think of, in biopoetic terms, as all the sensory information and cues from his films flowing across the various PECMA channels of attention, perception, cognition, and affect, toward some feeling of resolution or, better, epiphanic ecstasy. Kubrick’s aesthetic-conceptual puzzles work on the human mind’s deeply engrained desire to seek resolution out of irresolution. Yet, crucially, as this quote intimates, audiences do have recourse to solving his puzzles by applying a simple, commonsensical hermeneutic heuristic. Ask: what is the artist is “getting at”? Thus, we have an insinuated plea for communication, for mind-meld between artist and audience. Other statements Kubrick makes about the artist-audience relationship, in various interviews and dialogue reports, can hint more at Eliot’s orphanage principle of art: after public release, the artist must let his products go, accepting that they will be interpreted by many minds in many ways. Yet those quips tend to sound tinged with an artist’s weary resignation or flippancy—the real throwaway culprits, perhaps. They cannot undercut these stated desires to communicate with his audience and to deliver, however indirectly and unhurriedly, authentic senses of discovery.

When average moviegoers think of Kubrickian “discovery,” they might default to the memetic, crescendo moments of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But after exploring the film’s vast

critical literature, engaging the film with close repeat viewings, and applying a second-order hermeneutic framework for those repeat viewings, it becomes impossible to ignore that there are moments of discovery extending far beyond the narrative crescendos alone—discoveries that materialize from the film’s dense iconographies of sound, image, and polysemic signification. Not surprisingly, we can observe Kubrick himself, when pressed on such issues, walking a tight rope (not unlike the Zarathustran character) between two conflicting impulses: a wish to discourage his audiences from excessive abstracting, from falling too far away from their immediate sensory experience of the film; and an inclination to not shut the doors on admitting certain symbolical-allegorical possibilities into the meaning-making fields of his films—which of course can only be “discovered” by exercising some form and degree of mental abstracting. This is Kubrick in an interview that took place five months after *2001*’s premiere:

You’re free to speculate as you wish about the philosophical and allegorical meaning of the film—and such speculation is one indication that it has succeeded in gripping the audience at a deep level—but I don’t want to spell out a verbal road map for *2001* that every viewer will feel obligated to pursue or else fear he’s missed the point.³⁵⁹

The implication here is that there could be (and probably is) a philosophical and allegorical complex guiding the film’s unfoldings. But expecting a verbal re-articulation of that complex from the filmmaker himself—especially when they sport Kubrick’s attitudes about the failings of language and the non-verbal audio-visual priorities of film—would be naïve. The exegete is obliged to do any hermeneutic heavy-lifting on her own.

³⁵⁹ Stanley Kubrick, interview with Eric Norden, *Playboy*, September 1968. Reprinted in *Stanley Kubrick: Interviews*, ed. Gene D. Phillips (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

What's more, Arthur C. Clarke, who composed the film's script with Kubrick, was known to prefer a less enigmatic end-product than what Kubrick's film finally delivered. And yet—despite his hope for a more literal, accessible, narrative-driven art object—he authenticates the hermeneutic desire to interpret the film as doubly, triply, quadruply allegorical and replete with symbolic resonance. Upon the film's release, Clarke remarked, "If anyone understands it on the first viewing, we've failed in our intention."³⁶⁰ In typical contrarian form, Kubrick pushed back against Clarke's quip. In a public response, Kubrick simply called the remark "facetious." A more likely reading of the situation, however, would be this: the director felt remarks like this were crude, indecorous within the finely controlled universe of his aesthetic craft, unfitting to his auteur persona, and a poison pill to the film's commercial viability for satisfying mass audiences—audiences who Kubrick justifiably feared might bristle at the prospect of buying tickets for a movie that will not be fully understood with one paid sitting. Indeed, Clarke biographer Neil McAleer notes that MGM executives were apoplectic with Clarke's "multiple viewings needed" notice. Clarke was left unmoved, however, and later rejoined:

I still stand by this remark, which does not mean one can't *enjoy* the movie completely the first time around. What *I* meant was, of course that because we were dealing with the mystery of the universe, and with powers and forces greater than man's comprehension, then by definition they could not be totally understandable. Yet there is at least one logical structure—and sometimes

³⁶⁰ Neil McAleer, *Sir Arthur C. Clarke: Odyssey of a Visionary, The Biography* (New York: Rosetta Book, 2013), n.p.

more than one—behind everything that happens on the screen in *2001*, and the ending does not consist of random enigmas, some critics to the contrary.³⁶¹

If anyone was privy to Kubrick's designs for constructing *2001* around a multi-layered allegorical logic, it would be Clarke, who worked tirelessly alongside the director for many years. Clarke's on-the-nose remarks, coupled with Kubrick's cagier more incongruous ones, suggest the film be read as both enigmatic yet fully equipped with keys to unlocking certain of its signifying mysteries. In the end, it seems rather improbable that *2001* was not guided by a set of well-considered philosophical, narrative, and aesthetic logics that would lead a viewer (one day) to draw some satisfying conclusions and answers. Those logics may have been intentionally complex, obscured, and non-schematic, but we "get" that they must exist.

Further biographical evidence could be marshaled to support these points. One can find clue in Kubrick's lifelong omnivorous reading program, whose traces are evident in his personal library and in his many discussions of books and letters with family, friends, and colleague. Just to take two quick examples, Wilson Bryan Keys's *Subliminal Seduction* (1974) was a popular psychology book (with an introduction by Marshal McLuhan) that argued for the existence and power of subliminal imagery in print and motion-picture advertising; Kubrick had reputedly made a special order for this book in between filming *Barry Lyndon* and *The Shining*.³⁶² Anthony Frewin, who posthumously tended to Kubrick's library, also *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing* (1967) as one of the director's favorites among his vast book collection; *The Codebreakers* was "a thousand pages plus on the history of codes and ciphers written in an engaging and direct style that left no stone

³⁶¹ McAleer, *Sir Arthur C. Clarke*, n.p.

³⁶² Wilson Bryan Keys, *Subliminal Seduction* (New York: Berkley Books, 1974). Reference needed from *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*.

unturned. SK saw this as one of the great works of 20th century historical scholarship.”³⁶³ The takeaway of such evidence marshaling would be this: Kubrick became an artist who privileged techniques that elude, allude, and symbolize, more than signify overtly. He wanted his films to penetrate through side doors and anterior corridors, not frontal assaults, preferring the sneak attack to the broadcasted march. For Kubrick, if truth is approached too absolutely and obviously, it is at risk of crumbling before our eyes. Bradbury’s edict that all good symbols must be “unobtrusive” comes immediately to mind here. Even more resonant is Poe’s stumping for the “subdued” allegory: “Allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses, makes its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant appositeness.” Thus, the essential componentry of a dense second-order symbolic communication network is set up through Kubrick’s own words, his library, and his best critics.

Another motion-picture narrative artist who has, by his own admission, utilized second-order symbolic devices in his work is Nic Pizzollato. Writer-showrunner of HBO’s critically acclaimed eight-episode serial *True Detective* (2013–present), Pizzollato immediately established himself as a serious imaginative artist working in today’s so-called new Golden Era of television. This era, incidentally, has reinvigorated critical discourse on the intersections between film and the televisual. Suffice it to say, the hybridizations and convergences between cinema and small-screen narrative forms have effectively blurred many of the lines that used to set them apart. Today’s critics and academics have no choice but to treat them as, if not as equivalents, then at least as sisters within the broad family of audio-visual arts. Each season of *True Detective*, for instance, is meant to stand on its own as an independent narrative composed of eight episodes. With its pristine cinematic production

³⁶³ Anthony Frewin, “Stanley Kubrick: Writers, Writing, Reading,” *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*, 616.

values, the show can be easily reimagined, generically, as an eight-hour long film with seven intermissions.

Upon release of the philosophically inflected detective-thriller series, HBO aired each episode with an after-show behind-the-scenes supplement segment. These segments feature Pizzollato, series director Cary Fukunaga, and other principals of the production being interviewed and sharing observations about selected scenes, character psychologies, or thematic ideas of the episode at hand. In the supplement for Episode 1, Fukunaga and Pizzollato examine an establishing sequence in which an evanescent yet graphically notable tree is shot in sharp relief against a flat Louisiana plantation landscape. (See figures below.) This tree toggles between foreground and background across several shots, whispering to the viewer to mark its presence. Fukunaga's editing, photography, and mise-en-scène precipitate this arboreal object into nothing less than a cameo character. Its quietly haunting "performance" sets a poignant symbolic stage for the entire series' narrative and conceptual trajectories. The tree's symbolic associations will percolate through many strata of Pizzollato's story logic and the imagery, character, and dialogue that await the viewer. The tree is transformed into both an interpretive key and filter. And before the symbol skeptics get a chance to sharpen their axes, the filmmakers, we see, are not shy about discussing their intentions.

In the after-show segment, Fukunaga explains, rather generically, "the tree on its own is a stark, evocative image just based on the simplicity of the lines and then the focus of the tree." It is Pizzollato's meta-analysis, however, that gives us perhaps our most clearcut testimonial yet of an artist consciously deploying a second-order symbolic cues: "Symbolically the tree has many forms because its features mirror many forms. The

branching veins and capillaries. It's what the human nervous and all our arteries look like. So the tree itself is iconic. A lot of those symbols carry historical and anthropological significance beyond which is on the surface of our narrative."³⁶⁴ With that single iconographic key alone, *True Detective* immediately signals that we are playing on a larger, more complex signifying field: one that will offer modes and meanings slipperier, denser, more provocative than the programmatic cop/criminal serials, which we find jamming the slots of network primetime and which operate almost exclusively on first-order narrative hermeneutics.

Crucially, rather than alienating audiences with possibilities of cryptic symbolisms and interpretive enigmas, the second-order hermeneutic challenges of *True Detective* seemed to galvanize viewer excitement, discussion, and anticipation. (Kubrick may have been pleasantly surprised by such a turn.) The show's release was met with an unprecedented intensity of response from the web's fandom universe, its discussion boards, and the well-populated online communities of audio-visual enthusiasts. Significantly, it was the impulsion from these segment of the mass viewing public that drove the established, institutional television critics to attend more closer to the show's merits and novelties: an effective reversal of the more orthodox custom in which critics stoke the hermeneutic fires of popular audiences. For the most part, the hermeneutic moves and speculations that materialized showed all the signs of an intelligent and engaged community of interpreters: fans-turned-exegetes, inspired to dedicate their free time to formulating creative close readings of a primary text using their wits and whatever peripheral external research they might contrive. In this, Pizzollato deserves credit for effecting perhaps the most ingenious semiotic move and

³⁶⁴ "True Detective: Inside the Episode #1," Home Box Office, 2014, 1:02–1:40. See link on Youtube.com: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jEEwLo-MKA&app=desktop>

generic innovation of the entire show: the transformation of his *viewers* into the truest detectives of all—hermeneutic sleuths charged with de-nesting a cluster of nested truths residing both inside and outside the aesthetic universe presented before us.

Fans' research could bear good fruit, too. As the first season aired, the motivated viewer could find clues and confirmatory evidence from the showrunner himself sanctioning suspicions about latent meanings and "hidden secrets" waiting to be accessed through the show's narrativistic and photographic cues. In several interviews, all available online, we hear a very literate Pizzollato—who read English and philosophy at LSU before receiving high accolades in the MFA program at the University of Arkansas—speak openly about his intellectual and creative influences in general, and about specific intertexts he drew upon while crafting the scripts and steering the production of *True Detective*.³⁶⁵ Several figures recur in these conversations: H.P. Lovecraft, himself known for seeding his early-twentieth-century sci-fi and horror landscapes with thick symbolism; Thomas Ligotti, a leading contemporary figure in the genre of weird fiction who espouses a philosophical nihilism that orbits the same gravitational centers of Pizzollato's universe; and Robert Chambers, whose 1895 short story collection *The King in Yellow* figures prominently as an ur-text of *True Detective* (the show features its own Yellow King circulating through its narrativistic and imagistic networks). The following interview passage is representative:

Interviewer: It seems that some elements of *True Detective* draw influence from the realm of literary horror. I speak not only of the references to *The King in Yellow*, but also the stick-like creations reminiscent of Karl Edward

³⁶⁵ See, for instance, "Interview: Nic Pizzolatto: Creator/Writer of HBO's *True Detective*," *The Arkham Digest*, Jan. 21, 2014, <http://www.arkhamdigest.com/2014/01/interview-nic-pizzolatto-creatorwriter.html>; and Michael Calia, "Writer Nic Pizzolatto on Thomas Ligotti and the Weird Secrets of *True Detective*," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 2, 2014, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/02/02/writer-nic-pizzolatto-on-thomas-ligotti-and-the-weird-secrets-of-true-detective/>.

Wagner's story "Sticks," as well as [protagonist] Cohle's Ligottian worldview. What drew you to these elements, and how did you go about choosing to incorporate them into the show?

Nic: Sure. That influence is, like everything in *True Detective*, part of a whole-earth catalog of cultural obsessions, including my own. If your character conveys a vision of cosmic horror, it felt appropriate for me to dramatize the Lovecraftian sense of madness, of a carnivorous universe in which you're food. And Cohle's attitude is similar to things Lovecraft said (and Cioran, and Schopenhauer) [...].

The stick lattices are actually things I discovered in researching early Megalith cultures and the mound-builders in Louisiana, but I discovered Wagner's story and then it seemed even more appropriate to the kind of subconscious cultural associations the killer creates, the atavistic dread that the show tries to transmit. I suppose what drew me to these elements were the show's themes and characters, and my own interests, which to be fair are pretty broad and discursive. [...] If these things are all appropriate to the story and its themes and they can be incorporated organically and become an authentic part of the story, why not? Why not mash these influences together? Provided it's in a way that doesn't betray or lead astray the governing genre being served.

Beyond parsing out the literary genealogy of his text, Pizzolatto observes the presence of

subconscious forces at play in his characters: it is not much of a leap from there to presume he is probably aware of the aesthetic and hermeneutic potentials of deploying second-order meaning devices in the formal ecologies of his art, in service of penetrating a viewer's subconscious indirectly and unobtrusively. Finally, we observe his glossing of a fictional "whole-earth catalog"—a replete aesthetic field by another name, perhaps.

Some like-minded television programming seems to be sharing in, if not influenced by, *True Detective*'s style of symbolic realism, in which an arresting, naturalistically depicted narrative world carries the viewer along, yet is redolent with polysemic signifiers that enhance and comment upon that world. HBO's *West World* and *The Leftovers* strike similar aesthetic and hermeneutic orientations at times, for instance. But the original power of Pizzollato's first season of *True Detective* has yet to be replicated. Beyond all else, the show's success demonstrates the popular appeal of and a real *thirst for* well-formed narratives of symbolic realism and aesthetic enigma. While "popularity" alone cannot prove anything like universal cognitive adaptations are the culprit of such occasions, it certainly supports such a position. And the search for a biopoetic substratum underneath a second-order symbologies becomes even more justified with such evidence at hand.







Figures: From “*True Detective: Inside the Episode #1*,” Home Box Office, 2014. Showrunner Nic Pizzolatto, in the bottom two figures, is describing the symbolic resonances of the branching tree. Interestingly, he mimes the signifying branches using his hands and fingers—one of today’s most discussed models for how symbolic thought and language evolved in the human behavioral repertoire involves a progression from hand gestures.

Finally, let us circle back briefly to this chapter's epigraph by Rene Magritte. At this point in the argument, the burden of proof seems to be shifted to the symbolic cynics to prove that Magritte's decisions in creating this iconic painting would somehow be *devoid* of symbolic association. It is highly improbable that Magritte's decision to replace the hatter's face with an apple—one of the Western imagination's most easily recognized and highly charged symbolic images, and one that resonates across high and low cultures alike—was simply accidental, or even completely unconscious. It is marked with undeniable associations. Magritte the European master would have known these, and Magritte the surrealist would have certainly had some coterie associations of his own. The Belgium artist may not have been as forthcoming as the American showrunner Pizzollato about directing his audience toward the precise symbolic overtones and possibilities in his work. But it seems uncontested that these implicit resonances, these second-order explosions, were anything other than intended (however one chooses to define that term's philosophical parameters) and desired by the conscious mind that created them.

* * *

As with the handbook/gloss survey above, future research could explore building out a more exhaustive, globally representative survey of "artists on symbol." Data could be accreted and crunched from the vast repositories of authorial memoirs, letters, and interviews (print and video) increasingly available in the Anglophone and global media landscapes. Apply the computing power of the digital humanities, and we have the framework for growing yet another rich, living archive that beckons for creative investigation, data-slicing, and interpretative analysis. The admittedly anecdotal evidence provided in this section functions as nothing more than a preliminary estimation of what that research might point to.

CHAPTER 5

A Symbol Survey: The Ghosts of Symbol Past

We owe to the Romantics the symbol's modern apotheosis into the role of master literary device. The modern symbol is connected with its ancient legacy, but only through a circuitous and difficult route. As opposed to metaphor, the literary symbol has a more obscure classical history.

A few bold souls, ancient and modern, suspect that the poets' stories might say more than they appear to say. They still hear in their words the faint but distinct promise of some truer resonance, of a subtle and profound knowledge that arrives in a concealed form and is waiting for a skilled reader to liberate it from its code.

— Peter Struck³⁶⁶

Freud believed that dreams disguise our unconscious thoughts by translating them into a language of symbols, that by interpreting our dreams we could decode our unconscious, and doing so could help us discover repressed wishes or resolve some inner conflict.

Fiction works the same way. Writing is most successful when it avoids browbeating the reader with instruction and instead communicates in a language of suggestion. Symbolism doesn't exist in fiction merely to paint pretty pictures. It's actually an exercise in economy: symbolism allows writers to energize the work while gradually letting elements on the page accrue metaphysical weight. It allows the writer to supply the literal fundamentals while exploring metaphorical spaces. Symbolism isn't just a storytelling "trick." It's the lexicon in which stories are told.

— Jon Gingerich³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1–2. This quotation is the result of some elisions across paragraphs; ellipses have been removed for a more economic epigraphic style. The text's meanings are in no way compromised.

³⁶⁷Jon Gingerich, "Symbolism: Storytelling and the Invisible Hand," *LitReactor*, Oct. 30, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/symbolism-storytelling-and-the-invisible-hand>. Qts. also elided (see above.)

Overture

This chapter traces an *ad hoc* genealogy of Western symbol theory from the Classical to the modern period. (For a look at symbol's contemporary status in the Anglocentric academies and arts, see the preceding chapter.) It surveys some of the historical junctures and benchmarks of symbol theory as distilled from an interdisciplinary brew of artists, critics, philosophers, and their historiographers.

First, a disclaimer: a comprehensive history this is not. A truly exhaustive capture and synthesis of the critical literature on symbolism and its many interconnecting fields—from semiotics and linguistics to art-historical iconology, dream psychology, and philosophy of language—would demand a lifetime commitment plus contributions from a community of like-minded scholars. The sheer quantity and diversity of approaches taken toward symbol theory over the years is immense and, at least for practical purposes, systematically intractable. As symbol historiographer Tzvetan Todorov admits, the historical tradition of the symbol “is so vast as soon as one imagines extending it beyond the borders of a single country to the Western world as a whole, one realizes that it cannot be known in the course of a single human lifetime.”³⁶⁸

Petocz's Perspectives

Agnes Petocz sizes up the complexity of the historiography of symbol studies in her opening to *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism*. Pointing to Levi-Strauss's observation

³⁶⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 10.

that “the word *meaning* is, probably, in the whole language, the word the meaning of which is possibly the most difficult to define,” Petocz claims the term *symbol* is equally, if not as ironically, difficult to pin down.³⁶⁹ She starts with an etymological sketch: *symbol* derives from a Greek verb meaning “to throw together” and its nominative counterpart meaning “tally”; the first sense “referred originally to each of the two corresponding pieces of some small object which contracting parties broke between them and kept as proof of identity.” These meanings get “expanded to include a diversity of meanings (other kinds of token, seal, contract, sign, code, etc.), which today has mushroomed even further.” Contemporary definitions often “reflect the mystique originally associated with symbols, and which prompted Whitehead (1927) to comment on the ‘unstable mixture of attraction and repulsion’ in our attitude towards symbolism.”³⁷⁰

Petocz observes, with barely concealed consternation, that due to the bewildering commotion in symbol-theory history and historiography, most scholars who investigate symbol as a biopsychological event or a cultural-philosophical phenomenon consistently resign themselves to the following conclusion: “it is impossible to find a general, unifying definition” of the term—despite, as Ludwig von Bertalanffy points out, “the fact that symbolic activity is one of the most fundamental manifestations of the human mind.”³⁷¹ The disharmonies Petocz reads in the literature are further précised:

Even amongst those who bring some rigor to their treatment of the topic, there is considerable disagreement: disagreement, for example, about how to classify signs and symbols—what is the difference (if any) between the two,

³⁶⁹ Agnes Petocz, *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9.

³⁷⁰ Petocz, 9.

³⁷¹ Ludwig von Bertalanffy, “On the Definition of Symbol,” *Psychology and Symbol: An Interdisciplinary Symposium* (New York: Random House, 1965). Qtd. in Petocz, 9.

which is the broader term, and to which does language belong; disagreement also about the nature of symbolism—what constitutes symbolism, what activity may properly be described as “symbolic,” what are its origins, development, role, effects, and so on.³⁷²

Petocz aims to subvert the fatalistic attitude she detects in the definitional orthodoxies, maintaining instead that “this picture of disorder should not lead us to agree too readily that there can be no general theory of symbolism.” The remainder of Petocz’s book unfolds an interlocking argument for a more rigorous and psychologically viable definition of symbol, one founded on a resuscitation and reconsideration of one of Freud’s earliest models for symbolic activity.

Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism is indispensable reading for any scholar invested in parsing out the complicated history of semiotics and symbol theory, and in arriving at a set of conceptual frameworks needed for definitional precision. For reference and purposes of this dissertation, some of the parameters that fall out of what Petocz considers the “centers of controversy” in symbol studies are summarized below. In her own productive analysis of the historical and conceptual benchmarks of symbol theory, Petocz devises two major “perspectives” from which scholars fashion their approach to defining and understanding symbol. She is skeptical of the validity, or at least the usefulness, of Perspective One, countering that Perspective Two shows the most epistemological and experimental promise for moving symbol scholarship forward.³⁷³

Petocz’s Perspective One: Broad > Narrow Continuum

³⁷² Petocz, 9.

³⁷³ The following summary and quoted passages of Petocz’s schematic originate from Petocz, 9–20.

Perspective One is the “more obvious perspective,” which is “to regard the enormous range of definitions of symbolism as lying along a continuum, from very broad definitions to extremely narrow ones.” This classification spectrum is divided into five sub-groups or precincts of thought. Each of these coordinates is summarized below.

1.) At the broad end of that spectrum are theoreticians who consider **symbol as a superordinated category**. This is where the so-called Bibles of symbolism are located, according to Petocz: Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929/1953) and Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1943). Petocz discerns Kantian influences evident in their phenomenological and constructivist approaches, and in Langer’s information-processing view of symbolic thinking. Following Langer, computer-science applications in psychology and AI develop along this coordinate of the spectrum, according to Petocz, as does Piaget’s operational intelligence. The shared foci among these theoreticians is “the view that the ‘symbolic’ is universal because it is somehow fundamental to the thinking process.” In this scenario, symbol is thinking and thinking is symbolic.

2.) Farther along Petocz’s continuum are those who see **symbol as a kind of sign**. That is, “the sign is the generic term and the symbol is the special case, albeit special in different ways for different theorists.” Umberto Eco’s theoretical-historiographical approaches to symbol are located in this precinct, as are the outlooks of most semioticians, including “Jakobson’s synthesis of the works of Peirce and Saussure—a curious combination, given the radically different views of the concept of symbol

held by these two.” She restates their radical differences. Peirce’s tripartite model of icon–index–symbol treats symbol as the arbitrary component of the human signifying system: i.e. symbols tender “no biologically enforced connections between symbol and symbolized.” In Saussure’s semiotics, on the other hand, the sign is treated as arbitrary while symbol is “non-arbitrary” and “motivated” and thus “does not properly belong in the field of semiology.”

Petocz expresses dismay at the confounding scholarship that has spun off from these competing conceptual-terminological models of the “fathers” of semiotics and their disciples. Nonetheless, she concedes at least one positive insight gained traction from the work of these early semioticians: “One contribution made by these theorists is their recognition of, and emphasis on, the fact that symbolization (like any representation) is a *relational* phenomenon, a fact which should not be overlooked in the concern with the entities involved in the relation.” She honors thinkers like Peirce for contributing this major piece of the puzzle to the theoretical-critical debates of symbol/sign studies: that is, they successfully cast the *relation between* signified and signifier as the operative concept and proper subject of investigation. Thus, it is well-recognized in semiology today that it is not ordinary objects under study, so much as the dynamic relationship of objects and events that take place during the activity of semiosis.

Furthermore, in this precinct, symbols are understood as things which are *taken to be* their referent objects. Analogous or shared properties between the material or media of the symbol and its referent object are considered neither necessary nor sufficient

for qualifying something as a symbol proper. This sharing in some analogous or contiguous properties *is*, however, a defining feature of symbol in the precincts that fall closer to the narrow end of Petocz's spectrum (the next three included).

3.) The next group comprises those who treat **symbols as vehicles of indirect expression**. In this "neo-classical" school of thought, "the symbol is taken to be something which does have some qualities analogous to, or some natural association with, what is symbolized, and many of those whose views are located here claim that the primary form of symbolism is metaphor." Petocz uncovers muddles here as well: "sometimes the symbol is still classified as a kind of sign; sometimes it is opposed to the sign; sometimes the symbol is 'indirect' only in the sense that it is merely a vehicle for saying what a sign cannot say; almost always, however, 'affect' is seen to be an important characteristic of symbolism."

Leaders of the indirect-expression camp include Paul Ricoeur, who, Petocz notes, "explicitly locates [himself] somewhere between the Cassirer position and the metaphor position." Petocz excerpts a passage from Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), which provides key support to one of this dissertation's major definitional premises: "To mean other than what is said—this is the symbolic function," writes Ricoeur. Symbolism, moreover, "presupposes signs that already have a primary, literal, manifest meaning. Hence I deliberately restrict the notion of symbol to double or multiple-meaning expressions whose semantic texture is correlative to the work for

interpretation that explicates their second or multiple meanings.”³⁷⁴ It is precisely this additive meaning-making substrate—which symbolic schemes build-up through their doubled or multidirectional pointing capacities, while remaining embedded and often enshrouded in a work’s foregrounded narrative structures—that this biopoetic investigation of second-order symbolics seeks to interrogate and understand.

Petocz further claims, “What is important here, and what marks off the neo-classical view from the romantic, is that the symbol is ‘indirect’ only in the sense that it is a different way to say what the sign says.” The neo-classical view attaches little if any spiritual transcendence or ontological contiguities to its symbols. Thus, in this precinct it remains plausible for lucid translation to take place between more ordinary systems of signs and knowledge, and the meanings of secondary indirect symbols.

4.) Moving further toward the narrow-view end of the continuum, we meet thinkers and artists who see **symbol as a vehicle of the ineffable**. The symbol theories of romanticism are grouped here. Quoting Todorov, Petocz suggests that “without exaggerating [...] if we had to condense the romantic aesthetic into a single word, it would certainly be the word *symbol*.”³⁷⁵ According to Petocz, theories in this precinct foreground both the affective and motivational factors of symbol, adumbrating a Jungian idealist position. That is, “the affect which lies at the heart of symbolism is the affect of idealism, the ‘spiritual,’ the affect expressed by the sign.” The symbol is

³⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Dennis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 12–13. Qtd. in Petocz, 13.

³⁷⁵ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 198–9. Qtd. in Petocz, 13. Page numbers here are for the Cornell UP edition; Petocz uses the Oxford ed.

an object existing in the perceptual lived-in world that simultaneously hints at the unknown, thereby expressing the inexpressible.

The aesthetic-critical deification of symbol is placed squarely within this precinct: “In the romantic approach, above all, the notorious mystique associated with symbols is created and maintained: symbols are intransitive, intuitive, ineffable.” Translations and verbal paraphrases of symbols are rendered impossible. The reality that symbols attempt to communicate, and have communion with, is more metaphysical than physical. “On this view,” Petocz concludes, “symbols are characterized as progressive or anagoric—they are indicators of the forward-moving, spiritual, religious aspects of human nature.”

5.) The final station along the tracks of Perspective One is populated by artists, critics, and psychologists who view **symbols as unconsciously produced substitutes**. Their “approach is often characterized as ‘regressive,’ and belongs to the realm of the classical psychoanalysis.” Petocz claims, “What is important here is the unconscious nature of the symbolic process and the ‘primary’ nature of what is symbolized.” Petocz prefaces that “many later psychoanalysts support a position nearer the broad end of the continuum”: they apply *symbolism* as an umbrella term with the force of “both conscious and unconscious productions.” However, “the classical psychoanalytical position, as expressed by Freud and supported by Jones, restricts the term *symbolism* to cases where the substitutive process operates largely unconsciously and in service of defense.” Symbolic activity in this classical model

becomes nothing more than the uncontrollable outcome of jostling repressive forces. This constitutes a view quite remote “from that of linguists and semioticians.”

“At the narrow end of the definitional continuum,” Petocz specifies, “we find Freud’s later (1914, 1916/17) treatment of the symbol as unconscious, phylogenetically inherited universal code.” These are Freud’s universal dream symbols, which are unconscious, fixed, and inherited—yet inaccessible to the dreamer. This “peculiar” and “restricted” model is, according to Petocz, “at odds with Freud’s treatment of symbols elsewhere.” And there are “compelling reasons for agreeing with those who reject it.”

In her final judgment, Petocz perceives more limitations than assets to Perspective One’s broad>narrow continuum for modeling the historiography of symbol and for arriving at a tractable, academically viable definition of the term. She objects, first, to the fact that “many theorists or theories [...] occupy more than one location on the continuum.” Freud, for instance, conflates symbol with metaphor too often and casually; and Freud himself surrendered that “the concept of a symbol cannot at present be sharply delimited: it shades off into such notions as those of a replacement or representation, and even approaches that of an allusion.”³⁷⁶ “Secondly, and more crucially,” Petocz continues, “this perspective draws no distinction between those cases of symbolism which, for psychologists as well as for everyone else, are uncontroversial and uninteresting, and about which there is general agreement, and those cases which are controversial and which have for centuries been

³⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Standard Edition*, vols. XV and XVI (London: Hogarth, 1916/17), 152. Qtd. in Petocz, 15.

sources of dispute.” Perspective Two represents Petocz’s answer to this problematic, delivering an alternative model for organizing the theoretical-critical literature and historiographical coordinates of symbol theory.

Petocz’s Perspective Two: Conventional vs. Nonconventional Symbols

The second perspective of Petocz’s schematic “identifies a fundamental distinction between two kinds of symbol, and allows us to move safely towards the focus of inquiry”: namely, conventional and nonconventional symbols. The author’s explanatory passages are worth extensive recitation here:

Since, logically, anything can symbolize anything else (more accurately, anything can be used or taken to symbolize anything else), it seems reasonable to ask what the grounds are for claiming, in any particular case, that a symbol means one thing and not another. In the case of, for example, the symbols of logic, mathematics, or language, the meanings of the symbols have been established by agreement or convention. In such cases, naturally, what the symbol stands for must be learned, is not generally in dispute, and so is not held to pose interesting psychological questions. But there are other phenomena, which are considered to contain symbols, or deal with them, or be symbolic, or have some kind of symbolic force, in the areas of dreams, art, literature, rituals, myths, fairy tales, folklore, psychopathological symptoms, and so on. Because the interpretation of these symbols is not set by convention, the explanations of the occurrence, and the meanings, of such

symbolic phenomena are contentious, and have in fact been investigated, discussed, and disputed at enormous length.

It is precisely these *contentiously symbolic* elements of cultural artifacts—poems, fiction, film, visual art, etc.—that a biopoetically inflected second-order hermeneutics focuses its gaze upon and gestures to explain.

Petocz proceeds next to translate between various term-pairs theoreticians have deployed to discriminate between conventional (non-controversial) and unconventional (controversial) symbolic units:

This distinction between what may be termed “conventional” and “nonconventional” symbols is one which seems to emerge naturally from the general confusion of definitions and classifications, cutting across the broad versus narrow approaches discussed above, and also cutting across the various terminological, classificatory divisions to be found in the different subject areas in the literature on symbolism—in philosophy, semiotics, anthropology, psychology, etc. Thus, sometimes, the distinction is made between two different kinds of symbol (e.g., Langer’s [1942] and Bertalanffy’s [1981] “discursive” versus “non-discursive” symbols, Sapir’s [1959] “referential” versus “condensation” symbols, Turner’s [1968] “logical” versus “non-logical” symbols). On other occasions, the distinction is made between signs and symbols, the former representing conventional, the latter non-conventional, symbols. Here the distinction is characterized as “arbitrary” versus “transitive,” or “direct” versus “indirect.” But, whatever the terminology, and whatever the disagreements, there appears to be a major

(albeit often only implicit) agreement that it is the non-conventional symbols which are the psychologically interesting and controversial ones.

This dissertation argues that a second-order hermeneutic—whether conscious and disciplined or intuitive and non-programmatic—is indispensable for decoding any artist's or artwork's non-conventional symbolic vocabularies. However, a second-order hermeneutic is also a necessary tool for aesthetic situations in which artists deploy conventional symbols but in unconventional temporal sequences, spatial arrangements, or degrees of visibility.

Conventional symbols, in other words, can be presented in idiosyncratic spatio-temporal configurations within the media the artist is working in. Commonplace signifiers are made to recede into the work's background frames, waiting for detection, foregrounding, and integration into a work's total meaning structure by exegetes primed for such interpretative tasks. In such cases, it might be more accurate to say there is an unconventional *syntactical delivery* of conventional symbols.

Petocz continues her breakdown of these term-pairs below:

Further, there is notable cross-domain generality in the grounds on which the nonconventional symbols are separated from the conventional ones. For Langer, the “non-discursive” symbols, the non-scientific, controversial ones, point to a radically different symbolic “mode,” the two “modes” having important ontological and epistemological implications: “truth is so intimately related to symbolism that if we recognize two radically different types of symbolic expression, we should logically look for two distinct meanings of truth” (1942). Sapir distinguishes between “referential” symbols, such as writing, speech, code, and other conventional devices for the purpose of

reference, and “condensation” symbols, which are “highly condensed forms of substitutive behavior, allowing for release of emotional tension [...]. While referential symbolism grows with formal elaboration in the conscious, condensation symbolism strikes deeper and deeper roots in the unconscious [and] diffuses its emotional quality to types of behavior and situations apparently far removed from the original meaning of the symbol” (1959). [...]

Bertalanffy supports Langer’s distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbols; for him, discursive symbols convey facts, but non-discursive symbols (also called “experiential” or “existential” symbols) convey values. In romanticism, symbols (as opposed to signs) have the characteristics of Bertalanffy’s “existential” symbols: they are intuitive, transcendent, ineffable, belong to a “higher” reality, and act as vehicles for the expression of the spiritual and “progressive” aspects of human beings.

The non-discursive model of viewing symbolism as higher, progressive, value-laden, unconscious, and ineffable has had towering—and sometimes polarizing—effects on how symbolic techniques are construed and appropriated in our modern storytelling arts. As we shall see in more detail, symbolism has been both revered and shunned by artists and audiences alike for many hundreds of years. Romanticism led to an intensification and codification of those often conflicting attitudes about its rightful place in the arts.

Perhaps the most incisive inference Petocz draws from her assortating of the various lexical pairs in symbol theory’s terminological array, however, is found here:

As for the question of the relationship between these two kinds of symbolism, this is rarely addressed, although, amongst the few speculations

which are offered, there seems to be some agreement that the controversial non-conventional symbols enjoy an ontogenetic priority over the conventional symbols, the latter developing from the former via a gradual diminishing of affect coupled with an increasing contribution of conscious, as compared with unconscious, processes, although it is not clear how this transition is supposed to occur.

With this, Petocz suggests that how leading symbol theoreticians have introduced ontological or evolutionary speculations on the origins and causal arrows of how conventional/referential/arbitrary signs arose out of the unconventional/condensational/primal symbol. However, most of these ideas—for example, the notion that symbol is ontogenetically (i.e. developmentally) primary to the more conscious and abstracted events of sign-system mastery—seem to be either unfounded or in need of greater theoretical rigor and empirical evidence. Nonetheless, as Petocz herself concludes, and as this inquiry into second-order symbologies generally concords, “Whatever the relationship between the two classes of symbols” turns out to be, “it is clear that the focus of our inquiry here must be on the non-conventional symbols.” This biopoetics of second-order symbol is inspired by an analogous question: why would artists and their audiences ever feel compelled to indulge in aesthetic communication besotted by controversial, uncodified, highly condensational symbolic devices, or alternatively by more conventional symbols syntactically embedded, sunken, and obscured within mimetic narrative frames that seem to outrank those buried symbols.

Finally, bringing her prolegomenon and historiographical survey to a close, Petocz supplies a fluent synthesis of the “sources of confusion and centers of dispute”:

One major source of confusion in the literature on symbolism, and the reason for the disorder along the broad/narrow continuum, is that, when the controversial (i.e. non-conventional) symbols are under discussion, most theorists neglect to maintain clearly and consistently the distinction between the two types of symbol, slipping back and forth between them. This contributes to a second source of confusion, the question of the specific nature of the symbols which belong to the non-conventional group. There are two, closely connected, centers of controversy: the first is the question of the conscious or unconscious nature of the symbolic processes and productions, including the question of the relative contributions of conscious and unconscious processes; and the second, related, question is that of the “progressive” or “regressive” nature of symbolism, and whether there is any connection between these two.

The dialectical categories of conscious/unconscious and progressive/regressive become common topoi among symbol theorists and practitioners of all stripes. And they provide reliable frames for sifting through the otherwise delicate distinctions and oscillations that emerge in the symbolic “ideologies” of these thinkers across history. Petocz opens up the analytic further in the following passage:

As mentioned earlier, the conventional symbols are unproblematic; almost all writers on the subject consider them to be entirely conscious productions. They do not all agree, however, that the non-conventional symbols are unconscious; nor do they agree on the degree to which unconscious processes contribute to the symbolic productions, or on the origin and function of these

unconscious processes. It is perhaps no surprise that this area is rife with inconsistencies. The resulting tensions encourage theorists to speak (albeit uncertainly) of the “double aspect” of symbolism; “logos” versus “mythos,” “demystification” versus “remystification,” “transparent” versus “opaque,” “concealing” versus “revealing,” and so on. The tensions also fuel the disputes and confusions surrounding the “progressive” versus “regressive” vectors of symbolism. For the supporters of the “progressive” or “anagogic” view, symbols either have nothing to do with regressive, biological instinctual drives and their gratification, or they somehow “accomplish liberation from the slavery of the biologically imposed” (Hacker 1965), while still having “natural, biological, quasi-instinctual origins and vicissitudes.” For the supporters of the regressive view, on the other hand, the “anagogic” approach, with its idolization of the mystical “opacity” of the symbol, and its celebration of the freedom and creativity of the human spirit, is merely an attempt to disguise the formation of symbols, and “divert interest from their instinctual roots” (Freud 1919a), [promoting a] “philosophical brand of escapism” (Reichenbach 1951). It will become clear how both the failure (of which Freud is also guilty) to draw clearly and maintain consistently the distinction between conventional and non-conventional symbols, and the tensions produced by vacillations concerning the conscious/unconscious and progressive/regressive aspects of non-conventional symbols, serve as foci from which many difficulties and confusions arise.

Petocz’s organizational schema thus offers a valuable heuristic for cutting through the

theoretical-critical fog that plagues symbol historiography. As such, it sets up a productive conceptual lensing through which we can view the abbreviated chronological survey of symbol theory that follows. Building upon some of the canonical figures of symbol theory Petocz mentions, the subsequent section simply widens the scope, develops a few of her datapoints, and establishes clearer links to the priorities of a biopoetic understanding of symbolic realism and second-order hermeneutics.

Historical Benchmarks of Symbol Theory: An *Ad Hoc* Chronology

Properly, a long history of symbolism—first-order symbolisms, to be technical—would begin with the first clues of the evolutionary advent of human speech, gestural communication, and/or visual representation (~50,000–250,000 years ago).³⁷⁷ It would proceed to map the elaborations of human symbolic capacities enabled by the inventions of writing technologies and other external memory devices (~3,000–4,000 years ago). These prehistoric pivot-points receive summary treatment in the subsequent chapter. The current chapter addresses the less speculative building-blocks of our symbolic heritage, focusing on the historical record alone. That record indicates early iterations of second-order symbolics being codified as far back as ancient Greece. The subsections below sequester either a defining moment in symbol’s literary-critical history, a single influential theoretician or work, or a historiographer-critic who has already organized and analyzed these materials to good effect. These sections aim to catalogue some dominant warps and woofs of symbol theory that have threaded Western aesthetics over the last 2,500 years. My method of

³⁷⁷ Estimates in the archeological, anthropological, and biolinguistic literature are in constant flux and range widely. But extant evidence suggests to most experts in the field that this date range is appropriate for human speech evolution to have taken place within.

composition resembles more the medieval florilegium than the modern research paper and its insistence upon discovering new data or formulating (contriving?) original theory: that is, it is more a systematic collection of extracted best passages, which together will illuminate relevant conceptual motifs as well as histories.

The Foundling Birth of the Antique Symbol (Peter Struck)

University of Pennsylvania chair-professor of classics Peter Struck does considerable heaving-lifting to unearth the historical roots of literary symbolism and its hermeneutic traditions. Struck's *The Birth of the Symbol* (2004), another indispensable resource for symbol historiographers, provides extensive examination of symbol's etymological lineage and its interlocking literary traditions from the classical period to romanticism. Struck systematically traverses known and lesser known texts from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, on through early-Christian, medieval, and Renaissance Europe, concluding with a brief survey of European romantics and the paths they forged toward the symbolic sensibilities of modernism and beyond. His organization of the material discovers a vibrant cross-era conversation taking place on the functions and licensures of symbolism and its close literary kin, allegory. Mapping philological and hermeneutic genealogies of both, Struck imbricates philosophies, theologies, reading praxes, and conceptual tools that have linked these two terms across their checkered histories. One could achieve ample education in the ancients' uses and models of symbolism, ancient symbol-centric hermeneutic customs, and the impulses driving these models and customs by pairing *The Birth of the Symbol* with Struck's most recent work, *Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition*

in *Classical Antiquity* (2016).³⁷⁸ As historiographical ground zero for the field, Struck's major findings and their implications deserve some due rehearsal here.

In terms of etymological first encounters and conceptual drift, Struck has this to say about the category of *symbol*:

The category of the symbol, I will argue, is one of the allegorists' most distinctive conceptual tools, albeit one that does not arrive on the scene until the Hellenistic period. [...] The classical "symbol" is quite a different notion from the later allegorical one. A conclusion reached by Walter Müri some seventy years ago still holds: in the classical period, the word *symbol* is used almost exclusively to mean the token that authenticates a contract. But [...] a few unique contexts—in the mysteries, Pythagorean philosophy, and divination—facilitate its move from the marker of social agreements to a pivotal category in the literary imagination of the postclassical ancient world. It is securely attested as a critical term for reading literature in the third century BCE when the Stoic Chrysippus uses it as a term of art of his *allegoresis*, but we have hints that the notion was in place as early as the second half of the fourth century. It shortly takes its place among the organizing concepts of allegorical commentary and is boosted into preeminence by the Neoplatonists.³⁷⁹

Historiographically, Struck characterizes the symbol as something of a stray mutt within the pedigree of literature and criticism. "Due to its circuitous and difficult background," asserts Struck in his opening parry, "the symbol has remained a foundling

³⁷⁸ Peter Struck, *Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³⁷⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 5.

among the standard turns of literary thought.”³⁸⁰ The remainder of *Birth* is the author’s deeply informed reconstruction of the conception, parturition, and life cycle of this foundling trope. Connecting the historical-theoretical dots between an array of extant ancient sources and textual fragments, Struck validates a more prominent place for a symbol-centric, reader-responsive, Neoplatonically-inflected tradition in classical hermeneutics and letters. That tradition has, according to Struck, been historiographically and pedagogically marginalized, overshadowed by the dominant strains of Aristotelian schools of literary theory and criticism. Those Aristotelian strains, largely informed by the *Poetics* and that (incomplete) document’s analytical-prescriptive approach to art, valorize artisanal craft, textual clarity, the dramatic and epic modes, metaphor, and other tropes and figures deemed properly effective for rhetorical persuasion. As Struck observes, the canonizing anthologies of literary criticism tend to relegate the Neoplatonic symbolical-allegorical tradition to mere footnotes, figuratively if not literally, in their pages. They might include a few token excerpts sandwiched in between the Aristotelian big guns of the ancient lit-crit armada. Struck sees this as a grave mischaracterization of the historicity of ancient literary practices and, thus, sets his designs on filling out this missing piece of the lit-crit historiographical puzzle.

The following passage, capturing several major premises and conclusions of *Birth*, deserves extended recitation here:

A historian focusing on the large body of texts and scholarship that in recent tradition constitutes the field of classical literary criticism will be tempted to conclude that the symbol is a foundling in the history of criticism, as though it arrived a fully formed orphan on the doorstep of the modern age in the late 1700s. As opposed to metaphor, which critics of many later periods

³⁸⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 276.

reconstruct as a regnant trope with explicit references to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the literary "symbol" has a more obscure classical history. It almost never appears in the texts of the ancient authors that are typically collected in the anthologies of classical literary criticism, such as Aristotle, Demetrius, Horace, Quintilian, or Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Indeed, the concerns that are generally seen to be embedded in the modern symbol—to produce a form of representation that has an intimate, ontological connection with its referent and is no mere mechanical replication of the world, that is transformative and opens up a realm beyond rational experience, that exists simultaneously as a concrete thing and as an abstract and perhaps transcendental truth, and that conveys a unique density of meaning—are all quite alien to the concerns of these ancient readers. As has often been recognized within the scholarship that treats these figures, the work of Aristotle is their most prominent touchstone, and it is from rhetoric that they derive their literary-critical categories. They generate an approach to poetry and a method for studying it by adapting conceptual tools first developed for the study of the public delivery of persuasive prose: schemes of tropes, levels of style, figures of speech and thought, criteria of genre, methods of moving the emotions of an audience. [...] They tend to value clarity above all as the chief virtue of poetic language. They investigate which tropes are useful and which to avoid. [...] The greatest poets, in this reckoning, are those able to achieve these ends most effectively and clearly. [...] The rhetorical approach tends toward a criticism that focuses on composition, that is, on producing a "how-to" manual for would-be poets.

For the most part these critics see the great poet, something like the great orator, as a master craftsman who produces a finely wrought piece of work with skill and elegance. For these purposes, neither Aristotle nor ancient rhetoricians had much interest in “symbols.” The notion is almost entirely absent from the conceptual apparatus they use to analyze texts.

Struck continues, introducing his alternative “second” corpus of literary sources, which seed the ancient soils for the growth of the literary symbol and what Struck views as an equally influential strain of symbolical-allegorical hermeneutics. These texts—some of which have been newly discovered or recently translated, others simply ignored by scholars and critics—indicate a tradition of literary practices in need of rescue from the critical margins to coexist alongside the Aristotelian lit-crit histories:

But in trying to understand the literary history of the symbol we find more fruitful ground when we turn to a second body of ancient texts and a second corpus of scholarship. These ancient texts, produced by literary commentators commonly known to modern scholars as the “allegorists,” display a nearly continuous and lively interest in literary [symbol]. For reasons that bear some reconsideration, these readers have generally not been included in contemporary studies under the heading of ancient literary criticism. In marked contrast to critics in the Aristotelian tradition, these readers see their task to be primarily interpretive, not analytical.³⁸¹

In the footnotes attached to the passages above, we find other relevant remarks.

³⁸¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 2–3.

Parsing the etymology of *allegory*,³⁸² for instance, Struck traces its Greek roots to a term that “played a part in the tradition” of *allegoresis* (the practice of allegorizing) but never had the “starring role.” Usage of *allegory* today also “has the disadvantage of invoking a genre of writing, not developed until the early medieval period, in which a writer personifies abstract ideas and encodes a formulaic, one-to-one correspondence between each character and some concept, abstract principle, or element of the physical world.” The medieval generic mode of allegory, however, “has only a little to do with the ancient tradition,” which is less formally rigid or inflected by specific theological dogma.

It is crucial to observe at this point that, according to Struck’s findings, *allegory* and *symbolism* did not carry sharp distinctions for ancient interpretative communities:

In sharp contrast to the Romantics, the ancients did not generally distinguish between the “symbolic” and the “allegorical” mode. As contemporary critics, especially Paul de Man, have pointed out, the Romantics define their “symbol” in opposition to medieval and Renaissance notions of literary allegory, which struck them as mechanistic. The Romantic reinstatement of the symbol to primary position brings back a classical notion of allegorism in response to a neoclassical criticism that took its cues from the Aristotelians.³⁸³

The romantics, far from originating the notion of literary symbol, were in fact reconnecting with a much older tradition in Western poetics—a tradition that was, granted, not yet known to most writers and artists of that time period. So while their concerns often did center on defining symbol’s specialness over and against allegory, the romantics, according to Struck’s

³⁸² *Allegory* stems from the combination of Greek/Latin *allos* (other) and *agora/agoreuein* (to speak openly, in the marketplace). Thus, *allegory* = “to speak *other than* openly.” See, for instance, Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 2, footnote 1.

³⁸³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 5, footnote 4.

reasoning, were reacting more to the Aristotelian impulses of neoclassical art than to allegory as it had been practiced or conceptualized during ancient eras. Their splitting of hairs between *symbol* and *allegory* the ancients did not find necessary or useful—and neither, in many ways, does this dissertation. That is, second-order symbolism subtends any interpretive moves that assign an “other” (*allos*) meaning to a first-order sign. It embraces any meaning assignment that is “not there” on the page or screen at first(-order) blush. Whether those other, not-there meanings stem from the one-to-one formulas of medieval allegory, a two-to-one correspondence, or a many-to-one correspondence of ambiguously polysemic signs, we can assume this: there is a shared set of cognitive mechanisms and programs—native to the human brain but honed through cultural learning—getting enlisted to negotiate and derive pleasures from these double-/triple-/multiple-meaning ecologies. And these cognitive features and programs are what enables all allegorical or symbolic art to tick.

Struck also weighs in on the ultimate creative source for symbolism and allegory within the text–textmaker–text-interpreter complex: “While some ancient writers, notably Ovid and Vergil,³⁸⁴ surely incorporated the insights of allegorical readers in their poems, ancient allegorism is a phenomenon of reading, not writing.”³⁸⁵ With statements like these, Struck is inclined to locate the originary provenance of second-order symbologies and its interpretative validity within the activities of readers more than authors. At the same time, Struck allows that, similar to how Freud had major impact on the writers and artists of his day, “ancient allegorical criticism had an impact on writers” of that contemporaneous period: thus, for instance, “Vergil self-consciously fashioned his Juno in book 1 of the *Aeneid* under

³⁸⁴ This is Struck’s preferred spelling for the author.

³⁸⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 3, footnote 1.

the influence of traditional allegorical readings of Hera.”³⁸⁶ Since the perspective of this dissertation assigns substantive value to the conscious intentions of textmakers, it remains partial to authors who openly “incorporate the insights” of symbolical-allegorical minded readers into their craft, thus investing their aesthetic fields with consciously controlled devices of second-order symbolisms. At the same time, it does not wish to proffer that symbolic resonance licenses its validity or existence exclusively through a textmaker’s exercise of total conscious control alone.

Additionally, Struck clarifies his usage of the terms *analytical* and *interpretative* to good effect here:

By *analytical*, I mean a mode of criticism that is primarily dedicated to locating and mastering various classifications and characteristics of poetry, considered as a *techne* with unique rules and specifications. By *interpretative* I mean a mode of criticism that sees the text primarily as a repository of hidden wisdom and envisions its task as the extraction of these meanings. There is an analogue here [...] to the relationship between modern formalist criticisms and those approaches based on hermeneutics.³⁸⁷

Crucially, Struck argues that these distinctions—between the analytic-formalist schools and interpretative-hermeneutic criticisms—turn out more often than not to be arbitrary and fluid. In practice, ancient critics, particularly those who embraced the allegorical-hermeneutic approach, naturally deployed tools and objectives from both methodological perspectives. Noting the lumpiness of his classifications—more “rules of thumb” that loosely “apply to the production of allegorical commentaries”—Struck discerns a vital point about the liquid

³⁸⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 11, footnote 19.

³⁸⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 3, footnote 2.

boundaries between these critical methods: “Many allegorical critics show an equal facility with the tools and approaches of rhetorical criticism—which is to say that the rules of thumb here are not to be taken as excluding other approaches. The critic who produces an allegorical commentary is not barred from other forms of commentary [...]. One often sees rather sober textual criticism alongside exuberant interpretative leap.”³⁸⁸ This cannot be overstated. Hermeneutic symbol-minded critics (and artists) regularly employ the tools of analytical rhetoric and formalism; inversely, analytic rhetoric-minded critics (and artists) are not exempt from “indulging” in the hermeneutic practice of taking the “exuberant interpretative leap” from first-order representations to second-order symbolic meanings. The ancient symbolic text, according to Struck’s findings, was viewed as a “repository of hidden wisdom”; the reader, a miner charged with “extraction” of that wisdom and meaning. These extractions could very well require a double-minded critical approach: a rhetorical-formalist method of analysis coupled with symbolical-associational tools of interpretation. Among the classical figures who, according to Struck, “all exhibit a plurality of approaches—philological, allegorical, Aristotelian—in their commentaries” are: Metrodorus of Lampsacus, Chrysippus, Crates of Mallos, Cornutus, Pseudo-Plutarch, Heraclitus the Allegorist, Proclus, and Porphyry.³⁸⁹

Struck amplifies all of this in the passage below, which elucidates the overarching traits, motivations, and patterns of ancient symbolical-allegorical praxes:

Allegorical critics sometimes show an interest in locating and analyzing the mechanics of the poetic craft, considered as a *techne* of compositions; sometimes they do not. [...]. In the allegorical commentaries, one sees a view

³⁸⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 3, footnote 3.

³⁸⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 75.

of the individual poet (or some *ur*-mythmaker) in isolation, as a figure with some special insight into the underlying structures that govern the world, the hidden way of things. [...] Where rhetorical critics see a polished handiwork, allegorical commentators tend to see a deep well of wisdom, which everywhere nearly vibrates with arcane observations on the structure of the world and the place of humans and gods within it. Allegorists see great poetic language as deeply figurative, with the potential always, even in the most mundane details, to be freighted with hidden messages. They spend the bulk of their critical energy [...] on particular scenes, within the (usually hexametric) lines of the great poets, which they see as murky and allusive puzzles, more precisely enigmas or symbols, that carry some hidden message. Precisely reversing the scale of poetic virtues put forward by critics in the Aristotelian line, the allegorists claim that *unclear* language, whose message is by definition obscured, is the chief marker of great poetry.

[...] One conclusion to which this study points is that allegorism reveals the literature-critical impact of one of the the best-attested popular views of the poets, that the poet is a kind of prophet.[...] Pure Aristotelians do not, in general, have such heady visions of poetry, nor do they expect to find in it such grand truths. Where Aristotle and his followers see a master craftsman, the allegorists tend to see a master riddler and a savant who can lead the skilled reader to the most profound knowledge the world has to offer.

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Murky, allusive, hidden messages couched in openly ambiguous, deeply figurative language

³⁹⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 4–5.

by a master-riddler or prophet-savant—these are precursors, if not hallmarks, of the modern poetics of second-order symbologies. Indeed, the symbolic realisms that will emerge later in the Western traditions of literature, film, and visual art braid many of these second-order elements and impulses with the features of concrete imitative realisms and vernacularized prose, which tend to work in service of delivering clearer, known quantities of first-order cues and immersive narrative-event unfolding. As suggested previously in this dissertation, we can theorize how these later symbolic-realist texts are in some sense positioning themselves to supply their audiences with a writerly *jouissance*, which can arrive upon discovery and decoding of obfuscated second-order cues, proportioned with a readerly *plaisir*, offered by more classically built stories or images. According to Struck, many ancient readers were courting similar doubled experiences in their own times: the *plaisir* provided by surface textual cues, clearly presented objects and events, and immersive narratives simulations; mixed with the *jouissance* of confronting the obscure, extracting universal wisdom, and discovering hidden keys for unlocking grander meanings embedded in the text—if not in the universe and the heavens themselves. Modern symbolic-realist texts are thus presaged by, and in many ways are bootstrapped to, these ancient cultural customs and texts.

Struck's richly evidenced thesis and supporting arguments that follow from here, sound in their presentation and inferential integrity, represent the rectification of a major critical oversight in the critical tradition. And at the center of it all is the power and the seduction of symbol. Specifically, enigmatic second-order symbols: packets of highly condensed meaning that hide just out of sight—there but *not* there—evading immediate conscious detection, waiting to be decoded by a special coterie of exegetes or, in our more

democratically theorized reading communities, by any knowledgeable, creative, committed reader of submerged signs. Struck neatly encapsulates the symbolic impulse, and the ancient reading habits it fosters, in the following précis, characterizing it as both conceptual entity (“an idea”) and affective motivation (“a hope or desire”):

This study examines the ancient history of an idea, or perhaps it is better called a hope or desire. What do we expect from poetry? [...] Is it an entertaining diversion? An edifying tale? A craft whose masters delight and move us with their elegance and fine workmanship? Yes, perhaps. But a few bold souls, ancient and modern, suspect that the poets’ stories might say more than they appear to say. They still hear in their words the faint but distinct promise of some truer resonance, of a subtle and profound knowledge that arrives in a concealed form and is waiting for a skilled reader to liberate it from its code. Some go further and take poetry as a vehicle into a region where more sober minds fear to tread, where the limitations and encumbrances of our regular lives do not exist, and where we might meet, finally face to face, the deathless gods themselves. This realm is familiar to most of us, as a superstition or a moment of insight. It lies just beyond the always receding horizon that circumscribes our day-to-day existence. Though some say it is only a phantom, others are equally sure that it exists and are drawn away by its Siren song toward what they have learned from tantalizing daily experience to be always just out of reach. With a certain regularity, ancient readers find passage to this realm by the same means. They are transported by what they understand to be the inspired poets’ most profound

and most deeply resonant poetic creations, which they mark with the same Greek term [for] “symbols.”³⁹¹

Again, a common set of conceptual motifs is being drawn upon: subtlety, concealment, and faint promise; insight, truth, and profundity; tantalizing phantoms and deep resonances; transport to a transcendent realm of higher understanding; connection to something more, something beyond; signals that remain inaccessible to normal perceptual apparatuses or modes of rational consciousness; meanings that are not accommodated by more pedestrian patterns of language or modes of communication. All of these qualities get inherited—appropriated, transformed, elaborated, or restrained—by later iterations of second-order symbolic arts and literatures.

In his précis of *Birth*’s trajectory, Struck stresses ideas from this dissertation’s preceding chapter. “The symbol has a familiar enough standing in contemporary thinking on literature,” he writes. “In most standard reference works, a symbol is a deeply resonant literary image thought to have some special linkage with its meaning: the word *organic* frequently appears in its various definitions.”³⁹² Crucially, and to reprise this chapter’s epigraph, Struck points to the pivotal booster-shot the romantics gave the symbol: “We owe to the Romantics the symbol’s modern apotheosis into the role of master literary device.” However, the romantics should not be singled out as inventing the literary device or its conceptual underpinnings *ex nihilo*, as Struck states in his conclusion.³⁹³ The romantics undoubtedly put symbol on full critical and aesthetic display, but as noted above they were in many ways reacting to what came before.

³⁹¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 1.

³⁹² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 1.

³⁹³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 277.

Struck reiterates the challenges of establishing a clear, linear genealogy for the literary symbol: “The modern symbol is connected with its ancient legacy but only through a circuitous and difficult route.” He re-stresses that “the literary symbol has a more obscure classical history” than metaphor—a method of thought and/or device of language that, however interesting in its own right, relies on explicit visible statements and not the indirect implications or murky significations of second-order polysemic symbolisms. Despite these challenges, Struck sets his aim “to retrace the oldest segments of this path.” Yet “to do so, we will pass through an overgrown tangle of debates and discussions, problems and possibilities, cosmologies, theologies, and metaphysical schemes that have long since lost their relevance—and yet whose concerns, motivations, and agendas endure, even to this day, in and through the category of symbolic language.”³⁹⁴ Struck’s final destination is quite worth the trip. Some additional summary of his itinerary follows.

Struck imbricates three intersecting, chronologically indistinct fields of religio-artistic-philosophical interpretive inquiry, which were common in ancient Mediterranean cultures and which form the foundational foci for his genealogy of the classical symbol and its hermeneutic practices. His research paints these precincts as mutually entwined and inter-influencing, sharing conterminous yet porous borders. However their relationships are envisioned, they form the font from which later permutations of literary symbolism spring. Those precincts can be classified, roughly, as:

1. Religious rites, magic, and divination (oracular/natural and mantic/technical)
2. Esoteric philosophy (notably the Pythagoreans and Neoplatonic mystics)
3. Literary art (the readers as much as the poets themselves)

³⁹⁴ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 2.

Struck asks, “What is to be gained from the debate over whether to classify allegorical commentary as literary as well as (not to the exclusion of) religious and philosophical?” His summary answer, in two parts, bears repeating.

Without reckoning the ancient developments of allegory within the context of literary criticism more generally, it becomes impossible to discern the history that runs from ancient to modern symbol theories. [...] What are usually thought of as strictly modern concerns—ontological linkage between signs and their referents, the notion that language is autonomous and creates a world rather than passively labeling it, and the view of the poet as a solitary genius attuned to the hidden truths of the cosmic order—all these positions have their roots in ancient thought and can be tracked through the study of the symbol.³⁹⁵

Thus, the ancients adumbrated many important concepts normally attributed as arch-romantic signatures: e.g. the special sign-referent ontology of symbol, the special autonomous and active worldmaking powers of language, and the special status of the poet as prophet. Struck continues with the second part of his answer:

Second, the general definition of allegory that I have been suggesting, that allegorical readers are those that view the poet as primarily a font of subtle insight into the basic workings of the world, is visible only when set in the context of the ancient schools of literary criticism. This characteristic of allegorism is hardly noticeable when, for example, we view it solely within the traditions of physical and theological speculation that emerge with the philosophers. In these other contexts, allegorical reading will not be much more than science manqué. It is often that, but it is always also more than that.

³⁹⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 13.

[...]. An investigation of the allegorists in literary-critical contexts gives us a place outside the more familiar Aristotelian currents, from which we are able to see aspects of Aristotelian criticism that are otherwise difficult to spot. In particular I will be suggesting that Aristotle's notions of poetic language, which value clarity above all, are actually part of a decidedly anti-allegorical project that sits at the head of rhetorical criticism.³⁹⁶

Throughout *Birth*, Struck stresses how the Platonic-Aristotelian crosscurrents of the same era—those attitudes which consigned poets to being, at best, competent craftsmen or entertainers; at worst, deceptive illusionists and scourges upon the social fabric and civic integrity of the polis—did not necessarily constitute the prevailing forces in the daily appreciation or creation of art in Greco-Roman cultural life. This despite the dominant *de rigueur* views in modern classical history and scholarship that would have us think otherwise. He is keen to explain, among other things, how the poet-as-prophet idea has generative foundations in the classical era and certain allegorically affiliated traditions. Noting, for instance, that the poet-as-prophet “stance toward literature may sound vaguely familiar to post-romantic critics,” Struck declaims, quite compellingly, “I suspect that it is not too strong to say that the Romantics reinvented it for the modern period.”³⁹⁷ From here, Struck marshals commanding evidence to support such judgments. Modern symbolism gets so thoroughly recontextualized historically and aesthetically—reimagined to share in a much deeper well of ancient literary ancestors—that by the end of reading *Birth*, any lingering notions of a romantic “discovery” of symbol will be summarily quashed.

³⁹⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 13.

³⁹⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 4–5.

As Struck moves through his survey of writers, readers, philosophers, and spiritualists, he also suggests five areas of sociopsychological/philosophical “seduction” exploited by the philosophical enigmas and religious mysteries of these cultures as well as by ancient allegorical-symbolic literatures. Those five categories I characterize as follows:

1. Secrecy and exclusivity: Girded by the desires for and pleasures in possessing keys that allow access to elite knowledge—whether that involves unlocking the hidden meanings of shared texts, divining the workings of the universe, or simply knowing the shibboleths that signal membership into a special cultural group—this set of seductions seems to draw as much on psychosocial dynamics of in-group/out-group social formations and economic formations that reward possession of non-abundant commodities, as much as any human will toward special knowledge.
2. Monistic ontology and cosmology: Perceptible, knowable, earthly instantiations of the imperceptible, unknowable, transcendental Oneness of the Godhead—i.e. the concrete “symbolic” formations that ramify from the ethereal/pneumatic parts of the universe—mark the dominant ontological note that thrums through the history of the symbol’s song.
3. Power of suggestion: Never using this phrase verbatim, Struck intimates it at many turns; his reader infers that *some* psychological impulse is compelling humans, across times and cultures, to engage with texts and rituals that operate through indirections, insinuations, and the aesthetics of puzzling; in his most recent work, *Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition in*

Classical Antiquity, Struck locates such impulses more explicitly within a cognitive frame of the mind's intuitive unconscious.

4. Formal economy of means: Semantic and aesthetic qualities of compression and density are noted with great frequency; Struck suggests these are universally valued assets of any symbolic apparatus or symbolic experience.
5. Skill and expertise: The import and value of being a skilled reader who can fluently negotiate the prophetic expertise and intentions of artists is stressed.

Some brief words concerning these inventories can help illuminate how second-order symbolic impulses cascade down through a range of human cultural activities—and well before the beatification of Symbol (capital *s*) by the belletristic coteries of the European and American Romantics, French Symbolists, or twentieth-century High Modernists.

In ancient Greece and Rome, oracles were believed to be vessels through which the gods could speak directly, if enigmatically. As part of their office, mantic priests were often charged with interpreting oracular messages to the public. Additionally, and more often, mantics were practitioners of mystical rites and technical religious rituals, divining the will of the gods and the earthly futures of their communities and its citizens from, for instance, the innards of animals during sacrificial rites or the movements of birds in the sky (augury). Such divine mediations and prognostications entail second-order interpretive moves of grand proportions—epic, high-stakes, second-order interpretative productions, we might say. After all, prophetic forecasts and premonitions involve, by definition, ascertaining the eventual existence of objects and events *not here* (yet) based on what *is* here. Mantics, not unlike critic-readers of second-order symbolic art, are charged with “seeing” the invisible based on

the visible. For good or for ill, analogies of {oracles:metics::artists:critics} fall readily out of such relations.

Struck depicts the exegetical desires and customs associated with divination as the first instance of how symbols served (in some contexts) as riddles. He titles one of his early sections “The Symbol as Interpretable Riddle I: Divine Message.”³⁹⁸ The second instance of symbol-as-riddle involves Pythagoras and members of his esoteric cult. Struck titles this section “The Symbol as Interpretable Riddle II: Pythagoras and the Mysteries.” The Pythagoreans devoted much of their business to solving mathematical or mystical enigmas. They were even known for identifying their in-group members with special codes, tokens, and handshakes. Pythagorean practices were thereby precursors not just to medieval esoterica and alchemy but to self-selecting coteries of human beings who gather everywhere—from today’s urban street gangs to organized sports teams, from classified governmental bureaucracies to modern-day religions. Struck explains the deep Pythagorean influence on the symbolic tradition thusly:

Pythagoras, a storied figure of the sixth century BCE, is perhaps most widely known today for his mathematical theorem that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the two remaining sides. This observation, glaring in its insight, universal in its application, and expressible in a short burst, carries the typical characteristics of the sort of philosophy for which the ancients knew him best. Much more than for this theorem, Pythagoras was famous in antiquity for a different set of insights, for example, that the number five is justice, that the sea is the tear of Kronos, and that one ought never to stir fire with a knife. These sayings are

³⁹⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 90.

part of a large body of traditional Pythagorean wisdom, expressed through enigmatic epigrams concerning ethics, cosmology, ritual, and the nature of gods and humans. From very early on and consistently, Pythagoras's followers considered these sayings to be the most important and most characteristic of the master's teachings. From at least [...] 400 BCE and down through late antiquity, they were known collectively as the Pythagorean symbols. Many of the sayings take the form of proscriptive cultic rules.³⁹⁹

Continuing in this vein, Struck parses the etymological significance of the Pythagorean usage (or non-usage) of *symbol* and how it links up with a distinctive hermeneutic turn:

Whether Pythagoras used the term *symbol* is difficult to decide conclusively. We do not have direct evidence that he did, but this proves nothing, since the early record is so fragmentary. The term is documented in Pythagorean literature from about 400 BCE, when the younger Anaximander of Miletus wrote an *Interpretation of the Pythagorean Symbols*, which does not survive. From its first appearance in our records, then, the notion of a Pythagorean symbol is linked with the notion of interpretation. Anaximander wrote in what turned out to be a long tradition of exegeses of the symbols. The fragments of Aristotle's work on the Pythagoreans nicely fit the genre. He was followed on this topic by Philochorus (b. before 340, d. after 261/60 BCE), in *On Symbols*, a lost work that presents tantalizing possibilities.⁴⁰⁰

Certain felt qualities of Pythagorean enigmas and symbols, as Struck characterizes them, are particularly relevant to a biopoetics of second-order symbolism: namely, the sense of

³⁹⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 96–97.

⁴⁰⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 98–99.

“glaring insight” that is “expressible in a short burst”—a burst that, ultimately and perhaps paradoxically, might demand some reflective interpretative intervention. Economically crafted explosions of truth, hidden from those without the skills or experience to decode them, yet decodable nonetheless—such can be the power of second-order symbolism when wielded by the masters of our arts and literatures; and in some real sense, such is the core power of the symbolic mind generally.

By comparison, the cultural significance of the literary allegorists—spinning out their “exuberant” interpretations and deeper meanings of the Homeric epics, lyric poetry, and the dramas of their day—might pale in comparison to the hermeneutic stakes at play in the aforementioned occurrences: i.e. when spiritual mediators of the divine or philosophical mystics plumb the universe and natural world for its most profound, enigmatic meanings. But the allegorically minded poets and readers of the ancient periods, performing their mutually reinforcing crafts, are equally if not more instrumental to the symbolic-aesthetic literary tradition. Struck sketches a blueprint for this cornerstone of the symbolic foundation in this aggregate of passages:

While many of the allegorists perhaps remain obscure, a rather large and growing body of scholarly work has been uncovering them.

[...]

The field of study of ancient literary criticism in general tends to begin from the premise that the parameters of literary criticism as an ancient discipline are defined by Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The allegorists’ interpretive exuberances, of course, fall outside of literary criticism as Aristotle defined it, so one is more likely to see allegorism classified as speculative philosophy, naive science, or

theology. [...] The allegorists' interest in poetry is often characterized as only incidental to their philosophical and religious interests or agendas. In the strongest formulations of this view, the allegorists are seen as only "using" poetry to pursue their agendas in these other fields, not as interested in literature for its own sake. But this is, of course, a complicated claim.

[...]

A change [within the historiography of critical theory] can be observed in the evolving views of perhaps the single most important recent scholar of ancient literary criticism D.A. Russell. His article on "Literary Criticism in Antiquity," in the second edition (1970) of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, stated quite broadly that "most ancient criticism is a byproduct of rhetoric," and goes on to call Aristotle "the fountain-head of most later criticism." He nowhere mentions allegorism. But in the third edition of the *OCD* (1996), while he maintains the fundamental importance of rhetorical criticism, he also includes several references to allegorical strategies of reading and drops the characterization of ancient criticism as a "byproduct" of rhetoric. Andrew Ford's recent *Origins of Criticism* (2004) [...] gives thorough consideration to allegorism as one of the roots of classical aesthetics. I follow these cues, and place the allegorists within a rather broad context of ancient literary criticism.

[...]

Though the allegorical tracts differ in important ways, they are united in the idea that poetry has as its defining characteristic an ability to convey grand truths that more discursive forms of language are incapable of capturing. Such

a vision of poetry is vigorously disputed by some ancient thinkers, Plato not the least. It is out of step with Aristotle's approach. To some modern philologists, it may seem overly Romantic. For contemporary literary critics, reattuned to this view by the Romantics and steeled against it by critiques from deconstruction, it may seem at the same time overzealous and oddly familiar. However it strikes us, this approach to poetry is common and unmistakable among ancient readers; it is among the most consistently attested premises of the allegorical stream of ancient reading.⁴⁰¹

As we move away from the classical periods, modifications and refinements to the allegorical tradition are, of course, widespread. But the basic aesthetic-cognitive "dialogue" evident in these acts and processes of enclosing/disclosing, covering/recovering, encoding/decoding meanings and truth—grand or otherwise—will remain quite firmly in place. It will feed many of the regnant techniques and modern forms of second-order symbolics across eras and artforms.

A quick contemporary-textual interlude is fitting at this juncture. Fast-forwarding several millennia to reconvene with two American motion-picture auteurs (and two usual suspects of this dissertation), we can discern Stanley Kubrick and Nic Pizzolatto self-referentially invoking the spirits of these anciently rooted symbolic traditions in select images and scenes of their symbolic-realist narrative texts. Pizzolatto, for instance, casts a brief but unmistakable allusion to bird augury in episode two of *True Detective*. In the beginning of the episode, fittingly entitled "Seeing Things," we follow Detectives Rustin Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Martin Wood (Woody Harrelson) tracking their first leads in what will become a murder-kidnapping-pedophilia case. Driving along a swath of

⁴⁰¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 7, 8, 12.

highway that cuts across the Louisiana swamp country, Cohle exits their car and stares up to the sky, contemplating the landscape and what might lie ahead. Rust, as he is known in the series, turns to see a flock of birds congregating, circling, spiraling, and disassembling. The duration of the shot lasts no more than a few seconds. There is no dialogue. But the expression on Rust's face conveys, however fleetingly, both puzzled consternation and, perhaps, some inchoate sense of quiet illumination. (The screenshot images below help to illustrate.)



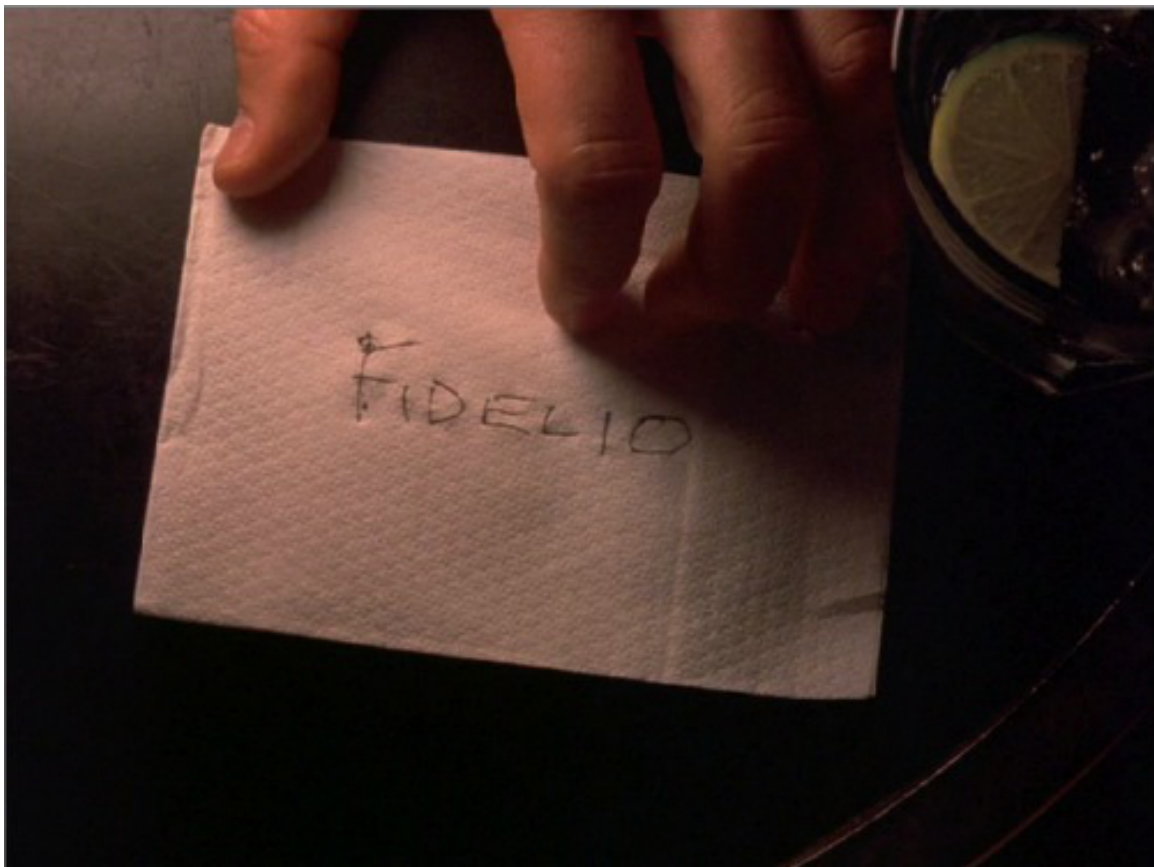




The flocking shot is clearly the product of CGI imaging, and while it blends *almost* seamlessly into the visual and narrative background setting, it also stands out as an effect that resonates as both realistic yet alienatory. A common daily occurrence (birds flying) becomes both the dominant point of focus within the *mise-en-scène* and an oddly surreal occurrence—noticeable yet subdued, pregnant with unresolved meaning. The quickness of this shot may barely register in the conscious, narrative-oriented cognitive processing of many viewers. Yet if we attend to the full visual and philosophical canvasses getting painted thus far in the series, it becomes hard to miss its significance. The action of the flock moves rapidly from its initial position as naturalistic backdrop—a local color element to accentuate the show’s verisimilitude, perhaps—to the foreground of our attention. Here, it shakes us out of the immersive illusion of the story proper and invites us to view Pizzollato’s text as a creative artifact rife with symbols that we the audience are supposed to trace out and ask questions about. Perhaps this is Pizzollato’s key for teaching his audience how to read this text. Rust, professional detector and arranger of trace clues left behind, is enlisted to augur signs evident in his world’s “text.” Positioned directly behind Rust, watching the birds from his point of view, we are asked to augur the signs of the text of *True Detective*. There is much to gain from such augury.

Along similar lines, a pivotal scene in *Eyes Wide Shut* involves piano player Nick Nightingale—a name charged with symbolism in its own right—passing his napkin to Tom Cruise’s Bill Harford at the Club Sonata, a (literally) underground jazz club Bill stumbles upon during his night wanderings. We see “Fidelio” scrawled in Nick’s handwriting. (See screenshot images below.) The napkin thus becomes the container for the password Bill needs for gaining access into a mysterious, exclusive event Nick tells Bill about in

confidence. That event turns out, of course, to be the strange, unsettling mansion party hosted by what appears to be a group of Illuminati-like characters and centered around anonymous orgy sex and pseudo-religious ritual. The party is, among other things, a living embodiment and symbolic reification of the exclusory worlds of the moneyed and powerful classes. But the exchange of the passcode itself is equally pregnant with attention-seizing significance. Smaller in scale (durationally and spatially) and subdued in effect, the sequence in the nightclub and the word *Fidelio* itself “burst” with submerged meanings. *Fidelio* not only suggests the “fidelity” (a guiding conceptual *topoi* of *Eyes Wide Shut*), it is also the title of Beethoven’s only opera (the German composer looming large across Kubrick’s entire oeuvre). With these understated yet oddly conspicuous markers, Kubrick prompts his viewers to compute a first-order representation of a passcode being exchanged as a self-reflexive invitation to see passcodes in other places: codes that might key them into construing better, more valid understandings of the implicit meanings of the text proper—and possibly key them into Kubrick’s mind, art, and philosophy as a whole. Kubrick and Pizzolatto both, in their own stylized ways, *signal* their audiences to *look for more signals*. We are thereby granted license to hunt second-order symbols. Moreover, some of those symbols may turn out to refer to the signification process itself: short, expressible bursts of insight *about* how short, expressible bursts of insight operate on us, for good or for ill.



To bring this section on the classical birth of the symbol to a close, an abbreviated chronology and gloss of the major voices of the ancient symbolic heritage according to Struck is supplied below. For detailed analyses of each figure's nuanced position and place in that heritage, consult *Birth* and its deeply instructive sections on these authors and their respective texts. In this dossier, as Struck points out, “we encounter names that are perhaps not as familiar as Aristotle or Horace, in texts and translations that are not as widely available.”⁴⁰² But the reclamation of these names and voices from the historiographical margins steers a new turn in the critical tradition—a turn that provides a crucial perspective in the long view of a biopoetics of symbol.

CLASSICAL/HELLENIC PERIOD (c. 510–323 BCE)

Pythagoras (fifth century BCE)

Refer to prior paragraphs in this section for glossing of the nature and influence of the Pythagoreans.

The Derveni Commentator (fourth century BCE)⁴⁰³

The *Derveni Papyrus* (c. 340–320 BCE) is an anonymously authored carbon-preserved text discovered in 1962 in the funeral pyre of a tomb at Derveni, Greece, a coastal city of Corinthia. Struck cautions that the “long-delayed publication of a critical edition of the text” means that his observations remain “preliminary.”

Nonetheless, Struck is confident in the gist of the document: “a running allegorical

⁴⁰² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 5.

⁴⁰³ The Derveni entry receives longer treatment than others as it sets an ancient yet surprisingly inclusive stage for the subsequent symbolic lineage. All citations and quotations in this section are culled from Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 29–50.

commentary on an Orphic cosmogonical poem” written by a divinatory priest, who claims to “act as intermediary between the suppliant and the gods.” As Struck describes it, “the papyrus shows the commentator turning his interpretative tools on poetic texts, dreams, and oracles, without any self-conscious difficulty [...], suggesting a parallelism between allegorical and divinatory hermeneutics.”

Among the Derveni commentator’s lines compelling for this dissertation is this, which Struck feels provides the tonic note for the remainder of the Derveni text: “Since he [the poet] riddles concerning his subject matter throughout all his poem, it is necessary to discuss it word by word.” Therein we detect what is perhaps a first pulse of puzzle literature (“the poet riddles”) and even an early valorization of close-reading techniques (“word by word”).

Struck’s analysis of the text posits many more relevant claims. For instance, he notes that the Derveni author believes “the riddles of the poet transmit ‘great things’ [and] “appears to associate the poetic riddle with oracular speech.” The text also “indicates that the enigma was surely a part of the conceptual apparatus of early allegorical reading.” Struck highlights the author’s “interest in the cryptic philosophies of Heraclitus,” who “tends to hide his meanings and speak in oblique fashion.” Before unfolding his allegorical exegesis of Orpheus’s poem, the Derveni commentator himself makes the following claim: “Heraclitus disguises common meanings and clothes them in strange ones; he speaks like a mythmaker.” This prefatory *obiter dictum* functions as a warrant for applying a similar interpretive approach to the

Orphic text. Struck's inferences are incisive: "The comparison with Heraclitus sets up a kind of equivalence between the texts. The esoteric philosopher and the poet-savant (as well as the oracle) produce texts that might equally be the subjects of allegorical inquiry. The crucial similarity is that they contain hidden messages that the skilled interpreter can decode."

The Derveni text is also informed by a metaphysics that heralds the philosophical axis girding much of the symbol theory and *allegoresis* of the coming centuries. The Derveni author does not subscribe to an atomistic Aristotelian view of the cosmos, in which language provides clear labels for discrete entities in the observable world. Units of language, particularly poetic language, are viewed as "designations of a reality that has less stable boundaries" (Struck). The text thus appears to adhere to a monism in which deeper structures of the universe are materially instantiated in and through the products of the human imagination and culture. Struck contextualizes, noting, "At several key points in the history of allegorical reading, we will see similar clusters of ideas emerge." Chief among that cluster: "Some form of universalist ontology forms the basis for interpretive leaps from a surface sense to a hidden sense. The movement from one sense to the next is anchored through an assertion of ontological linkage." Indeed, according to Struck, "such a universalist ontology is evidenced in the three major schools of thought that are the most important engines of allegorical reading: the Anaxagoreans, the Stoics, and the Neoplatonists." Struck further advances that this metaphysics provides "the most important presupposition

behind the developments of the notion of the poetic ‘enigma,’ which will, within a century of the Derveni commentator, lend itself to the creation of the ‘symbol.’”

Further contextualizing the Derveni text’s intellectual history and conceptual timeframes, Struck ventures that “the ideas expressed by the writer were current in the era before 400 BCE.” Backed with support from other textual evidence, he infers, “While our commentator likely has idiosyncratic views on some matters, especially on particular interpretations, it is unlikely that he invented the poetics of the riddle.” The Derveni commentator is assumed to be working in a well-set tradition, not innovating some hermeneutic enterprise technology out of thin air.

Struck even contextualizes the contents and concepts of the papyrus within a broader classical circuit that includes Socrates, Plato, and Aristophanes. Often satiric in attitude, the references of these three stalwarts of the canonic classical tradition nonetheless provide proof of the popularity of allegorical practices within their native cultural climes. The Derveni document, according to Struck, “unmistakably shows enigma poetics to be part of the technical language of the professional allegorical interpreter.” Meanwhile, a text like Aristophanes’ *Peace* (~420 BCE) “attests, equally unmistakably, that the methods of such professionals were familiar enough to an Athenian audience to get a laugh in the popular medium of comedy.” Struck shows that “allegorical reading is not foreign to Socrates and his interlocutors” either. In *Republic 2*, for instance, Struck observes that, “With no apparent irony, Socrates allows that such hidden meanings might lurk in poetry, and perhaps even believes that

the poets themselves produced these undersenses.” And in *Ion* (~380 BCE), Plato’s “most concentrated treatment of poetry,” it is too seldom observed that “the view of the poet that Plato assumes to be common, and on which he heaps ridicule, is one particularly characteristic of allegorical readers.” Struck’s assessment of this Socratic dialogue is eloquent and succinct: “Ion and his peers measure their skill as commentators by the sheer amount of material they are able to extract from Homer’s text. Such a scale of value is worth remarking. It attests to a view that poetry’s unique characteristic is a density of meaning, which nurtures a view of the task of the professional reader as primarily an interpretative one.” Whether we choose today to devalue the virtues of density of meaning and hermeneutic skillsets is rather beside the point. (Although it remains this author’s view that we would be mistaken to do so. Risking the ridicule of the enshrined Aristotelians of Classical Athens is a risk worth taking.)

Struck concludes with a final parry exquisitely sensitive to the tenets of this dissertation. “For literary critics with allegorical affiliations, the logic of the enigma takes central position,” he writes. “The enigma, and later the symbol and its cognates, live in ongoing tension with central notions of Aristotelian criticism: that the best poetry makes use of clear language, subsumable under a scheme of tropes, to produce an effect on an audience, by a straightforward mimesis of the world.” Starting with Aristotle, nearly all rhetorical critics portray enigmas “as a *flaw* of style, one that a skilled poet avoids since it produces unclarity.” That is, “With its attendant senses of riddle, omen, and oracle, the [enigma] marks out an obliqueness of signification,

situated outside the concerns of language and plot and the dictates of genre and character. It hints at hidden connections within reality itself and lays out a particular program of action for the reader of poetry: to decode.” Thus, not unlike “the sayings of the Sphinx or the Pythia, the point is to solve the riddle.”

Punctuating this line of thought, while looking ahead to the rest of his arguments, Struck notes, “We will find the suggestion that the poets’ hidden meanings are underwritten by an underlying *entelechy*”—a body’s vital principle, its pneumatic soul that suggests a potential yet realizable form—“rather than the logic of mere mimesis or resemblance of the sort that governs the surface meanings of the poem.” He concludes with a persuasive reprise: “For the allegorists, the study of diction or plot types or character (such as the Aristotelian critics emphasize) may be important but usually as a preliminary step to what they see as the central task of the reader of poetry: rooting out the deep meanings that are understood to be lurking underneath the mimetic surface of the poem.” Thus, rhetorical criticisms only get us so far. They are, in the end, preliminary to the real work of literature.

All of this context just bears further witness to the indissoluble presence of a strong allegorical-symbolical sensibility pulsating in the Western poetic imagination as far back as classical-era Greece.

HELLENISTIC PERIOD (c. 323–31 BCE)

Philochorus (c. 340–260 BCE)

Historian Philochorus's *On Symbols* is considered a "lost work" with only trace fragments surviving. Struck regards it as a "work with multiple foci" spanning divination as well as Pythagorean enigmas and symbols. While "it is certainly reasonable to consider that this work should be included in the long series of Pythagorean symbol interpretations," other texts "show that Philochorus's name was also attached to the notion of the *symbol* in divinatory contexts." Whatever Philochorus's primary emphasis was, "it is most significant that he considered symbols to be a subject worthy of a complete treatise." Written at the inception of the Hellenistic era, *On Symbols* is "our earliest evidence that the symbol [began] to have an identity of its own and to assume a certain prominence."⁴⁰⁴

Chrysippus (c. 280–207 BCE)

Along with Xeno and Cleanthes, Chrysippus figures prominently in the Stoic tradition of thinkers who began to apply symbolic-allegorical methods and terms to the domains of literature proper. From the fragmentary "shards that remain" of the Stoic corpus, we know at the very least that "the allegorical interpretation of poetic texts occupied an important place in Stoic thought, and that the notion of the symbol, which they are the first to attest securely as a conceptual category for reading literature, was a noteworthy feature of the intellectual terrain."⁴⁰⁵ The Stoical use of *symbol* can be charted through the influence of divination more than Pythagorean symbolism. According to Struck, "Two specialized uses comprise an undercurrent for the development of the literary idea: the symbol as a divine omen (a meaningful

⁴⁰⁴ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 107–9.

⁴⁰⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 111.

coincidence) and as a special kind of identity token among Pythagoreans and devotees of the mysteries, for whom it was an enigmatic epigram or divine name that carried a hidden message.” Significantly, both uses “speak directly to a hidden surplus of meaning that can be decoded by an interpreter skilled in a special language.”⁴⁰⁶ While Struck cautions “to keep a critical eye on interpretative overreaching among Stoics,” he feels “we should also reserve some of our skepticism for Stoic detractors.” He infers Chrysippus in particular “had reasons other than hermeneutical mischief to read the way they did, that he was not simply grabbing at the poets’ authority for his own views”⁴⁰⁷; and that he “did not think of himself as foisting ideas onto the text that did not belong. He believed the text would bear his interpretation.”⁴⁰⁸ Hermeneutics, it seems, even in the Stoic age were beset with questions about authorial intention and the linguistic misconduct of treating art as grist for one’s personal mill.

As for Chrysippus himself, his writings mark the first time in the historical record that a cognate of the term *symbol* was used toward literary ends. However, Struck speculates that Chrysippus “may be employing an allegorical terminology that was already standard at the time he is writing.” Other lines of “evidence suggests that the symbol may already have been in use to mark figurative language by the middle of the fourth century.”⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 112.

⁴⁰⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 114.

⁴⁰⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 122.

⁴⁰⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 112.

By Struck's rendering, Chrysippus "believed that ancient poets are keen observers of the world, that they handed down many stunning insights about it, and that some of these are in line with contemporary thinking." In fact, contrary to the poet-as-prophet mindset that predominates within other precincts of the allegorical tradition, certain "evidence suggests that the Stoics had no grand visions of the poets as anachronistic channels [...] or fonts of divine wisdom." Rather, Stoics viewed poets as proto-scientists of sorts. According to their poetics, "the poets engage in a kind of embellishing process" whereby "ancient mythmakers observe principles at work in the natural world; then generations of poets proliferate fanciful stories based on those core observations." The reader's mission, then, is "to sift through the myth's imaginary accretions to find the core truth that underlies it."⁴¹⁰ Chrysippus's detractors even felt he irresponsibly "appealed to the authority of the poets to justify his scientific experiments."⁴¹¹

This proto-scientific stance led the Stoics to a more general attitude that "insists that the purpose of poetry is to teach, not just to provide cathartic experience and not just to delight. Only the wise man can be a poet, according to the Stoics."⁴¹² Along these lines, the Stoic-affiliated Strabo, for instance, believed that Homer's original audiences would have automatically assumed that the bard's poetry "conveyed allegorical knowledge in his poem and did not just entertain." According to Struck, poets and readers like Strabo naturally "associated poetry's transmission of knowledge (as opposed to entertainment value) with allegorism."

⁴¹⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 116.

⁴¹¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 118.

⁴¹² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 118.

As for specific extant instances of his allegorical criticism, Chrysippus's "lengthy reading of Hesiod's account of the birth of Athena" is, by Struck's account, "the most important example of early Stoic allegorical reading." It is also "our earliest evidence of someone calling a literary construction a *symbol*."⁴¹³ See Struck for his erudite treatment of this landmark interpretative performance. Struck's appendix, "Chrysippus's Reading and Authorial Intention: The Case of the Mural at Samos,"⁴¹⁴ provides further occasion for inspecting one of Chrysippus's allegorical analyses. Here, Struck offers fascinating account of the high stakes involved in the contested interpretations of a mural painted on Hera's temple in Samos. Some highpoints from Struck's addendum are relevant and provided below.

The anonymously painted Samos mural contained a stark portrayal of Hera fellating Zeus. Chrysippus interprets the scene as a conventional and quite uncontroversial symbolic rendering of the pneumatic *entelechy* emanating through the sperm of the king of the gods. In Struck's words, "Chrysippus interpreted the painting allegorically: it depicted matter receiving the *spermatikoi logoi* of the divine."⁴¹⁵ Many of Chrysippus's contemporaries disagreed, denigrating the mural as nothing more than exploitative shock art. Struck muses, "One wonders what the intention of the artist would have been in such a case. We have no good evidence [...], so we are left to speculate." Struck feels "it is most doubtful that the artist was attempting to shock [...] at the largest and most important (and expensive) center of active worship

⁴¹³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 119.

⁴¹⁴ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 279–82.

⁴¹⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 280.

of the Greeks' highest ranking goddess." And because "Stoicism was establishing itself in the Greek-speaking world" at the time the mural was painted, "the artists might very well have had Stoic principles in mind when painting the scene." Struck's analysis bears reproducing:

Whether or not the painter was consciously and specifically influenced by Stoic allegorism, allegorical reading was an established tradition by the time the temple was built, so whenever the mural was painted, the painter could have relied on this tradition to suggest more than a straightforward sexual act.

[...] According to the Stoics, the emission of sperm (like sensory perception of the enunciation of words) is at root a transference of *logoi*. This sexual transference of *logoi* suggests to Chrysippus the ontological process by which *logoi* (pneuma) enter unqualified matter and bring things into existence. Furthermore, he is drawing on a tradition that figures Zeus's *logoi* as ordering agents that suffuse and structure unformed matter, figured as Hera. If one can allow that the ancients saw *logoi* in sperm and sperm as *logoi* also, his interpretation is actually quite traditional.⁴¹⁶

Echoing several of this dissertation's earlier arguments about authorial intention and hermeneutic methods, aims, and limits, Struck notes that "the question of whether Chrysippus's reading of the mural is an imposition on the text is highly complex," as it "depends on a whole range of normative judgments about the artist, the original audience, and the common sense of the one evaluating the interpretation." In other words, is Chrysippus simply indulging in an allegorical hunting expedition, imposing

⁴¹⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 281.

his mill upon the poet's grist? Or are his exegetical judgments justified? Struck asks similar questions, more colorfully and more specific to the mural's sexually charged contents: "Do Chrysippus's readings make sense within the larger context of his thought, or is he, out of some assumed embarrassment, passing off a hermeneutical whopper?" Struck's ruling: "The former seems to me much more likely."⁴¹⁷ The production of valid yet insightful readings of artworks, while avoiding "hermeneutical whoppers," is a cardinal hermeneutic mission of the second-order symbolics this dissertation presses forward. Thus, the concerns above are exquisitely germane to the mission at hand.

Crates of Mallus (second century BCE):

Crates of Mallus was a Stoic philosopher, grammarian, and head of the literary school and library at Pergamum, Greece. According to *Britannica*, Crates "was the chief representative of the allegorical theory of exegesis, maintaining that Homer intended to express scientific or philosophical truths in the form of poetry."⁴¹⁸

ROMAN ERA (c. 31 BCE – 400 CE)

Heraclitus the Allegorist (first century CE)

Heraclitus the Allegorist was a grammarian and rhetorician who, Struck claims, was "the first of our critics to make extensive use of" the term *allegory* and its cognates. Heraclitus believed Homer "intended globally to communicate hidden pieces of

⁴¹⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 281–2.

⁴¹⁸ "Crates of Mallus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, online.

wisdom about the cosmos”⁴¹⁹ and that other commentators who attend to “only the surface fiction” were “missing the deeper meaning.”⁴²⁰ Surface readers “see merely fabrications in passages where the poets have in reality buried enigmatic truths.”⁴²¹ According to Struck, “this formula will become a popular polemical characterization of those who do not read allegorically, who, the allegorists claim, miss the point.”⁴²²

But Heraclitus also straddled the line between rhetorical and allegorical critical approaches. As Struck puts it, “Like the rhetorical critics, he views allegory as an individual turn of phrase, one of which Homer appears to be particularly fond. Also like the rhetorical critics, Heraclitus believes in Homer’s total control over the text’s meaning, a position sometimes absent, or at least nuanced, in allegorical readers.” Still, Heraclitus operated from the assumption that Homer’s texts were ancient repositories of wisdom, and “the characteristics Heraclitus shares with allegorical critics” are most important for the historiography of the tradition.⁴²³

Pseudo-Plutarch (second century CE)

Pseudo-Plutarch refers to the unknown author of *Life of Homer*, a work passed down erroneously under the name of Plutarch. Not unlike Heraclitus, Pseudo-Plutarch engaged a hybrid critical approach that mingled rhetorical and allegorical tools of textual examination. *Life of Homer* “shows, with unique clarity, the distinctive (and in Pseudo-Plutarch’s understanding, complementary) characteristics of Aristotelian and

⁴¹⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 151.

⁴²⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 152.

⁴²¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 152.

⁴²² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 152.

⁴²³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 155.

allegorical criticism.”⁴²⁴ Its author subscribed to the naïve but not uncommon belief that Homer “had an encyclopedic range of knowledge” and sowed “the seeds of *all* later forms of discourse.”⁴²⁵ And because Homer’s deep insights into nature, god, and humanity were thought to be delivered “through enigmas and mythic language and through undermeanings,”⁴²⁶ the job of the skilled critic is to decipher these codes for the uninitiated. Despite Pseudo-Plutarch’s blind trust in Homer’s infallibility, his work provides a fulcrum point in the lineage of allegory and symbol, wherein rhetorical concerns get moved “to the background” while “questions of interpretation” are brought into sharp foreground relief. As Struck characterizes it, Pseudo-Plutarch “devotes himself to riddling out what he understands to be the hidden meanings of the text” rather than “classifying the techniques of Homer’s art.”⁴²⁷

Crucially, in his allegorical apologia in *Life of Homer*, Pseudo-Plutarch “sets forth what become two popular explanations of why poets would use an oblique method of communication, rather than plainer speech.”⁴²⁸ In the words of the author himself: “If ideas are expressed through enigmatic and mythic language, this should not be unexpected. They did this so that on the one hand lovers of learning, delighted by a certain elegance, might more readily seek and find the truth, while on the other hand the ignorant would not scorn what they could not understand.” Pseudo-Plutarch goes on, surmising, “For I suppose that which is couched in hidden messages is attractive,

⁴²⁴ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 157.

⁴²⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 157.

⁴²⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 158.

⁴²⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 158.

⁴²⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 160.

where that which is spoken explicitly is cheap.”⁴²⁹ Struck provides effective analysis of these speculative yet compelling psycho-aesthetic observations: “The poet communicates in code in order that the wise may have the pleasure of cracking it, and be left wanting more, and the ignorant may be kept away from profundities that they would not understand and may ridicule.” Struck reminds us that this “tendency toward esotericism”—and, we might add, puzzle cracking—“was present as early as the Derveni papyrus.”⁴³⁰

Struck draws one more salient inference from all this. That is, “The ideology of exclusiveness and secrecy proved to be the most productive of the semantic engines behind the vocabulary of *allegoresis*.” Restating earlier claims, Struck posits that “allegorical reading in general, and the symbol in particular, produce always two groups, those who know and those who do not.”⁴³¹ This in-the-know dynamic carries through to the modern symbolic realisms of today. Whether occurring in modern or ancient times, this dynamic often belies a bifurcated double-edged aesthetic economy: one which grants potent pleasures to the in-group while breeding resentment in the out-group, whose members might come to resist the perceived elitism of those purportedly in-the-know.

Cornutus (first century CE)

⁴²⁹ Pseudo-Plutarch, *Life of Homer*, 92. Qtd. in Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 160.

⁴³⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 160.

⁴³¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 160–1.

Lucius Annaeus Cornutus was a late Stoic flourishing in mid-first-century Rome.

According to Struck, he “might be best described as a cultural anthropologist.”⁴³²

Cornutus was “fond of using etymological analysis to riddle out the hidden meanings in poetic texts and cultic practices.”⁴³³ His still-extant *Compendium of Greek Theology* is “a manual of Stoic etymological interpretation of popular mythology”⁴³⁴ and remains a hallmark of symbolic-allegorical exegesis.

Cornutus applied the term *symbol* in multiple usage contexts. Sometimes it would refer to “accouterments of particular deities, which are interpretable codes of their qualities” (e.g. the snakes of Hermes’ staff, the scepter of Zeus). Sometimes it referred to characters’ personal qualities, which in turn signified more abstract characteristics (e.g. Athena’s virginity signifying purity, the Muses’ femaleness signifying the indoor nature of learning and art-making). Rituals also had symbolic elements for Cornutus (e.g. the placing of stones on a herm signifies that the world is made of many small parts). Cornutus’s *symbol* referred basically to “a thing from this world that is affiliated with a being from beyond.”⁴³⁵

Like the Derveni commentator, Cornutus saw “deeply resonant poetic images that carry hidden messages about the gods, the cosmos, or the place of humans in the world.”⁴³⁶ In Struck’s section “Cornutus and Authorial Intention: The Invention of Mythic Truth,” Cornutus claimed that the ancient mythmakers saw the deep truths of

⁴³² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 9.

⁴³³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 147.

⁴³⁴ “Lucius Annaeus Cornutus,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, online.

⁴³⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 145–6.

⁴³⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 145.

the world and then transmitted them through stories that contained enigmas of the structure of the cosmos. Subsequently, the poets reconfigured those “preexisting mythic materials” to transmit a “nugget of truth” to the contemporary audiences.⁴³⁷ According to Struck, Cornutus’s work marks “for the first time in serious Greek thought” when the *mythic* became a “privileged source of true scientific insight” and the *symbol* became “one of its privileged vehicles.”⁴³⁸

Between Cornutus, Pseudo-Plutarch, and Heraclitus—all writers of the second century CE—“the notion of the symbol, along with that of the enigma and allegory, had entered a new stage in its history as a conceptual tool for understanding the poets.”⁴³⁹ The second century can be seen as marking symbol’s egress from its fledgling literary standing into fuller adolescence, if not early maturity.

Porphyry (c. 234–305 CE)

Porphyry, a third-century Neoplatonist, “was one of the ancient critics who adopts the approach that a poem might be a repository of enigmatic wisdom.”⁴⁴⁰ His works *On the Cave of the Nymph* and *Homeric Questions* are central to the classical symbol tradition and our questions at hand. The hermeneutic theory undergirding these works, particularly Porphyry’s methods for arriving at explications of poetic scenes and passages, remains impressively applicable: Thomas Foster’s tips for negotiating symbolism in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, for instance, reverberate with

⁴³⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 149.

⁴³⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 150.

⁴³⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 161.

⁴⁴⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 71.

the sounds of Porphyry's own advisories; as do David Bordwell's heuristics for spotting symbolic moments and resolving gaps and ambiguities in art films.

I defer below to Struck and his instructive analyses and excerpts concerning this important figure. To open these passages, he differentiates how Aristotle and Porphyry approach the same set of ostensibly digressive details from the nymph-cave scene in *The Odyssey*. None of the elements initially appear to clarify the linear causality of the poem's narrative throughline, nor do they contribute much as tactics of mimetic immersion. But first appearances can be deceiving, as even rhetoricians the world over have to admit at some point. Ultimately, the symbolic significances that Porphyry susses out here—which are related obliquely, conceptually, and associationally to Homer's work and world; rather than by more obvious logics of narrative resolution, causal clarification, or better recreations of “realistic” felt experience—seem, in this author's opinion, to win the day. Here's Struck:

When Odysseus lands at the cave of the nymphs in Ithaca, Homer devotes eleven lines to describing it in detail. After mentioning the cave's stone bowls and jars that bees use to store honey, stone looms where nymphs weave purple cloth, and two gates, one for mortals and one for immortals, Homer continues with his story, as though what he had just described were a perfectly normal setting. In a telling contrast, Aristotle briefly discusses the same scene, but his curiosity is peaked [*sic*] because it seems absurd to him that Odysseus would not have woken up when the ship ran aground and the Phaeacians carried him ashore. Porphyry, on the other hand, seems to feel that the curious elements

within the cave are in need of explanation. As was noted earlier, he opens *On the Cave of the Nymphs* with a question [...]: “What on earth does Homer riddle by the cave?” One is forced, Porphyry tells us, to trouble oneself with a number of bothersome questions. For example: “What is a gate of men and one of gods?” “What is the use of the kraters and amphoras?” and “Who could remain credulous when told that the goddesses go around weaving sea-purple cloaks on stone looms in a murky cave?” [...] As we know from his *Homeric Questions*, Porphyry considers analysis by the tools of textual criticism to be one possible solution for a troublesome spot in the text. In his textual commentaries on Homer, Porphyry explicitly reserves the possibility of finding a solution by allegory, indicating that while he sees a difference between the two methods of reading, he has no problem applying both to any given text. Elsewhere he tells us that the first method is a kind of warm-up or preliminary exercise for the real contest, which seems to be a reference to the kind of interpretation he ventures into with the commentary on the cave of the nymphs.⁴⁴¹

The verbiage here is telling. The “troublesome spots” in poetic text are most satisfactorily read as allegorical signatures. Translating in Bordwellian terms, Homer’s formal system arranges certain cues to prompt his audience to momentarily withdraw themselves from the immersive experience of pure narrative simulations—to suspend themselves above the classically structured, mimetically driven frames of the story proper—and to read those cues as symbolic commentary or expressions of the author’s personal vision. Moreover, Porphyry (at least according to Struck) feels

⁴⁴¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 72.

that it is precisely these problematic, symbol-accommodating spots that count the most in our comprehension of great poetry. He casts the narrative-bound, first-order representations of the story world as preliminary warm-ups for generating second-order allegorical interpretations. Struck continues:

In his commentary, Porphyry exhibits one of the most durable characteristics of allegorical reading. In order to find out what the cave means in Homer's text, Porphyry feels it necessary to explore what real caves out in the world are. Such investigations are part and parcel of the view that sees questions of literary interpretation as inextricably bound up with ontological ones. The literary portrayal of the cave provokes a consideration of "caveness." Such a stance leads allegorical commentators to analyses, sometimes lengthy, of various features of the cosmos in an effort to elucidate what hints about these subjects Homer may have revealed to his careful readers. Porphyry surveys the opinions on caves that are attested not only elsewhere in the Homeric corpus but also in the Presocratics, Plato, and the Persians, and adds his own scientific assessment of what caves are and what they do in the world—this latter view is of course steeped in Neoplatonic common sense. He nowhere suggests that Homer had in mind a particular traditional belief when he constructed the cave. His position is closer to the following: caves themselves have characteristics; these can be researched by examining and evaluating the available opinions on caves from all sources; Homer, possessing an acute understanding of the world, knew about caves and constructed the cave in his poem in accordance with particular aspects of

caves as they exist in the world. In other words, the referent of the word is something Porphyry sees as an entirely open topic, worthy of consideration for a reader of Homer who wants to appreciate everything the poem has to offer. The significance of the word is not clear and plain, nor is it reducible to a trope. Porphyry never calls the cave a metaphor—though he has no general aversion to the term. Indeed, his *Homeric Questions*, where his textual criticism and his Aristotelian approach are put to use, contains discussion of dozens of [metaphors]. The multiplicity of meanings in the cave and its accouterments seems to defy tidy classification. The cave in Homer, Porphyry suggests in the end, is a crystallization of the material cosmos, the world subject to generation and decay. Each of the elements inside of it adds to this meaning, highlighting particular parts of the world that comes into being and passes away.⁴⁴²

The poetic experience is thus defined through a now-familiar confluence of descriptors and concepts. Poetry involves an additive process of formal elements that “crystallize” around a single profound truth and/or expand into a “multiplicity of meanings.” While those truths might be cosmic in nature and obfuscated in their expression, this does not prevent the commonsense reader from summoning the required knowledge and associational frames needed to unlock the implicit metaphors or allusionistic complexes the poet has generated. Crucially, according to Porphyry, these inferential engines can be derived simply through attentive external observation and honest inner reflection. Theoretically, any thoughtful reader can translate the secret languages of the poets with some concerted effort.

⁴⁴² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 72–3.

Deferring one last time to Struck:

One detail of his reading will perhaps give a sense of the whole. Porphyry spends several pages teasing out what Homer might have meant by the honey that the bees store in stone jars. He begins by wondering why Homer told us that the amphoras are filled not with water but with honey. This is strange. The myth tellers use honey to symbolize many things, he says, since honey has many uses. It has both cathartic and preservative functions. It heals wounds and keeps things from rotting. In the Lion mysteries (the fourth and last stage of the Mithras cult), initiates are cleansed with honey [...]. Furthermore, Porphyry continues, the preservative effect is why some equate honey with ambrosia, Homer's "tawny nectar." But Porphyry is not sure that they should be considered identical and says we can only resolve this question by looking at more texts. According to the Orphics, Zeus used honey to make Kronos drunk so he could bind him, weakening him as Kronos weakened Ouranos by castrating him. Plato also tells of a similar effect of honey on the mythical figure of Poros, "since wine did not yet exist." Orpheus is hinting that divine beings are ensnared by pleasure and pulled down into the world of coming-to-be and passing away. [...]. Earthy actions will dissolve divine powers. Honey is an earthy pleasure. For the ancients (as Porphyry calls Homer and his contemporaries), the pleasure of honey had the same meaning as sexual pleasure (and is therefore, by implication, not to be equated with ambrosia). To sum up, Porphyry says, the honey in Homer's poem has these properties: it indicates purification, prevention of decay, and the pleasure of

descent into the material delights. It is therefore appropriate to the water nymphs, whom Porphyry says live in the cave and preside over the process of bringing souls down into bodies, and to human souls who are caught in the material world that is subject to generation and decay. The honey is further appropriate because the ancients commonly referred to souls as bees.

Porphyry cites Sophocles: “The swarm of the dead buzzes and rises up.” In this long reading, Porphyry nowhere suggests some simple anachronistic prescience on Homer’s part. Rather, he sees his job as a critic to be the discovery of what Homer could have meant by introducing honey at this point in his text. In order to do so, the critic must understand everything he can about actual honey, with the goal of seeing what possible resonances it had for Homer.

This occasions a long search in a whole array of cultural material, ancient and contemporary, mythic and cultic, Greek and non-Greek. This is not to claim that we ought to endorse the answers Porphyry reaches by his method, only that his method is not simply a foisting of his own views onto the text.

Porphyry thereby establishes, through performance and theoretical commentary, some normative strategies for practical exegetical criticism. These strategies are, crucially, informed by principles of an active authorial intention and a shared sociocultural world. And Porphyry appears to be duly concerned about drifting into the egoistic interpretative constructions of the proverbial grist-mill. Finally:

From the standpoint of his theoretical position toward the text, most telling for us is Porphyry's treatment of the issue of a poetic fabrication. Porphyry is not uninterested in whether there was a real cave in the harbor of Phorcys or whether this is Homer's flight of fancy. He takes up the question by way of introduction to his interpretation. But he soon leaves it. After examining briefly the evidence for and against such a cave, Porphyry tells us:

Whether Homer described it as it actually is or embellished it, nonetheless the problems remain. An investigator will still hunt for the intention, either of those who set up the real shrine or for the poet who made it up. Neither would the ancients have established a shrine without mystical symbols, nor would Homer have described them randomly.

The judgment that a representation is a poetic flight of fancy, then, will not be the end point of the reader's work but the starting point. Aristarchus warns against searching for meanings in such places in a poem, for we risk pulling to the inside of a poem what should be left on the outside. Porphyry and the other allegorical critics share precisely the opposite belief. What appear as poetic flights of fancy are exactly where we should look for the poet's most profound messages.⁴⁴³

Thus, for Porphyry and the allegorists, first-order realisms—language and poetry that aim for concrete factual reflections of the world, mirror representations of life as we live and consciously experience it everyday—take a co-pilot position, if not the backseat, to second-order symbolic imaginaries. Implicit analogies, mythical allusions and *ur*-stories, strange and disruptive *un*realities or *ir*realities—these become the ultimate gathering points for the allegorical reader's concerns, not

⁴⁴³ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 71–5.

determining how well-formed the vehicles of first-order representations are according to a set of pedantic classification systems.

Porphyry's theories and methods so exquisitely set the stage for modern forms of second-order hermeneutics, it is plausible to imagine them usefully deployed in present-day pedagogical settings. Certain passages could be organized and distributed to literary initiates, to function as *imprimatur* for a how-to manual or best-practices guide on poetic symbolism—proof from the ancients that such interpretive moves are neither empty exercises nor confections of bored English teachers seeking to fill their quotas of “B.S.” on student essays.

Iamblichus (c. 245–325)

By the fourth century CE, “the idea that symbols have the power to *do* things and not just *say* them reaches a new and determining prominence with the Neoplatonists. In this sense, the symbol functions as a talisman.”⁴⁴⁴ Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Apamea was part of this mounting development. By Struck's account, “Iamblichus makes the symbol the central link between the divine and human realms. The symbol makes the impossible happen; it becomes the node on which the transcendent can meet the mundane. [...] Like the Pythagorean password or the mantic pronouncement of an oracle, the symbol becomes once again the crucial link between the mundane and the transcendent.” Specifically, “according to Iamblichus's psychology, humans dwell on a plane of existence that is remote from the higher orders and have souls that

⁴⁴⁴ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 204.

have fully descended into material bodies. But he will not allow that humans have *no* access to transcendence.”⁴⁴⁵ Iamblichus’s talismanic ideas are inherited and amplified in later symbol theories, from Dantesque anagogical allegories to romantic and post-romantic theories of the symbol’s mystical-ontological qualities.

Proclus (c. 412–485)

Proclus, a later Neoplatonist, wedded Greco-Roman “theurgical innovations [...] with traditional allegorism and brings the talismanic symbol into the mainstream of Western literary theory.”⁴⁴⁶ In Struck’s parroting of Proclus, “the inspired poet and the theurgist operate by the same nonmimetic mode: the symbol which does not resemble its hidden referent, but has ‘sympathy’ with it.”⁴⁴⁷ For Proclus, *sympathy* signifies “the power or energy that suffuses the chains that emanate from the One. It is the energy that link the higher-order manifestations to the lower-order ones along the cosmos’s ontological rays.” Reading and interpretation begin to “look very much like a sacramental act.” Over and above these spiritual-ontological resonances, what is most compelling for this dissertation is how Proclus privileges and leans into nonmimetic styles of meaning-delivery, rather than verisimilitude and mimesis alone.

During Proclus’s time, there were “real risks of pagan religious affiliation.” Struck thus finds it perfectly reasonable that Proclus “would shift modes of worship into the more private realms of reading the poets.”⁴⁴⁸ This imparts a vested sociopolitical

⁴⁴⁵ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 213.

⁴⁴⁶ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 227.

⁴⁴⁷ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 247.

⁴⁴⁸ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 247.

value to embracing a poetics of submerged symbolism. In circumstances like those Proclus found himself in, second-order symbolic techniques could function as savvy tools for avoiding legal sanction and nontrivial sociopolitical consequences, while expressing (to those in-the-know) the poet's iconoclastic ideas, beliefs, or feelings.

Struck notes Proclus's significant influence upon others who followed him, too: particularly Dionysius the Areopagite, himself a towering influence on medieval Christian cosmology and theology, which in turn had consequences for the likes of Dante and other European Renaissance writers. According to Struck, "Those who specialize in Proclus have long been familiar with the breadth of his influence on the cosmologies of premodern Europe, East and West, but his legacy can be tracked in literary studies as well."⁴⁴⁹ For instance, Dionysius's "symbol theory (which recapitulates Proclus's ontological, liturgical, and literary forms)" made him "one of the most important authorities in the medieval period on figurative language in the Bible."⁴⁵⁰ Struck also notes that "Proclus's symbolic thinking played a role in the works of three Romantics: Schelling, Novalis, and Coleridge"; and that while "the Neoplatonists' general influence on the Romantics has received a good bit of attention, [this] connection could be fleshed out in further detail by a specific focus on the category of symbol."⁴⁵¹

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⁴⁴⁹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 255.

⁴⁵⁰ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 255.

⁴⁵¹ Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 256.

So where does all this leave us? As Struck himself concludes, all these authors and commentators “appropriate and reshape the notion of the symbol for their own idiosyncratic ends, to be sure. The concept has been constructed and reconstructed over centuries, across cultures, and always for particular purposes, but [...] never *ex nihilo*.”⁴⁵² Indeed. The next chapter of this dissertation, which sketches the biopoetics and ev-cog backdrop of the second-order symbol, follows a similar premise. But it also widens Struck’s scope, reminding of a deeper evolutionary logic and history operating underneath the methods and attitudes of even the most ancient allegorists and symbolists we have record of. A biopoetics of symbol should, in other words, reinforce and double-down on the idea that symbolism did not arrive *ex nihilo*: that it is indebted to deeper biological and evolutionary history, which over tens of thousands of years fashioned a universal cognitive architecture out of material substrates of neuronal cells and biomechanical structures, which in turn gave rise to *homo sapiens*’ specialized symbolic capacities and circuits. If not for this even more ancient history, none of the texts, ideas, methods, and symbolic displays of the authors and readers Struck cites would ever have come to pass.

Symbol’s Sister/Daughter, Allegory: A Parallel History (Angus Fletcher, Jon Whitman)

To gain purchase on the historical foundations of Western allegorical traditions, two works offer firm footholds: the older but still robust monograph *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964) by Angus Fletcher, and Jon Whitman’s more recent edited collection *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (2003). Summations and textual

⁴⁵² Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 276–7.

extractions from each work follow, along with brief analysis.

Despite his book's initial publication over 60 years ago, Fletcher's theoretic-conceptual tenets retain much of their original strength and cogency. With scholarly command over a range of primary-source material, Fletcher takes his reader on a lucid intellectual circumnavigation—not, as the author himself makes clear, a linear intellectual “history” proper—across that conceptual terrain. He begins with some definitional discourse on *allegory*, which could be equally well-applied to *symbol*:

Allegory is a protean device, omnipresent in Western literature from the earliest times to the modern era. No comprehensive historical treatment of it exists or would be possible in a single volume, nor is it my aim to fill even a part of this gap. Hoping instead to get at the essence of the mode, I have outlined a theoretical, mainly non-historical analysis of literary elements.

Whereas a full-scale history would entail numberless small observations of changing literary convention, a theoretical treatment of allegory will succeed by opposite means: it must keep to a plane of generality. [...] Only the broadest notions, for example the modal concepts of “irony” or “mimesis,” embrace so many different kinds of literature. Given this range of reference, no narrowly exclusive stipulated definitions will be useful, however desirable it might seem, while formal precision may at present even be misleading to the student of the subject.⁴⁵³

The “modal concept” of a symbolic literature, or a symbolic realism, could be ascertained in analogous ways, as embracing a similarly broad class of literary output across the ages.

Arriving at a baseline definitional starting point, Fletcher determines that “in the

⁴⁵³ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 1.

simplest of terms, *allegory* says one thing and means another.” Despite its terseness and the ostensibly simple mental-linguistic mechanics this definition takes account of—saying one thing, meaning another—the profundity and ramifications of these mechanics should not be underestimated. The allegorical mode, according to Fletcher, “destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words ‘mean what they say.’”⁴⁵⁴ This is no small feat. To turn on its head the very function—and it is probably safe here to say *adaptive* function—of verbal communication itself should not be taken lightly. Since second-order symbolisms operate according to the same fundamental principle, we can regard most of Fletcher’s claims about allegory as salient and applicable to this dissertation’s objects of inquiry.

Also akin to second-order symbolic devices, the allegorical mode can infiltrate virtually any other conventional demarcation zone or generic classification of artforms we can contrive. Fletcher presents a menu of generic forms that allegory cuts across:

chivalric or picaresque romances and their modern equivalent, the “western,” utopian political satires, quasi-philosophical anatomies, personal attacks in epigrammatic forms, pastorals of all sorts, apocalyptic visions, encyclopedic epics [...], naturalistic muckraking novels whose aim is to propagandize social change, imaginary voyages like Lucian’s *The True History*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Verne’s *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* [...], detective stories in both the genteel tradition and the hard-boiled Hammett-Chandler styles, fairy tales (many of which are “cautionary tales”), debate poems like the anonymous medieval “The Owl and the Nightingale” and Yeat’s “Dialogue of Self and Soul,” complaints like Alain de Lille’s *Planctu*

⁴⁵⁴ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 2.

Naturae and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* [...]. All these and more, with one genre sometimes merging into another, may be termed allegorical or partly allegorical works—by which we mean primarily that as they go along they are usually saying one thing in order to say something else. There is no reason allegories should not be written entirely in prose, entirely in verse, or in a mixture of the two. [...] There is no reason why allegory must always be narrated; it can be used in the drama, whether ancient, medieval, Renaissance, or modern. Besides drama and narrative fiction, lyrical poetry is available to convey the “extended metaphor” [...] and more familiarly the conceits of Metaphysical verse.⁴⁵⁵

Again, the shared terrain here with second-order symbolic figures, implicit metaphor, and polysemic referential complexes—as they are conceived in this dissertation—is abundant. Symbolism, like allegory, functions as a universally applicable tool, which can be wielded in various capacities and for any aesthetic project the artist might choose. The artist might try to avoid or evacuate any appearance of allegory and symbolism. The same artist could be aggressively allegorical in one work, more gingerly symbolical in another, and consciously avoidant of all allegoric-symbolic contrivances in yet another.

The puzzle/resolution form of allegory—a form that must be met with by a reader's co-creative imagination, a problem-solving state of mind, and the expectation for a steady if not always complete diminishment of surprise, wonder, and perplexity—is a recurring concern of Fletcher. A riddle/resolution movement of mind is, course, integral to symbolic devices generally, not just those of allegory; thus, it must be given due consideration in any biopoetics of second-order symbolologies. Fletcher emphasizes how, as the typical allegorical

⁴⁵⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 2.

work unfolds, “surprise is diminished as analogy is extended, because we see more and more clearly the meaning of the hidden tenor. In most cases allegories proceed toward clarity, away from obscurity, even though they maintain a pose of enigma up to the very end.”⁴⁵⁶ Using Brecht’s political poem “The Stone Fisherman” to exemplify some of these points, Fletcher suggests the author intends his poetic text to evoke a particular kind of progressive emotional-intellectual response from his reader: “This parable of leadership in which the leader does not give his people what they need, but instead gives them ‘stones,’ does not cease to be enigmatic. It nevertheless *is* gradually less and less so for the leader who pursues the puzzle to the last line. Since the poet wants his reader struggle over the hidden meaning, he is asking the reader to remove surprise to lessen the unexpected, rather than the opposite.”⁴⁵⁷ Moving to Hawthorne, Fletcher notes how “The Birthmark,” one of the most commonly anthologized short stories in America, “leaves the reader with a gradually more sure sense that the birthmark is the insignia of life itself, by virtue of the imperfection it implies.” Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” on the other hand, “moves in two directions at once: while the action becomes increasingly restless and dramatic, the iconography settles into an increasingly sure interpretative pattern, so that by the close of the story we have a fixed of the particular contagion that is attached to Rappaccini’s garden.”⁴⁵⁸

This “gradualism” of a text’s allegorical movements and accretions—which advance a reader from states of mystery, dissonance, disconnection, and confusion to states of understanding, enlightenment, fixity, connection, and convergence with an author’s meanings—is integral to most symbolic devices and modes of art. Furthermore, the import of Fletcher’s point about how a text’s iconography can reveal itself as the core stabilizing force

⁴⁵⁶ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 82

⁴⁵⁷ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 82.

⁴⁵⁸ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 82–3.

of a text, acting separately from if not oppositionally against narrative patterns of instability or chaos, cannot be underestimated: this idea allows for the possibility that some artists intend to convey important answers or ideas through symbolic iconographic cues rather than through conventional narrative structures and developments alone. If this claim bears truth, as I believe it does, then any rejection or disregarding of potential allegorical-symbolic interpretations of texts in our critical discourses or classrooms will end up diminishing, if not totally evacuating, intended meanings of artworks that would have otherwise been discovered and validated.

Comparing Western allegory's earliest functions (largely sectarian) with more recent uses (increasingly secular), Fletcher makes some noteworthy assertions, which imply allegory is a literary mode that seamlessly adapts to changing social conditions, philosophic orientations, artistic needs, and cultures of reading communities: "While allegory in the Middle Ages came to the people from the pulpit, it comes to the modern reader in secular, but no less popular, form. The modern romance and the detective story with its solution also carry double meanings that are no less important to the completion of their plots than is the *moralitas* to the preacher's parable."⁴⁵⁹ I would simply add that the secular flavor of modern allegory has a piquant counterpart in modern second-order symbolism, which also often sets up a dual-sighted, secularized scope through which its readers and viewers are asked to view a narrative's contents and its possible meanings.

Also in line with the multifunctional appeals of symbolic realisms, allegory, according to Fletcher, "has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself. But *somehow* this literal surface suggests a *peculiar* doubleness of intention; and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much *richer* and more interesting if

⁴⁵⁹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 5.

given interpretation.”⁴⁶⁰ A viable biopoetics of symbolism should be positioned to explore with greater precision what the “somehow” in Fletcher’s proposition entails; and to explain how that “peculiar” doubled intentional stance, which operates by suggestion and recruits the audience’s interpretative faculties, would cause audiences to judge their aesthetic experiences had become “richer” by virtue of negotiating between literal surfaces and symbolic depths.

Illustrating his point further, Fletcher enjoins, “Even the most deliberate fables, if read naïvely or carelessly, may seem mere stories, but what counts in our discussions is a structure that lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning.”⁴⁶¹ Fletcher’s idiom is once again notable. His division between “primary” and “secondary” meanings has close parallels with this dissertation’s first-order and second-order schematic. Nor does the diction attempt to hide his assumption that literary works and genres, whose meanings or purposes might appear uncomplicated or elementary at first blush (e.g. fables), can indeed be read with naïvety and carelessness—a point seemingly lost on some of today’s literary-arts instructors today. American teachers have been conditioned to be gun-shy about saying such things to their student learners, whose self-esteem and consumer contentment are pedagogical first priorities. Nonetheless, naïve, careless reading exists.

Fletcher is also refreshingly frank in discussing how allegory (and, by my extension, second-order symbolism) can provide an artist with a subversive sociopolitical tool by which to communicate with his or her audience:

At least one branch of allegory, the ironic *aenigma*, serves political and social purposes by the very fact that a reigning authority (as in a police state) does

⁴⁶⁰ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 7. Italics mine.

⁴⁶¹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 7.

not see the secondary meaning of the “Aesop-language.” But someone does see that meaning, and once seen, it is felt strongly to be the final intention behind the primary meanings.⁴⁶²

It is “naïve readers,” according to Fletcher, who are unable to key into an allegorical text’s true intentions and ultimate meanings, which reside beneath its *prima facie* surfaces. “But then,” as Fletcher bluntly states, “in discussing allegory we are not much concerned with naïve readers. We are talking about sophisticated readers and what they read *into* literature.”⁴⁶³ The very same could be said about audiences of second-order symbolic artworks. Some combination of readerly care and sophistication—or at least a willingness to engage in contemplative reflection that considers possible non-surface connections in certain artworks—are essential ingredients for any second-order symbolic work to reach the zenith of its *raison d’être*.

Fletcher offers another bold if contentious line of argument, which interrogates how narrative modes and structures (those of “pure storytelling”) relate to the presumably more abstractive processes of mind and art (those of thematics and *allegoresis*):

There is [...] no harm in admitting that stories can move the reader by sheer plot, action, and surprise. But these stories are much rarer than one would expect. It is commoner to find a veneer of action laid over a moralizing intent. Finally, whether one thinks there is such a thing as pure storytelling, or only degrees of abstract thematic structure (Aristotle’s *dianoia*) underlying every fiction, the main point is surely that in discussing literature generally we must be ready to discern in almost any work at least a small degree of allegory. All

⁴⁶² Fletcher, *Allegory*, 8.

⁴⁶³ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 8.

literature, as Northrup Frye has observed, is from the point of view of commentary more or less allegorical.⁴⁶⁴

Whether or not one sides entirely with Fletcher (and Frye) on this last point, his advocacy for such an attitude—that all fictions are, to some greater or lesser degree, allegorical—is hard to dismiss, philosophically if not in critical praxis. And as Fletcher’s evidence and claims unfold across his book, his arguments do gather force.

Underlining the definitional problematics that have bogged down theoretical criticism about poetic symbol and allegory, Fletcher proposes that “figurative language is not understood at the present time in any final way.” He feels “the tortuous subtly of William Empson and Kenneth Burke [...] suggests that no simple formulas are possible.”⁴⁶⁵ While our language science and linguistic taxonomies have of course progressed in positive ways since the time of Fletcher’s writing, the gist of his statement here still holds. The definitional borders of rhetorical devices, figures of speech, schema, tropes, types of ambiguities, etc. invariably fuzz up as one drills down, in hopes of concretizing them into rigidly discrete classes. The boundaries of lumpy classes—such as allegory, symbol, and poetic speech, which often get opposed to notions of the literal, narrativity, historicity, reportage—become inscrutably blurred upon the most rigorous examinations, despite the best intentions and microscopic analyses of highly intelligent scholars who attempt to differentiate their nuances (à la Empson and Burke). The title of Fletcher’s book itself even embodies that slippage between symbol and allegory: *allegory* is evidently just one of several possible classes of a *symbolic mode*.

Addressing the historically contentious debates about the proper usage of and

⁴⁶⁴ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 8.

⁴⁶⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 11.

delineations between *allegory* and *symbol*, Fletcher concludes they have budded off more intellectual muddles and unnecessary disciplinary quibbles than lasting scholarly value or definitional clarity. This “unhappy controversy,” as Fletcher sees it, “begins with Goethe’s distinction between the two terms.” Fletcher characterizes the problematic as “primarily historical matter, since it concerns romantic conceptions of the mind, and of ‘imagination’ in particular.”⁴⁶⁶ He parses Coleridgean theories that contrast symbol’s alleged essence (a symbol is always a *part* of some organic, unfolding *whole* and is, thus, linguistically synecdochal) against allegory’s more mechanistic logics of correlation (the doubled meanings of allegory are metaphorical and, all too often, gracelessly contrived):

Coleridge makes a natural starting point for an analysis of allegorical practice, since he is at the center of the disputation which has so obscured the problem.

For Coleridge the definition of allegory was an important matter because it allowed him to once again make the distinction between “organic” and “mechanistic” form, and to provide a major instance of literature created out of a compromising relationship between the imagination and the logical powers of reason. [...] Coleridge made his criticism of allegory implicit in his distinction between symbol and allegory.

In “Falling into Time: The Historicity of the Symbol” (1997), Vance Bell captures the ways and reasons the romantics rupture the categories of allegory (mechanistic) and symbol (organic), referencing Coleridge’s exemplum passage from *The Statesman's Manual* (1816):

⁴⁶⁶ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 13.

The rise of Enlightenment thought in Europe was met by numerous counter-movements grouped under the umbrella term “Romanticism.” It is within the context of this Romantic rebellion against reason that the symbol-allegory distinction received its most extreme characterization. The backlash against the divisionism and materialism of the Enlightenment's “analytical reason” was manifested in aesthetics and criticism as the extreme distinction between the organic and mechanical form. A.W. Schlegel's discussion of mechanical and organic form in his *Die Kunstlehre* (The Art-Lesson) is mirrored in Coleridge's vehement attack on allegory as the “counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding.”

...allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture language, which is nothing but an abstraction from the objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol...is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all of the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of the unity of which it is representative.⁴⁶⁷

With Coleridge the symbol is one with the “whole”—it presents a unity of the particular and the general in which each is reflected in the other. This synecdochal relationship of the symbolic object and the greater reality precipitates a hermeneutic circle in which it becomes impossible to obtain knowledge of either the symbol or the 'whole' it mirrors apart from their interrelationship.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* (1816).

⁴⁶⁸ Vance Bell, “Falling into Time: The Historicity of the Symbol,” *Other Voices: The e-Journal of Cultural Criticism* 1, no.1 (March 1997), http://www.othervoices.org/1.1/vbell/symbol.php#Note_22.

The synecdochal nature of the romantic symbol in some interesting ways invokes what Goodman calls *exemplifications* or *samples*: i.e. a segmented part that has been been “removed” from or stands apart from a larger whole. Exemplifications and samples are somehow materially identical to the whole, although diminished or transformed morphologically so they are more convenient to manipulate physically, cognitively, or informationally. It is almost as if the part element of the synecdochal part/whole relationship has been physically removed from its whole, and shrunk into a token. The tailor’s swatch is Goodman’s favorite illustration of this. Exemplifications and samples symbolize but they do not *denote*: *denoting* only occurs with fixed, conventionalized notational systems, according to Goodman’s symbol schematics. Of course, exemplifications and samples are not *contiguous* with its other/whole, as the romantic symbol does seem to insist upon. But there are some curious overlaps here, I believe, which could profit from further analysis.

Fletcher describes the part/whole synecdochal dynamic as lending a “participation mystique” to the romantic symbol. (Perhaps it is “*sample mystique*”? Or “*exemplification mystique*”?) He also, in the passage below, broaches some important points on the conscious/unconscious creative processes involved in *allegoresis*:

By identifying symbol with synecdoche, Coleridge is assuming a sort of *participation mystique* of the symbol with the idea symbolized. [...] whereas in allegory there is always (as Coleridge sees it) an attempt to categorize logical orders first, and fit them to convenient phenomena second, to set forth ideal systems first, and illustrate them second. This latter Platonic idea-image relationship can exist only when one is conscious of the philosophic status of the ideas one’s conceiving. One need not necessarily be

aware of one's own private motives in constructing such ideal systems, but one does need to have a conscious, highly organized view of the interrelationships that bind the system into a unity. Coleridge emphasized the unconsciousness of the symbolic process in a way that tempts a Freudian reinterpretation of his view. [...] *Allegoria* manifestly has two or more levels of meaning, and the apprehension of these must require at least two attitudes of mind. [...] Yet Coleridgean theory only goes so far, and modern approaches will eventually replace it. Whether duplicity of meaning in all allegory follows necessarily from a splitting of *reason* and *imagination* is not a question that modern psychology would pose in Coleridgean terms.⁴⁶⁹

These last ideas—about what authors need to be absolutely conscious of (the soundness of and organizational binding relationships inhering within the ideal philosophical schemes illustrated via their allegories, as well as the metaphorical binding relationships between text, subtext, and those philosophical orders) and what they may or may not be unconscious about (deeper motives behind their interest in or favoring of the philosophical messages or abstract themes being delivered in their allegorical texts)—call out for some modern updating. That is, updating with terms informed by the latest scientific studies on the conscious and unconscious mind-brain. Fletcher was himself seeking such updates on these romantic theories of symbol and allegory, bidding for corrections from “modern approaches” to psychology. Of course, modern approaches during Fletcher's time were by and large Freudian. New updates are needed in light of today's more advanced psychological sciences, neuroscience, and evolutionary-cognitive theories about the human mind-brain.

Fletcher notes how “the word *symbol* in particular has become a banner for

⁴⁶⁹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 15–18.

confusion”—an assessment that holds even truer today than it did in his time—often because, for Fletcher’s contemporaries, *symbol* found itself taking on a default normative identity: what Fletcher considers “a falsely evaluative function whenever it is used to mean ‘good’ (‘symbolic’) poetry as opposed to ‘bad’ (‘allegorical’) poetry, and in this way it clouds distinctions that are already difficult enough to make.”⁴⁷⁰ Contrarily, “The value of allegory, called into question both by the Romantic critics and by the New Critics, cannot be determined apart from a consideration of its function. Critics have not always sought positively for the things allegory does well. One gets the impression, furthermore, that when they attach such a protean procedure as this, they are doing so in order to praise some other procedure they prefer.”⁴⁷¹ And in his concluding remarks, Fletcher affirms, “To say that a given work is allegorical is therefore not to say anything about its value, since allegory is only a mode of symbolizing.”⁴⁷²

Since the time of Fletcher’s writing, valuations of the relative merits of symbolic and allegorical art have experienced inversions, evolutions, and convolutions. With the advent of postmodernism, poststructuralism, identity-politics criticism, narratology, and the opening of the canon, there no longer seems to be much critical consensus (or interest) about whether so-called allegorical works are somehow inherently praiseworthy; whether symbolic works are better or worse than non-symbolic, first-order, hyper-realistic kinds of works; or whether symbolic/allegorical modes and their associated devices are worthy of critical attention at all. Whatever stance one wishes to take on such questions, this dissertation makes no apologies for occasionally playing fast-and-loose with terms like *allegorical* or *symbolic*. And while it is unwise to consider such terms as interchangeable synonyms or as designations of “good”

⁴⁷⁰ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 13.

⁴⁷¹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 304.

⁴⁷² Fletcher, *Allegory*, 358.

art, assumptions like Fletcher's, about the lack of robust definitional formulas of so much figurative language, help validate some of this looseness when it arises. While some of the distinctions behind these labels remain useful and thus should not be discarded, the shared territories and common genealogies of the terms are such that shadings and substitutions are bound to occur, in laymen conversation certainly but also in academic critical discourse. This should not be cause for alarm. I happily open myself to allegations of imprecision here. But ultimately a viable second-order biopoetics should apply liberally to both allegorical and symbolical devices in artworks, however they get defined.

Some additional passages from Fletcher's Chapter 7, "Value and Intention: The Limits of Allegory," bear resuscitation here for their clarity of thought and relevance to topics about second-order symbologies, thematic abstraction, mimesis, and author intention. Theorizing further on allegory's broadest values and effects, Fletcher problematizes the commonly touted, negatively charged critical dogmas about the mode—dogmas which work on presumptions that allegories tend to be too clumsy, inflexible, doctrinaire, or artificially correlational to function well as "high" art:

Allegories are far less often the dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles. If they are often rigid, muscle-bound structures, that follows from their involvement with authoritarian conflict. If they are abstract, harsh, mechanistic, and remote from daily life, so as to forget all higher aspirations, an author perhaps does well to present behavior in a grotesque abstract caricature. In such a way he may arouse a general self-criticism, and the method will be justified.

Both this satirical criticism and the apocalyptic escape into an

infinite space and time tend toward high human goals. In both cases allegory is serving major social and spiritual needs. When we add to these the functions of education (the didactic strain) and entertainment (the riddling or romantic strains), we have a modality of symbolism which we must respect. Allegory, as I have tried to define it, seems to be a many-sided phenomenon. Its overall purpose are capable of many minor variations.⁴⁷³

Grotesque caricatures can function as what cognitive scientists and psychologist have come to call *super-normal stimuli*: cues that our perceptual-attentional apparatuses can readily latch on to, be motivated to resolve, and commit to memory. Such caricatures are arguably part of allegory's lasting and dynamic appeal. (Kubrick, for instance, is often portrayed by critics as a master of such caricaturing, which emerges from his fairy-tale/mythic characterizations, narrative layerings inflected by his prodigious lifelong reading habits, and his peculiar and arresting formal combinations of classical Hollywood conventions, stylistic choices that produce an immersive mimetic realism, and other stylistic choices that work in the other direction to create surreal or alienatory effects.) The "riddling" strain of allegory Fletcher refers to above shares aesthetic and cognitive ground with appeals of any second-order symbolic riddles. (Once again, we can look at Kubrick and his reputation as a riddler filmmaker, a producer of enigmatic cinema puzzles that probably do hold some answers for his most attentive, imaginative viewers.) Finally, Fletcher's defense of allegory as a literary mode that is multifunctional and deserving of critical respect is no less true of virtually any other mode of symbolic art.

Fletcher understands how allegories, by definition, impose a field of interpretative strictures on readers, guiding reader responses in some more or less "authoritarian" way: "the

⁴⁷³ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 23.

mode necessarily exerts a high degree of control over the way reader must approach any given work.” Quoting Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Fletcher acknowledges, “The author’s whole technique ‘tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed.’”⁴⁷⁴ Neither mimetic (empirically pleasing in its verisimilitude and accommodating of uncertainties that plague earthly human life) nor mythic (“where a higher reality is pressed upon the reader in the form of some cardinal, underlying question about existence itself”⁴⁷⁵) in its epistemological-hermeneutical profile, allegory gestures at shoring up certainty and erasing interpretive ambiguities among quizzical readers:

Allegory does not accept doubt; its enigmas show instead an obsessive battling with doubt. It does not accept the world of experience and the senses; it thrives on their overthrow, replacing them with ideas. In these ways allegory departs from mimesis and myth, and its intention in either case seems to be a matter of clearly rationalized “allegorical levels of meaning.” These levels are the double aim of the aesthetic surface; they are its intention, and its ritualized form is intended to elicit from the reader some sort of exegetical response. Whereas a simple story may remain inscrutable to the sophisticated reader, and a myth inscrutable to any reader at all, the correspondences of allegory are open to any who have a decoder’s skill. In this way, oddly enough, allegorical intention is in general a simple matter.⁴⁷⁶

At the same time, Fletcher implies there is always a spectrum of constraint. The interpretative limitations placed upon readers by allegories can vary significantly by period, author, and text. Moreover, Fletcher seems to understand that constraint, in and of itself, is not an

⁴⁷⁴ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 304.

⁴⁷⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 322.

⁴⁷⁶ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 322–3.

inherently undesirable condition of the aesthetic-communication transaction. He makes a convincing case that even the most ostensibly non-allegorical works, such as the *loci classici* of the naturalistic novel, can paradoxically summon up as thematically-oriented, idea-bound, predetermined responses and criticism from their readers as the most didactic medieval allegories do. Meanwhile, genres regularly thought of as natively allegorical, such as the fairy tale and fable, often comprise works that are chimeras of mimetic realism, mythic vision, and pure flights of imaginative fantasy idiosyncratic to the author's mind—in addition to the *sine qua non* double-messaging of allegory. As Fletcher duly notes, “since mythic and mimetic moments are always possible in the midst of a fable, we find that exegetical problems can always arise as to the specific intention of any particular work.”⁴⁷⁷

Furthermore, Fletcher suggests that the default critical stance on allegory too often dismisses the mode's instances of, and abiding potential for, both strangeness and furtive difficulty. Contrary to straw-man characterizations posited by detractors of the mode, allegories are not always so blatantly obvious in revealing their “simple” one-to-one fixed correlations and presumed ham-handed didactic messaging:

We need to be aware that allegory teems with cases where the particular meaning of the work is not immediately obvious, where the intention of the work is to shroud abstract ideas under a cover of dimly understandable imagery, as in the mystical and doctrinal passages of *The Divine Comedy*, or the deliberate obscurities of the troubadour poetry know as *trobar clus*. This enigmatic art thrives because its “difficult ornament” arouses the reader's curiosity. It therefore deliberately tries to be obscure. In the same way, the occasional poet, wishing to praise but not to embarrass, or to damn but not

⁴⁷⁷ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 323.

appear scurrilous, will hide the identify of the true objects of this poem—real people, since this is occasional poetry—and once again a particular “intention” may be said to be deliberately obscured. But this does not mean that we have any doubt as to the *kind* of search for intention that is involved. [...] The same goes for those earliest of English allegorical poems, the Old English riddles, and in general we may say that the enigmatic, emblematic, occasional, or occult traditions of allegorical poetry elicit only particular doubts as to the intentions of specific symbols. (Does this monkey symbolize wisdom or trickery? Does this dove belong to Venus, or Noah’s Ark? Is this amethyst a talisman against drunkenness? Does this opal signify bad luck?)⁴⁷⁸

Elaborating on the allegorical strategies and potency of troubadour poetry, Fletcher quotes Maurice Valency’s *In Praise of Love* to good effect:

The best of *trobar clus* is characterized by a parabolic quality, the result of a studied ambiguity which implies a reserve of meaning beyond the comprehension of the average intelligence. The poem communicates a felling that more is meant than meets the eye, and what meets the eye is by no means certain. We are thus aware of penumbral significances which may or may not have been intended, as well as of a general exasperating breakdown of communication. Such poetry teases the mind into poetic activity on its own account. It elicits an athletic response which is in pleasant contract with the more passive pleasure of easy poetry, and thus brings about an enhanced participation on the part of the listener or reader, who has a feeling, if he succeeds in penetrating the poet’s meaning, of greater intimacy than less

⁴⁷⁸ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 310–12.

exclusive types of poetry can afford.⁴⁷⁹

The “athletic,” co-creative responses that difficult or puzzling poetic texts want to “tease” out from a reader stand in contrast to the allegedly more passive responses elicited by “easy” poetry. All forms and devices of second-order symbolism demand, to varying degrees, similar kinds of effort and problem-solving states of mind in their decoder-reader. This active *working for* poetic meaning relies on several social-mental-emotional appeals that Valency’s passage insinuates—appeals that are ripe for translation into ev-cog terms. If these appeals are conceptualized as proximate instantiations of ultimate-cause cognitive mechanisms built for fulfilling inclusive fitness needs, we locate a suite of universal human desires at work: desires to be part of a (select) group, to participate in something (possibly larger than themselves), to identify and work to solve problems or ambiguities in the world (thus demonstrating intelligence), and to connect to others who may have intelligent ideas about the world themselves (such as Valency’s troubadour poets or society’s most esteemed or profoundly sensitive artists more generally).

Lastly, Fletcher devotes several sections to allegory’s special capacity for and methods of staging sociopolitical commentary. Texts written in an allegorical mode inhabit a unique rhetorical position: they can effectively disseminate unpopular political messages or express unsanctioned social thought with both clandestine persuasive power and plausible deniability. Since allegory natively operates in a signifying landscape of covert doubled meanings (one signifier => two signifieds), politically minded allegorists can exploit narrative and semantic gray areas to communicate against the grains of socially, politically, legally, or morally sanctioned systems of thought and behavior without (much) fear of

⁴⁷⁹ Maurice Valency, *In Praise of Love: An Introduction to the Love Poetry of the Renaissance* (New York: MacMillan, 1958), 125–30. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 310–11, footnote 8.

repercussions. Fletcher's passages on these matters offer lucid, informative views on the topic and are worthy of some inspection.

Invoking the celebrated Greek fabulist Aesop and the thinly veiled coded narratives and beast fables attributed to him, Fletcher adopts the expression "Aesop-language" to signpost an author's use of allegory as a polysemous sociopolitical message-delivery system, especially when under threat of political oppression or censorship:

Allegory [...] appears to express conflict between rival authorities, as in times of political oppression we may get "Aesop-language" to avoid censorship of dissident thought. At the heart of any allegory will be found this conflict of authorities. One ideal will be pitted against another, its opposite: thus the familiar propagandist function of the mode, thus the conservative satirical function, thus the didactic function.⁴⁸⁰

Important to note here, whether functioning as political propaganda, social satire, or moral instruction, an allegory's Aesopian language and tendentious messaging introduces questions about how to judge that work's merits. While an allegorical text's partisan political stances and ethical coordinates might be disconnected from other kinds of aesthetic or historical judgments we want to make about the text, will our final arbitration about the text's overall worth be inextricably enmeshed in how its political-moral visions align with our own?

Fletcher frames the problem thusly, suggesting the answer is "yes":

Frequently didactic in aim, allegories raise questions of value *directly*, by asserting certain propositions as good and others as bad. Typically, a poem like Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, constitutes an art that breaks the Kantian rule of disinterestedness. Spenser continually affirms rules of conduct and

⁴⁸⁰ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 22.

powers of soul he would label “virtuous.” The reader is forced into an attitude either of acceptance or rebellion, and for this reason there is room for more than a merely aesthetic dislike of the mode; we can include among critical dislikes of allegory the strong reservation that particular allegories may in fact be teaching wrong things.⁴⁸¹

Of course, the same kinds of questions—concerning an author’s moral-political partisanship or a text’s endorsement of proper social conduct—will arise when evaluating most texts (narrative fictions in particular). Insofar as narrative art can reflect, challenge, or teach us something about our own moral values and political worlds, in relation to those of the author or the human agents of the narrative, such questions are indigenous to critical arbitration of virtually any text. They are simply foregrounded, in extreme high relief, when we come into contact with allegorical works.

In a section titled “Intentional Control in Political Allegory,” Fletcher develops these ideas further. “It is chiefly in the area of political allegory that the thematic function of an ‘Aesop-language’ can be justified,” he writes. Though we might rightfully question the integrity or value of allegory “which reinforces the *status quo* without any critical flexibility, we respect the very same propagandistic method when it is turned *against* inflexible governmental censorship.” In other words, “We cannot then condemn allegory as an instrument of universal conformity, until we have admitted that it is also the chief weapon of satire.”⁴⁸²

Fletcher properly recognizes “there are times when, to be useful, fictions need to be purposively controlled as they are in allegory.” Specifically, those “are times when

⁴⁸¹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 306.

⁴⁸² Fletcher, *Allegory*, 324–5.

censorship is extreme, or when authoritarian government, either secular or sacred, assumes full control of the means of public communication.” Allegory in such circumstances can function as a secure artistic channel for political dissidence and self-expression, veiled and compromised as that self might have to be in public performance. “No matter how strict a censoring procedure is invoked by a repressive government, some sort of allegorical subterfuge is possible,” Fletcher contends; moreover, “this subversive style, sometimes satirical, sometimes utopian, always seemingly innocuous, preserves freedom against tyranny.” Therefore, according to Fletcher’s logic, allegory “thrives on political censorship.”⁴⁸³

Fletcher cites several passages from Kenneth Burke’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1957) as extratextual support for his claims. Burke’s diction and key ideas link up with the terminological and conceptual motifs of this dissertation as well, and thus deserve some recitation:

Exile or silence seems to be the only choices open to writer who, born and trained in the ways of liberalism, are suddenly compelled to meet situations of absolute dictatorship wholly alien to their training. Bred to one situation, with their methods formed by it, they find a totally alien situation abruptly forced upon them. [...]

But I can imagine there gradually arising, among a younger generation of writers bred to the new situation, a new language of deployments and maneuvers, with sly sallies that have an implied weighting far in excess of their surface meanings. In short, I am suggesting that no political structure, if continued long enough for people to master its ways, is capable of preventing

⁴⁸³ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328.

forms of expression that tug at the limits of patronage.⁴⁸⁴

Burke's prognostications of an emergent artistic class, whose members "deploy" a strategic language of "sly sallies" with "implied weightings" percolating "in excess" under "surface meanings," basically resituates this dissertation's discourse on second-order symbolism squarely into the realms of sociopolitical oppression and the artistic response to that oppression. Again, the point to be made is this: a biopoetics of symbolism should be positioned to investigate the ev-cog machinery behind what makes these cunning deployments of sly implication and symbolic insinuation cognitively possible, aesthetically effective, and sociolinguistically secure in otherwise insecure political conditions.

For a case study to help illustrate his points, Fletcher examines several different flavors of allegory that emerged in twentieth-century Russian/Soviet fiction and theater. Citing Burke again, as well as Bertram Wolfe, Fletcher suggests the first allegorical strain arose during the gradual changeover from imperial Czarist Russia to Soviet Leninism. This is Burke:

Even under the censorship of the Czar, for instance, there were circumlocutions, known to all informed readers, that referred to the day when the Czar would be deposed. Nor were these any less known to the censors than to the readers. They were allowed in part, perhaps, as a way of revealing to government agents those particular authors who might, by thus expressing their attitudes, provide the agents with valuable "leads" into more serious forms of conspiracy.⁴⁸⁵

Here, we see allegory being not very sly at all. In such cases, everyone is in on the game.

⁴⁸⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 198 ff. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 326–7.

⁴⁸⁵ Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Forms*, 198 ff. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 327.

Including the reigning hegemonic powers being ironized and presumably duped.

Bertram Wolfe also observes the triumphs of allegorical agitprop in the revolutionary period.

It is suggested, according to Fletcher's reading of Wolfe, that certain allegorical works "enabled Lenin" to consolidate support and persuade his Russian backers to persist in their contestations of the Czarist regime. These works helped Lenin

to fight Russian imperialism in wartimes by a statistical, theoretical analysis of the German variety. Still later Bukhurin was to employ the same device to circumvent a more vigilant and ruthless censorship when he wrote a pamphlet attacking the Vatican, in which his criticism of Loyola and the "corpse-like" obedience and discipline of the Jesuits' implied his criticism of the Stalin regime.⁴⁸⁶

Fletcher acknowledges that "one tends to think of this literature as being not exactly literature, and to assume that its methods have no relevance to aesthetics properly speaking." Propaganda's moral sanctity and political rectitude certainly bucks against much received wisdom about what the "high" literary arts can, or should, do. But, as Fletcher notes, "Burke is willing to tolerate an 'art' which speaks through an 'Aesop-language,' and whose main aim is political subversion—of a defensible kind since the powers to be subverted are denying political liberties."⁴⁸⁷ Whether one classifies such texts as literary art, propaganda, or something else entirely, their powers to capture the cognitive attentions and collective political imagination of an entire polity, and to help facilitate real-world consequences, remain undeniable. Some of that power must derive from the peculiar biopoetic operations of allegory on the human mind, as opposed to the effects from more purely essayistic discourse

⁴⁸⁶ Bertram Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* (Boston: 1955), 23. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 327.

⁴⁸⁷ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 327.

or more purely mimetic fictions.

As Soviet totalitarianism and its attendant paranoia and militancy grew stronger in the USSR, not all Soviet artists were fortunate enough to evade the impending panopticon and purges of Stalinism. According to one account of Fletcher,

The early stages of Soviet rule witnessed a flourishing of satire, because there were obvious abuses in both the leftover old regime and the rising new regime. But when the Soviets were fully established, it required a very delicate hand to avoid complete suppression. Thus [Ilya] Ilf and [Yevgeny] Petrov survived Stalinist day, but [Vsevolod] Meyerhold did not. When Meyerhold's invective turned upon the new regime, having previously demolished the old regime, he was himself suspected by the new rulers, stamped out because he failed to be sufficiently indirect.⁴⁸⁸

Examples like this—of a radical figure like Meyerhold, a pioneer of the expressionist theater and the symbolic avant-garde, suffering torture and execution at the hands of an authoritarian police force for crimes of sedition and treason linked almost exclusively to his not-covert-enough allegorical art—are probably too extreme and anomalous for extrapolating out too many conclusions. They are likely the exception not the rule across the broad sweep of art, politics, and social history. Nonetheless, they can effectively provide young students with some instructive first lessons in, and even remind seasoned critics about, the high-stakes real-life consequences that can arise from the “games” played within the arenas of our symbolic-allegorical arts. If nothing else, they can provide graphic, concrete illustration of how serious sociopolitical costs and life-security issues can arise when one fails to be sufficiently *indirect* in their rhetoric, in their art, in their symbolic subterfuge.

⁴⁸⁸ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328.

Furthermore, one does not need recourse to Stalinist Russia for examples of modern artists taking refuge in techniques of sly subterfuge. The Hollywood Hays Code (c. 1930–1968) provides a historically parallel instance of America’s own powerful exertion of religious-political censorship. Even if the Code impelled industry “self-censorship” only, it reigned as the *de facto* law of the land in Hollywood for nearly 40 years, significantly shaping the content, stylistic trends, and moral patina of Golden Era Hollywood. It deprived filmmakers of certain tools of self-expression and prohibited them from depicting or tackling head-on a host of important social, sexual, religious, and political subject matters. At the same time, the moralistic guidelines and formal constraints enforced by the Hays Code induced many Hollywood filmmakers to invent special narrative codings and clever stylistic workarounds to circumvent at least some of those restrictions. Few Hollywood writers, producers, or directors would openly flout the Hays Code before the 1960s. But many would impishly wink at, or deploy more subtle ways of undermining, these very real external suppressions of their artistic expression. Suppressions which were certainly career-endangering, if not life-threatening as in the cases of Soviet artists working during and against Stalinism.

As final nod to Fletcher, a short section that capstones his political segments, titled “Puttenham: The Elizabethan Subversive,” deserves brief attention and recitation. Resurrecting several captivating passages from George Puttenham’s 1589 landmark work of English literary criticism, *The Arte of English Poesie*, Fletcher suggests that “Elizabethan rhetoric presents us with a full account of the subversive functions of allegory.”⁴⁸⁹ Puttenham himself proposed that allegory was “the chief ringleader and captain of all other figures,

⁴⁸⁹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328.

either in the poetic or oratory science.”⁴⁹⁰ Indeed, the Elizabethan courier will not prosper, according to Fletcher’s reading of Puttenham, “if he cannot put allegory to use, that is, if he cannot speak deceptively and equivocally.”⁴⁹¹ Puttenham consolidates a litany of rhetorical and poetical figures under the rubric of what Fletcher calls “generalized irony”: riddles (*aenigmas*), proverbs, mockery, irony, jests, hyperbole, synecdoche, to name but a few. All of these exhibit certain trappings or attributes of the allegorical. But it is a passage from Puttenham quoted in one of Fletcher’s footnotes I want to track more closely here.

That passage picks up from Puttenham’s depiction of allegory as a devious but subversive “figure of false semblaunt.” (Fletcher here recalls that “False Semblance is one of the characters in Jean de Meung’s continuation of *The Romance of the Rose*.”). Keeping original spellings intact, this is Puttenham:

As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sorte of abuses or rather trespasses in speech, because they passe the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the eare and also the minde, drawing it from plainnesse and simplicitie to a certaine doublenesse, where by our talke is the more guilefull and abusing, for what else is your *Metaphore* but an inversion of sense by transport; your *allegorie* by a duplicitie of meaning or dissimulation under covert and darke intendments: one while speaking obscurely and in riddle called *aenigma* [...]; and many other ways seeking to inveigle and appassionate the mind.⁴⁹²

Perhaps what is most revealing about passages like this is the exuberant urgency and focused critical attention Puttenham gives to these topics. For here we have a sixteenth-century critic

⁴⁹⁰ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), Book III, Ch. vii. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328.

⁴⁹¹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328–9

⁴⁹² Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie*, Book III, Ch. vii., 154. Qtd. in Fletcher, *Allegory*, 328–9.

rigorously negotiating with, if not scientifically investigating, the nature and paradoxes of second-order symbolic devices. Puttenham is essentially wrestling with the puzzling, dichotomous cognitive attractions and repulsions the human “eare” and “minde” have for certain kinds of duplicitous speech: particularly those “covert and darke” figures and poetic riddles that sometimes inhabit an artist’s replete aesthetic field, and that invariably “inveigle and appassionate the mind.” Central among those figures, of course, are the enigmatic symbol and the double-faced allegory.

The strange allure and binary conceal/reveal nature of those figures gets reinscribed in these concluding remarks from Fletcher: “In short, though allegory may be intended to reveal, it does so only after veiling a delayed message which it would rather keep from any very ready or facile interpretation.”⁴⁹³ The virtues underwriting allegory’s appeals, then, circle back to some of the same qualities ascribed to second-order symbolism more generally: the power and appeal of suggestion, indirection, effortful decoding, delayed understanding, and thus delayed gratification.

Fletcher goes on to present several justification scenarios intended to explain an artist’s possible motives for deploying allegorical schemes. First, “While one can justify the Puttenham aesthetic on the Augustinian basis that whatever is acquired with difficulty is more highly valued, and one can invoke the standard Renaissance belief in this view, that is not Puttenham’s view.”⁴⁹⁴ Rather, Puttenham is “thinking chiefly of the courtier,” who must survive the strain of intense sociopolitical maneuverings at court using a complex of verbal art, wit, and social intelligence. Fletcher thus posits that anxiety was “the dominant feeling

⁴⁹³ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 330.

⁴⁹⁴ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 330.

accompanying allegorical procedures” in the world of Puttenham’s courtier.⁴⁹⁵ Perhaps more persuasive, or universally relevant, than his courtier anxiety theory of allegory are the political and “cosmic” justification theories Fletcher recapitulates next. These tie allegory back to power politics of the margins and center, and to the allegorist’s position within a cosmic ethical order: “One can politically justify the ‘figure of the false semblaunt’ when the *status quo* is being maintained by censorship from above, since at such times the mode allows the writer to attack. Presumably, from another point of view, one can justify the cosmic defense of the *status quo*, if that reigning situation is seemingly valid.”⁴⁹⁶

No matter what the ultimate justification is for any single instance of allegorical art that has been or might yet be created, two broad theoretic claims seem indisputable. First, allegory, as much as symbolism, has proven itself an indispensable and highly efficacious cultural adaptation of the modern human arts. Second, the allegorical mode must tap into and ride upon an equally complex suite of deep ev-cog mechanisms of mind: mechanisms ranging from the human animal’s most basic survival drive (the radical allegorist could conceivably be killed or imprisoned for expressing ideas directly in dangerous sociopolitical climes, therefore covert indirect expressions better secure one’s chance of immediate survival and thus inclusive fitness) to much more nuanced proximate mechanisms related to long-term and short-term memory, the neurocognitive adaptations (and quirks) of verbal language, the cognitive roots of abstract thinking, our mental predispositions for both metaphor and narrative, and even evolved dispositions for attending closely to non-human forms of animal life, particularly large or mammalian, which we might need to eat or flee from or live with and learn from (something that can help explain the origins and persistence of beast fables

⁴⁹⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 330.

⁴⁹⁶ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 331.

and the presence of personified animal characters in many of humanity's most treasured narratives).

* * *

The more recent scholarship found in Jon Whitman's collection *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (2003) provides a wider theoretical lens on, and a greater diversity of specialized contributions about, the history of allegorical hermeneutics than Fletcher's work alone can provide. Nonetheless, it complements and enhances Fletcher's theoretical schematics. It also acts as good companion to Struck's works on ancient symbolism. Whitman's preliminary materials, coupled with twenty essays commissioned from scholars of world literatures, language, religion, and history, range over some of the same territories as Struck, going into less depth on the classical period while expanding the topic's breadth into later eras and geographies. Whitman's own essays are erudite but lucid, offering able primers and access-points into the field's scholarship. In these texts, Whitman weaves several lines of history and historiography around a conceptual axis of by-now-familiar idioms and theories on Western allegorical traditions. The collection as a whole spans topics and eras ranging from ancient Greco-Roman allegorical approaches to their own received myths and legends to Hellenistic Jews' pagan-influenced modes of scriptural interpretation, from Kabbalistic naming systems to Boccaccio's mythographies, from Renaissance hieroglyphic studies to medieval and Early Modern emblems and imprese, from Freud and Benjamin to at least one postmodern ideological reading of the allegorical aesthetic. Extracting a few select passages from Whitman's introductory remarks and chronologies will sharpen timelines and offer insights that can deepen our sense of the distinct and universal appeals of second-order symbolotics, while reinforcing and further

organizing earlier information about these puzzle pieces.

Whitman opens with a familiar hedge, clearly the *de rigueur* gambit for any scholar grappling with the theory and history of symbol, allegory, and/or hermeneutics: that is, he stresses the topic's geo-historical vastness and the implausibility of formulating any satisfying comprehensive account of the allegorical arts and their interpretative traditions. Such remarks, redundant as that might be at this point, are nonetheless valuable reminders of the enormous scope and unwieldy nature of these subject matters. Moreover, Whitman's obvious command of the field's coordinates and trajectories serve to grant an important summary perspective from a devoted expert on this breed of second-order hermeneutics. Several of these prefatory passages are thus reproduced here:

The act of interpretation has a way of turning into the subject of interpretation itself. A telling case in point is the theory and practice of allegorical interpretation in the West.

During the past century, thousands of studies have discussed diverse aspects of interpretive allegory. These discussions have extended from brief reflections to expansive volumes, devoted to topics ranging from the explication of a specific scriptural term to the reading of ancient mythology at large. Such investigations have been complemented by a multitude of analyses of compositional allegory, ranging from brief figures of speech to elaborately codified stories. The contemporary effort to characterize allegorical interpretation—one of the formative interpretive activities in the West—is inseparable from this continuing critical history.

Yet for all the variety and value of this history, the effort to engage interpretive allegory at large has recurrently entailed severe problems. Its theoretical and practical expressions are scattered in a formidable number of texts, situated in an imposing array of places and periods, composed in a host of idioms and forms. Scholarly discussions of it are themselves frequently dispersed in an extraordinary range of specialized studies. Even the most capacious works on the subject, central to contemporary scholarship on allegorical interpretation, have understandably tended to concentrate on specific periods such as antiquity, or particular approaches such as typology, or disparate episodes in the general movement of allegory.

In the opening chapter of this volume, I discuss some of the difficulties in any attempt to develop a composite view of such a variegated subject. At least in this life, to imagine a “definitive” account of the theory and practice of allegorical interpretation in the West would require something of an allegorical vision in its own right. But perhaps the intensive research of past years has nonetheless promoted the possibility of a more accessible order, a coordinate framework with which to assess the subject in its very diversity.

To my knowledge, this volume is the first study that offers in detail a historical and conceptual framework for approaching interpretive allegory at large in the West.⁴⁹⁷

Whitman builds on these statements in other nearby passages, which underscore the intractable challenges of formulating convincing historical, conceptual, and definitional

⁴⁹⁷ Jon Whitman, Preface, *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman. (Boston: Brill, 2003), xi.

frameworks that can properly historicize the rich traditions of allegorical texts and interpretative practices without sacrificing their historical and theoretical complexities. As the case with *symbol*, articulating a viable definition of the very term *allegory* itself, along with semantic relatives like *literal* and *poetic*, proves to be fraught with problems.

If it may be useful to suggest in advance what the design of the study is, it is also important to stress what it is not. First, it does not aim to provide a “comprehensive” account of all cases of allegorical theory and practice, whether in the form of a systematic “history” or an explanatory “model.” [...] The subject is hardly susceptible to such an enterprise. In any case, it is scarcely feasible in a single volume even to mention all the important versions of allegorical interpretation in the West.

[...]

Second, the study does not aim to propose a strict “definition” of allegory and to align its discussions with such a definition. As the introductory chapters indicate, the definition of “allegory” fluctuates radically in both historical and conceptual terms.⁴⁹⁸

Yet despite the persistent importance of allegorical interpretation, no one has written a systematic history of it from antiquity to the modern period. There are reasons for this omission. One is the sheer vastness of such a project. To attempt a history of allegorical interpretation in the West would almost be to attempt a history of Western cultural change itself. It would require close acquaintance with over two thousand years of interpretive theory

⁴⁹⁸ Whitman, Preface, *Interpretation and Allegory*, xii.

and practice, a host of regions and peoples, and a variety of genres and languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and the Romance and Germanic languages. Even then there would be pressing practical problems. From antiquity, for example, some of the most important writings of prominent Greek and Christian allegorists have been lost. [...]

There is another reason for the lack of such history, “internal” to the notion of allegory itself. Allegorical interpretation is not a single “kind” of interpretation. [...] Acts of interpretive allegory are transactions between fluctuating critical communities and formative texts. While these transactions regularly draw upon shared interpretive methods, they are situated in times and places, marked by tensions and polemics, that are specific to each historical community and its developing canon. [...] The complexity of the problem is dramatized when allegorical interpreters expressly deny to others a “form” of interpretation that they apparently defend for themselves. When the classical philologist Johannes Geffcken composed an encyclopedia articles near the beginning of the twentieth century on “Allegory, Allegorical Interpretation” (devoted almost exclusively to antiquity), he found himself “bewildered” by an antique “confusion of terms”; early Christian Apologists opposed pagan allegory but themselves used allegorical interpretation, while the pagan Celcus attacked Christian allegory yet was “an allegorist himself.”

This expression of displeasure suggests a third reason limiting the study of allegorical interpretation. For much of the past several centuries, such interpretation has frequently been approached with conspicuous unease. In

part this unease is the result of Reformation and Romantic arguments that “allegory” violates the historical particularity and imaginative integrity of texts. [...] Allegorical interpretation was frequently conceived as a procedure alien to the principles of proper philology itself. [...] But beyond its uneasy reception in recent centuries, the very notion of *allēgoria*—a disparity between the apparent sense of speaking (Greek *agoreuein*) and some “other” sense (Greek *allos*)—has long implied a certain dissonance, even for those who have endorsed it. [...] Even today, when it has become fashionable again to speak of the “other,” to encounter it in allegorical interpretation remains somewhat jolting. Not everyone will be persuaded [...] by the early medieval Christian mythographer Fulgentius that the shipwreck at the opening of the *Aeneid* signifies the dangers of childbirth. Such readers may sympathize with a remark made already in antiquity by Basil the Great while interpreting *Genesis* [...]. “I know the laws of allegory,” he sighed., but “for me, grass is grass.” Part of the difficulty of assessing allegorical interpretation is that such an assessment is itself an interpretive act, inescapably situated [...] in the very history it seeks to assess.⁴⁹⁹

These reflections [...] suggest the critical importance of situating the very definitions of terms like “literal” and “allegorical” in the context of changing intellectual and polemical conditions. To analyze such conditions systemically it would be necessary to examine transitions not only in the theory of allegory but in its practice from antiquity to the modern period. Such

⁴⁹⁹ Whitman, Preface, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 5–7.

an analysis would need to assess the far-reaching historical changes—
linguistic, imaginative, ideological, institutional—that promote or constrain
the realignment of specific texts with shifting interpretive communities. [...]

No single study, however expansive, could fully coordinate such wide-
ranging developments. The questions themselves are still beginning to be
asked. Even the most ambitious and valuable projects of recent years [...] at
times tend less to engage [productive] questions than to provide rich scholarly
resources with which to conduct such an investigation. [...]

In any case, the present volume does not aim to offer such a model,
much less a “history” of interpretation and allegory during a period of over
two thousand years. Investigating major interpretive turning points in differing
but overlapping cultures, it aims rather to provide a set of case studies of
interacting critical drives and their relation to historical change. The subjects
of the interpretative movements it examines include primal forms of
mythology, conceived in terms ranging from ancient logic to Romantic
poetics; foundational texts sacred respectively to Judaism, Christianity, and
Islam; and critical categories of visual and verbal art, among the hieroglyph,
the emblem, the symbol, and irony.⁵⁰⁰

Of course, such hedges and qualifications can only inform about what this collection will not
and cannot do. But Whitman offers affirmative statements as well. The collection’s design
and contents, according to the editor’s own meta-description, fit a three-dimensional order
falling along chronological, cultural, and critical axes: “In chronological scope, the study
explores interpretive activity during a period of over two thousand years, from antique

⁵⁰⁰ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 20–1.

glosses and exegetical treatises to modern and “postmodern” critical theories. [...] In cultural perspective, the volume incorporates extensive analyses of allegorical theory and practice in distinctly pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities, along with more eclectic ones. [...] In critical approach, the work draws upon research from a host of disciplines—the study of literature, religions, art, philosophy, and social history.”⁵⁰¹

Other passages from Whitman’s introduction are worthy of mention, some simply for their humor and pleasurable lucidity, others for their useful chronological summations of the historical junctures and critical benchmarks of the allegorical-symbolic tradition. He opens by citing some fiercely hilarious quotations from thinkers who we might, in kind, call “allegoracists”:

An “insane” activity, the refuge of “unskillfulness”—that is how one Protestant scholar [Sixtinus Amama], commenting in the seventeenth century, described allegorical interpretation in some of its most prominent forms. He was not the first to express his disenchantment. A century earlier Luther had called allegory a “beautiful harlot who fondles men in the such a way that is impossible for her not to be loved.” But he announced that he had escaped her embrace: “I hate allegories.” More recently, a German scholar described allegorical interpretation in antiquity as a kind of “weed” proliferating over the intellectual life of the Roman Empire. In a reverie I sometimes imagine myself writing an extended interpretation of the figures of speech by which critics describe allegorical interpretation. But the reverie always ends abruptly with someone protesting that it is “unskillful,” if not “insane,” to subject the

⁵⁰¹ Whitman, Preface, Interpretation and Allegory, xii.

figurative language of such critics to allegorical interpretation in turn.⁵⁰²

Despite the insanity, harlotry, and invasive toxicity these proverbial allegorical weeds can inflict upon a culture's poetic and spiritual health (allegedly), this has never stopped the mode's momentum and vital adaptations to cultural-historical changes over 2,500 years. In a profitable service, Whitman organizes these changes into ten pivotal moments, which are rehashed below. Cautious and self-correcting as per his style, Whitman naturally downplays his confidence in this chronological construct: "Admittedly, any effort to reduce 2,500 years of interpretive activity to ten brief reference points is almost as risky an enterprise as trying to reduce the regulations of the Bible to ten commandments. [...] My concern at the moment, however, is not that this outline [...] is too sketchy, but too 'developed,' too smoothly *au courant*, with too much of the present projected into it."⁵⁰³ Concerns notwithstanding, the Top Ten Moments in Allegorical Evolution According to Whitman are recast in abbreviated form below.

1. The first signs of an allegorical tradition are evident in ancient Greece (sixth and fifth centuries BCE) "with the philosophic interpretation of Homer and Hesiod," which "aims to give a 'scientific' or 'ethical' rationale to mythological stories. Later, with Stoics like Chrysippus and Cornutus, "allegorical interpretation develops into a sweeping transformation of mythological figures into physical or moral principles."
2. Philosophically inclined Hellenized Jews, such as Philo of Alexander (first century BCE), adapt Greek allegorical methods to Jewish exegetical practices

⁵⁰² Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 3–4.

⁵⁰³ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 14.

scriptures and holy works. Later, “these Alexandrian methods are in turn adapted to the Christian Bible, especially by the esoteric commentators Clement and Origen (second and third centuries CE)

3. With the close of antiquity and the arrival of the Middle Ages, various “overlapping strains of interpretation are consolidated by Christians” (e.g. Cassian and Bede) into programmatic, multileveled systems of scriptural exegesis. The familiar “fourfold” method of Biblical interpretation (literal/allegorical/moral/anagogical) was a product of this period. Additionally, “by adapting Neoplatonic notions of cosmic hierarchy from the Pseudo-Dionysius (turn of the fifth and sixth centuries) and other philosophers, medieval Christians transform natural phenomena at large into coordinate expressions of a multilevel cosmos.”
4. Outside Christian Europe, “The movement toward mystical or philosophical ‘levels’ of interpretation also develops, more controversially, in medieval Islamic treatments of the Koran and medieval Jewish interpretations of Hebrew Scripture.” Koranic allegorical approaches eventually come to be judged heretical and “receive their last methodological defense in the late twelfth century.” Concurrently in the Judaic faith, Maimonides and his followers promoted allegorical exegesis from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, while the Kabbalistic tradition formulated their own version of a fourfold method of interpreting sacred texts.
5. The multileveled systems of Christian allegorical praxes begin to fall out of favor by the late Middle Ages. Their programmatic interpretations of “isolated” Biblical

passages” were deemed too “schematic,” and there was a counter-turn in late-medieval scholasticism toward literal-historical readings of scripture. “Drawing upon Jewish exegesis of scriptural history and upon Aristotelian critiques of ambivalent language,” this movement “gradually redirects interest to the historical continuities of the literal sense.”

6. Late-medieval anxieties about allegory “anticipate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critiques in the Protestant Reformation. Reformers like Luther broadly repudiate ‘allegory’ [...] and invoke a ‘simple’ or ‘literal’ sense of Christian Scripture.”
7. Despite the attenuations and denunciations of allegorical methods in the official ecclesiastical circles of Christian Reformation faiths, allegory “continues to flourish in the Renaissance treatment of ancient mythology, culminating in the vast, mid-sixteenth century encyclopedias of Giraldi, Conti, and Cartari. This interpretive program overlaps with iconographic programs for displaying and decoding conspicuously allusive images, ranging from the enigmatic pictograms of hieroglyphics to the intricate designs of emblems.” Nevertheless, “counterstrains are developing” against allegory in the critical communities devoted to secular texts and the arts as well: “The sixteenth-century humanist revival of Aristotle’s *Poetics* increasingly inclines critical theorist to seek the organizing principles of imaginative plots not in ‘allegory’ but in ‘credibility,’ and related concepts of the conventions of representation tend to qualify Neoplatonic emphases on iconic mystery.” A more historicist approach to uncovering the ancient sources of classical mythology also develops during this period.

8. After the eighteenth century, it is increasingly rare for Biblical scholars to allegorize scriptural passages. A “rationalist”/“historical-critical” approach to interpretation begins to dominate Christianity as well as comparative mythography. Crucially, for literary studies in particular, “Neoclassical norms of clarity and propriety tend to reduce mythological allusions and ‘allegorical’ figures to the status of imaginative ornaments to a poem’s rational design.”
9. In the nineteenth century, the critique of allegory intensifies. Cultural analysis is predominant in Christian interpretative circles, while “a more general hermeneutics promoted by Schleiermacher and others treats understanding itself not as the specification of a text’s ‘point’ but as a the reader’s own reconstruction of the creative consciousness from which the text emerges.” Particularly germane to the scope of this dissertation, “In Romantic literary theory, critics such as Goethe and Coleridge devalue the term ‘allegory,’ applying it to a schematic, even arbitrary technique of signification. By contrast, they argue a ‘symbol’ substantially belongs to the whole that it evokes; it is not displaced by what it reveals. Similar attitudes inform the study of mythology. For Schelling, a mythological figure is itself inseparable from its overall significance; to allegorize it is to violate its integrity.
10. Finally, although these “nineteenth-century views continue well into the twentieth century, strains gradually appear in their theoretical and practical designs.” For instance, “Romantic notions of the abiding spiritual value of the ‘symbol’ come under forceful attack by Benjamin, who counters that ‘allegory’ exposes the very historical process which disrupts any such effort to unite ephemeral objects with

eternal ideas. Benjamin's critique, however, does not circulate widely until considerably after the middle of the twentieth century." Critical theorists begin "drawing upon the psychological and anthropological theories of Freud, Jung, and Frazer," often transforming "symbols and myths themselves into hidden, explanatory structures underlying texts, a tendency regarded by some critics as too close to allegorization." Midcentury theorists "invoking such latent structures, including Northrup Frye (1957) and Angus Fletcher (1964), argue that 'all' commentary is in some measure 'allegorical.'⁵⁰⁴

The year 1967 marks a watershed moment for Whitman. This is when our new critical epoch purportedly begins: when postmodernism entrenches itself; when Theory-laden criticism emerges on all topics related to textual spheres of life, allegory included; when new forms of rigorous, self-introspecting historical scholarship and criticisms emerge. Since then, according to Whitman, "something of the 'alien' seems to have passed out of the *alieniloquium*. For an increasing number of critics theorizing about encounters with 'other' texts and times, 'other-speaking' seems to speak their language." He contends that "general notions about allegorical interpretation like those just indicated—the notions of allegory as 'imposed,' 'abstract,' 'closed,' and 'ahistorical'—have changed with the transformation of critical attitudes at large since the late 1960s." For many critics today, "allegory no longer seems so peculiar a form of 'imposition' when a range of critical movements from contemporary hermeneutics to reader response criticism argue that readers at large regularly 'intervene' in the texts they engage. [...] If for some allegory remains a means of interpretive 'closure,' for others it is a way of opening texts that would otherwise remain inscrutably

⁵⁰⁴ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 9–13.

closed.”⁵⁰⁵

But this does not mean all critics, Whitman included, necessarily agree with the trend of playing so fast-and-loose with the term and conditions of *allegory*, applying it to nearly anything a critic does or any effect a text might have in the world of its readers. Whitman rejoins, “For others (like myself), the recent expansive use of the term ‘allegorical’ is deeply questionable in both conceptual and historical terms.”⁵⁰⁶ And he offers this crucial reminder: “The most prominent and avid enthusiasts of what is normally called ‘allegorical’ interpretation, after all, did not share the view that ‘all’ interpretation is allegorical. Such a notion would have seemed strange to allegorists as diverse in intellectual and spiritual orientation as Philo, Heraclitus the Allegorizer, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Cassian, and Proclus in antiquity; [...]” and his list goes on through the Early Modern period.⁵⁰⁷ Reanimating the voices and attitudes of these original allegorists, Whitman makes a further partially speculative but wholly convincing claim:

For them, allegorical interpretation displays some sense of a text that is “other” than the apparent sense, whether that apparent sense is called “literal,” “historical,” “external,” or something else. This is not to say that the character of this “apparent” sense is identical for such writers; on the contrary, there is no single criterion by which all of them define the “literal” sense [...] But for most of that history, interpreters agree that it is one thing to explain the “apparent” sense of a text, another to explain its “allegorical” one.”⁵⁰⁸

The commonsense appeal of stances like this have a power of simplicity and clear-

⁵⁰⁵ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 15–16.

⁵⁰⁶ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 16–17.

⁵⁰⁷ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 17.

⁵⁰⁸ Whitman, Introduction, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 17.

headedness that offer some brief resolution and escape out of the definitional miasma—especially when the alternatives are the rhetorical and conceptual involutions of postmodern/poststructuralist critique.

* * *

If nothing else, the sweeping convergence of works like Struck, Fletcher, and Whitman can embolden us to draw some inferences about the deep nature of allegory, based on the sheer scope and magnitude of its cultural presence alone. Namely, allegory's regular cross-cultural occurrence across an expansive historical duration, the form's tenacious endurance through and despite profound cultural changes and fluctuations in application, the eclecticism of those applications and iterations across those years, and the mode's self-evident ability to appeal to individuals across the human life-cycle spectrum (allegory shows demonstrable power to enchant children, adults, and the elderly alike)—these all combine to give strong, though by no means conclusive, indication that allegorical art and interpretive methods are shaped by and tap into certain deeply embedded mechanisms of the mind-brain's universally evolved cognitive architecture. Logically, too, it follows that many of these mechanisms are apt to share neural tracks and mental networks with ev-cog mechanisms exploited by second-order symbolologies.

* * *

NB: Subsequent sections are conspicuously more abbreviated than those on Struck, Fletcher, and Whitman. They function more as quick-and-dirty annotated bibliographies, recommendations for further study, and “farming out” to other sources; and less as rigorous mappings of every twist and turn along symbol theory's helical historical trajectory. The major reason for this asymmetry, aside from time and space constraints, is this: Establishing

the ancient, less-talked-about foundations of symbolism and allegory is arguably more instructive for this dissertation's biopoetic mission than trying to reconstruct a tedious catalogue of the conceptual vicissitudes that inflect the more recent histories in symbol theory. Some of those inflection points are absolutely crucial in shaping modern techniques of second-order symbolism and genres of symbolic realism, however. So major figures and movements are given at least attenuated lip service below. The reader is encouraged to follow those leads, fill in gaps, or correct my understandings as evidence warrants.

Iconology/Iconography (Gombrich)

E.H. Gombrich's studies in iconology/iconography cannot go unmentioned. Since this art historian's work focused on visual art from the Early Modern period, it makes some chronological sense to place mention of it at this point in my historical *abstractum*. As indicated by the cited passages below, however, his theoretical and historical understanding of symbolism writ large—of which Renaissance iconographic practice is only one “branch” or mode—absorbs positions from antiquity, the Enlightenment, romanticism, and Freudian and Jungian psychology. Showcasing these groundbreaking theories and applications of iconology, *Gombrich on the Renaissance: Symbolic Images* (1972) should be considered terrific development not just in visual-art history and explication but in any disciplines grappling with meaning-making procedures and strategies of art. Pertinent passage from his introduction and chapter “*Icones Symboloicae*” are reproduced below. His insistence that the critic obtain records and evidence of possible intent before mounting interpretations espousing coded meanings in artworks—lest we conjure up a “mythical code of symbolism”—is particularly notable within his theoretical schema. As are his ruminations on

the interlocking relationships between abstracted conceptual thought and concrete visual imagery and personification; his remarks on the special “mixing” of real, associational, and mythic objects that certain artists and modes of Western art learned to accomplish as they matured and reacted to craft and cultural changes; his observations about the underlying unconscious interplay that exists between images and words, metaphors and discursive speech, symbols and reality in our dreaming and waking minds; and his emphasis on context for deciphering symbolic (or nonsymbolic) meaning.

Philosophies of Symbolism

[...] What I have called the Aristotelian tradition [...] is in fact based on the theory of the metaphor and aims, with its aid, to arrive at what might be called a method of visual definition. [...] The other tradition, which I have called the Neo-Platonic or mystical interpretation of symbolism, is even more radically opposed to the idea of a conventional sign-language. For in this tradition the meaning of a sign is not something derived from agreement, it is hidden there for those who know how to seek. In this conception, which ultimately derives from religion rather than from human communication, the symbol is seen as the mysterious language of the divine. The augur interpreting a portent, the mystagogue explaining the divinely ordained ritual, the priest expounding the image in the temple, the Jewish or Christian teacher pondering the meaning of the word of God [...].⁵⁰⁹

We may do well to remember the role which such mediation and study once played in the life of the learned. The monk in his cell had only few texts to

⁵⁰⁹ E.H. Gombrich, *Gombrich on the Renaissance: Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), 13.

read and re-read, to ponder and to interpret, and the finding of meanings was one of the most satisfying ways of employing these hours of study. [...] Once it was accepted that revelation had spoken to man in riddles, these riddles embodied in the Scriptures and also in Pagan myths, demanded to be unraveled again and again, to provide the answers for the problems of nature and of history. [...] The temptation is indeed great for the iconologist to emulate this technique and to apply it in his turn to the works of art of the past.⁵¹⁰

Levels of Meaning?

But before we yield to this temptation, we should at least pause and ask ourselves to what extent it may be appropriate to the task of interpreting the pictures or images of the past. Granted that any of these images could be seen to carry all kinds of implications—to allude to Hirsch's use of the terms—were they intended to carry more than one level of meaning? [...]

Panofsky [...] has stressed the importance of what he calls “disguised symbolism” in early Netherlandish art. [...] Even though one might wish for more evidence that these symbols and metaphors were commissioned to be painted, there is no doubt that religious pictures do embody things as symbols.⁵¹¹

Codes and Allusions

⁵¹⁰ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 14–15.

⁵¹¹ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 15.

[...] Codes [...] cannot be cracked by ingenuity alone. On the contrary. It is the danger of the cipher clerk that he sees codes everywhere.

[...] It is never easy to disprove such interpretations [of double but hidden meanings], but as far as iconology is concerned it should be ruled out unless a documented example is produced.⁵¹²

We should always ask the iconologist to return to base from every one of his individual flights, and to tell us whether programs of the kind he has enjoyed reconstructing can be documented from primary sources or only from the works of his fellow iconologists. Otherwise we are in danger of building up a mythical code of symbolism.⁵¹³

The Society of Concepts

The simplest way in which art and rhetoric could exploit the mode of personification is still intimately linked with mythology. We have seen that Homer calls Panic the son of Ares, and kinship has remained one of the basic metaphors for the expression of relationship between concepts. The Muses are the daughters of Memory and painting and poetry are called the Sister Arts. Mozart (speaking of librettos) demanded that the text must be “the obedient daughter” of music. Truth, as we know, is the daughter of time, and Caution, according to a German proverb, the mother of wisdom.

[...] It is one of the fascinations of this mode of thought that it

⁵¹² Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 19.

⁵¹³ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 21.

demonstrates the affinity between abstract thought and artistic visualization. The very word “affinity” I have used shows how our expository discourse is still steeped in metaphor: I could have spoken of “kinship” instead—or of a “link” or a “spectrum” between the two, I could have invoked the spatial metaphor of “proximity” or the paler formulation of a “close relationship”; in every one of these cases I would still have suggested a concrete image to communicate to the reader that personification is the joint offspring of thought and imagination.⁵¹⁴

Not only can [Rubens] turn Gods into vivid personifications and personifications into demons freely interacting with real human beings such as architects or mourning mothers, he can even mix real objects such as books and drawings with emblems originally conceived as “attributes” or personifications. We remember “the bundle of arrows with the cord, they, when being bound together, being the emblem of Concord, and...beside them, the caduceus and the olive symbol of Peace.” The emblem of Concord, of course, derives from a demonstration of the strength of a bundle, in other words from a simile or comparison, the caduceus is the wand of Mercury while the olive branch as a symbol of Peace is a conventional association.

If surely does not need any special pleading to bring it home, in such a case, how perfectly the intellectual message is here transposed into visual form. Those who see only “what meets the eye” may also enjoy the drama and even sense the horror of the scene; but to read the Ruben letter in front of the

⁵¹⁴ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 130.

picture enable even the eye to take in more. Benedetto Croce, we find, erected a formidable obstacle in the way of perceiving the arts of the past when he insisted on divorcing rhetoric from art. It is precisely the point that ancient theory did not know this distinction. Poetry could be didactic, and teaching or preaching poetic. The painting by Rubens is a splendid illustration of this fusion. It teaches and preaches the blessings of peace and the horrors of war by placing the contract between the two before our eyes.

It was this conception of art that kept the tradition of ancient mythology and personification alive through the Christian centuries. It enabled and even enjoined the poet, the orator, or the artist to cultivate the mythopoeic faculty and to conjure up the vivid presence of any notion which to the logical mind appears a “concept.” This expressive evocation of a concept could also contribute to its explanation, just as the explanation in its turn could aid the imagination in arriving at a more perfect expression.⁵¹⁵

Neo-Platonism: Giarda and His Antecedents

Christophoro Giarda composed his speech in praise of Personifications [in 1626]. [...] Giarda knew how to exalt the special character of visual image in terms which immediately introduce us into a different intellectual atmosphere.

[...] The Symbolic Images, however, present themselves to contemplation, they leap to the eyes of their beholders and through the eyes they penetrate into their mind, declaring their nature before they are scrutinized and so prudently temper their humanity that they appear to the unlearned as masked, to the others however, if they are at

⁵¹⁵ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 128–9.

least tolerably learned, undisguised and without any mask. How pleasantly they perform this, Sweetness herself, if she could speak, could hardly describe.⁵¹⁶

The Symbol's Power

[...] Ficino expressed his belief in the magic potency of the image quite openly.

[...]

Ficino's theory of the image is suggestive. He thought that the numbers and proportions of a thing preserved in the image reflect the idea in the divine intellect and therefore impart to the image something of the power of the spiritual essence which it embodies. Moreover, the effect of images on our minds can be considered a valid proof of this type of magic effect.

[...]

This attitude would explain the immense care and learning which was spent on the "correct" equipment of figures not only in paintings but also in masques and pageantries where nobody but the organizers themselves could ever hope to understand all the learned allusions lavished on the costumes of figures which would only appear for a fleeting moment. Perhaps the idea was under the threshold of consciousness that by being in the "right" attire there figures became genuine "masks" in the primitive sense which turn their bearer into the supernatural beings they represent.⁵¹⁷

Art and Belief

⁵¹⁶ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 145–46. Christophoro Giarda, *Bibliothecae Alexandrinae Icones Symbolicae* (1626).

⁵¹⁷ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 172–6.

[...] Our attitude towards the words and images we use continuously varies. It differs according to the level of consciousness. What is rejected by wide-awake reason may still be accepted by our emotions. In our dreams we all make no difference between the metaphorical and the literal, between symbol and reality. In the dark recesses of our mind we all believe in image magic. [...] In the history of European thought this duality of attitudes is somehow reflected in the continuous coexistence of Neo-Platonic mysticism and Aristotelian intellectualism. The tensions between these two modes of thought, their interpenetrations, conciliations, and divisions make up the history of religious philosophy throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁵¹⁸

From Giarda to Galileo

Four years after Giarda published his little pamphlet, an infinitely greater adherent of Platonism wrote another eulogy of painting and of the powers of the human mind: I am referring to Galileo Galilei, whose *Dialogue on the Two Main Systems* reflects and surmounts the Platonic conception of the two modes of knowledge. For Galilei contrives to exactly the higher form of knowledge without devaluing discursive reason, as Tasso, for example, had done. But then Galilei's primary subject in this passage of great beauty is not poetry, but the science of mathematics.

Whenever I see a statue of one of the great masters I tell myself: "Whenever would you be able to remove the surface of marble and uncover a figure of such beauty which was hidden within?" [...] Reading the outstanding poets, with what feelings of the miraculous do they inspire anyone who attentively considers their inventions, their

⁵¹⁸ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 179.

conceits, and their expositions? But beyond all the stupendous inventions what eminence of mind was possessed by him who had the imagination to find a way of communicating his most recondite thoughts to any other person whatsoever, how ever far away he might be in space or in time? TO speak with those who are in the Indies, to speak with those who are not yet born nor will be born before a thousand or ten thousand years? And with what ease? By the various arrangements of twenty little marks on a piece of paper. Let this be the seal of all the admirable human inventions.⁵¹⁹

The Age of Reason

In the year 1726 there appeared, posthumously, Joseph Addison's *Dialogue on the Usefulness of Ancient Medals*. The little work marks a turning point in the conception of symbolism. Addison takes issue with a tradition of learning which he contemptuously dismisses as that of the "mystical antiquary." [That is, with] the Neo-Platonic philosophy of symbolism. [...]

It should not surprise us that in opposing this mystical conception of the "open sign" with its plenitude of meaning Addison appeals to the alternative tradition in the philosophy of symbolism. [...]

The Age of Reason dismissed the mysterious image as an absurdity. [...] In the eighteenth century the emphasis had shifted from the message of mystery to the message of beauty. Not that the guardians of the tradition in art, the Academies, belied their name by rejecting the Platonic doctrine outright; but it is now overlaid with Aristotelian rationalism.

But even their divinity has been rationalized. There was an increasing identification of the Platonic ideal with the Aristotelian interpretation of the

⁵¹⁹ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 180–1. Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo dei due Massimi Sistemi del Mondo* (1630).

universal concept. [...] The classical artist does not portray the individual but the type, not a particular man, but man as such.

It was an unsuccessful rationalization. [...] The idea of an inductive process through which we can rise from the particular to the general by leaving out the individual traits has been challenged in log—in the realm of the image it certainly rests on no foundations. A moment's reflection will show that the most schematic or rudimentary image can be intended as a representation of an individual while the most detailed portrait can stand for the concept or type. It is not the degree of naturalism which determines the question whether the image of a horse is to serve as a symbol for the universal concept of "horse" or as a portrait of a particular horse. A photograph in a textbook or on a poster may represent the type of serve as a symbol—a mere primitive scrawl may be intended as a representation of the individual. Only the context can determine *this* distinction between symbol and representation.

Maybe it was with this Academic identification of the abstract with the generalized which finished the allegorical imagery as a branch of art. The phrase of the "bloodless" abstraction was no empty metaphor. Artists began to think that the more generalized was the concept they had to symbolize the paler and more etiolated should be the image. Thus the visual symbols of invisible entities became more shadowy every day.⁵²⁰

Allegory versus Symbol

It is well known that this conception of Allegory gave the genre a bad name. It also led to a search for alternatives. It was this search which led

⁵²⁰ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 181–3.

philosophers of art in Germany to invest the word *symbol* with a new aura of mystery. If allegories were purely cerebral pictographs [...], symbol would have to be different, more vital, more forceful, and more profound. [...]

The divergence of usage, which has sometimes led to misunderstandings, is not entirely due to the German Romantics.

Paradoxically it was the rationalist Immanuel Kant who harkened back to the Platonic tradition in this discussion of aesthetic apprehension. In Paragraph 69 of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant protested emphatically against the “wrong and absurd” usage of the word symbol among the new logicians who separated the symbol from the intuitive act. Kant saw the symbolic as a species of the intuitive, he wanted to stress its opposition to “discursive” thought.

[...]

It is along this line that the opponents of the enlightenment fight their battle against the encroachment of rationalism. Art must be allowed its link with the imagination, for the imagination sees further than “aeging reason.”⁵²¹

The Revival of Neo-Platonism from Creuzer to Jung

A few quotations from Creuzer’s *Symbolik* of 1810 may serve to document his kinship with the hieroglyphic tradition:

It is precisely through its lack of harmony between form and meaning and through its superabundance of content as compared to its expression that the symbol becomes significant and rousing.... Contact with the symbol is a moment which demands our whole being [...]. For this instantaneousness appeals to a receptive imagination while our

⁵²¹ Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 183–6.

reason experiences an intense pleasure in analyzing the totality which the Chinese image concentrates in one moment into its elements and in assimilating them one by one.... Whenever the creative mind takes up contact with art or dares to crystallize religious intuition and faith in visible shape the symbol must expand to become boundless and infinite. [...]

Creuzer's use of the term was taken up by Goethe in the later years of his life who lent it his unquestioned authority. [...]

In Hegel's conception of history as a dialectical progress of the spirit, the symbol is called a kind of "pre-art," *Vorkunst*. [...] For Hegel, art begins with what he calls "unconscious symbolism." [...]

For what characterizes the symbol in Hegel's usage is precisely the quality he calls "inadequacy." The symbol is a groping adumbration of something inexpressible.

[...]

The road that leads from the Romantic belief in the superiority of the symbol to the Neo-Romantic movements of the symbolists and their twentieth-century successors has often been traced. But a word may still be said about the thinker whose concept of the symbol has had the most far-reaching influences on our century—Sigmund Freud. Freud, of course, saw himself as a rationalist exploring with the means of science the irrational layers of the mind. Just as Vico was rooted in the tradition he tried to transform, Freud derived many of his ideas about symbolism and the unconscious from Romanticism, thus enabling Romantics to re-absorb his formulations.

[...] His conclusions about the importance of the body for the

metaphors of the dream remind us indeed of Vico's insistence on the psychological disposition of the primitive mind to see everything in terms of the body.

There is no difficulty thus in subsuming Freud's concepts of symbolism including sexual symbolism under then ancient theory of metaphor. But for Freud the metaphor is not overt but unconscious. Like the apophatic symbols of the Areopagite Freud's symbols also tend to be enigmatic, monstrous, and opaque. They are in face the masks the unconscious wishes must don to pass the censor; their meaning is only accessible to the initiated. [...]

And just as Vico's revolutionary insights were fused with a revised Neo-Platonism, so Freud's discoveries were again connected with this age-old tradition in the writings of Carl Gustav Jung. Here the Freudian concept of the symbol regressed, as it were, to its origins in Neo-Platonism. This is achieved—or so it seems—by fusing transcendent realms of the religious tradition with the ineffable content of the collective unconscious that talks to us in riddles—but riddles for which the key is again provided in the wisdom of the ancients.⁵²²

Symbol Theory across the Ages: From Classical Foundations and the Romantic Crisis to Freud and Jakobson (Tzvetan Todorov)

Tzvetan Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol* (1977) remains one if not the supreme point of contact for a thick historical treatment of symbol theory across eras, up to and

⁵²² Gombrich, *Gombrich*, 187–90.

including the romantic era in particular and into more modern periods. Todorov is penetrating in his presentation of the intersecting theoretical positions and critical discourses of the major literary and philosophical figures of antiquity, romanticism, and the early twentieth century. His terminological appraisals and genealogies are dense, exhaustively researched, and framed by generous historical context. Thus, rather than insert myself into the already crowded primary-source debates on semiotics or romantic literary theory, I defer to Todorov and his *magnum opus*. I pull out a few of the most salient historical pivot points and theoretical insights germane to this dissertation below.

Todorov characterizes his initial chapter, “The Birth of Western Semiotics,” as a “brief handbook summarizing the common stock of semiotic knowledge available to all.” In it, he locates “the birth of semiotics in the work of Augustine.”⁵²³ Augustine’s work, satisfied what Todorov considers to be the two definitional cornerstones of semiotics: 1) “with semiotics, we are dealing with a discourse whose objective is knowledge (not poetic beauty or pure speculation)”; 2) “its object is constituted by signs of various types (not by words alone). These two conditions were fully met for the first time, it seems to me, by Augustine.” A qualification follows: “But Augustine did not invent semiotics; [...] he merely combined ideas and notions drawn from several horizons.”⁵²⁴ With that, Todorov examines Pre-Augustinian sources, vocabularies, hermeneutics, and rhetoric, which reveal the origins of terms like *indirect symbol*, *tropes*, and *polysemy*, as well as the roots of more conceptual moods and linguistic effects like obscurity and suggestion.

Todorov is particularly keen to stress the influence of oracular dream language and an emergent body of secular dream literature in his retelling of this early history. Of course, an

⁵²³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 11.

⁵²⁴ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 15.

intense interest in the nature of dreams, dreaming, and their symbolic potential will resurface centuries later, along with an allied interest in the signifying powers and imaginative-emotional-aesthetic effects of incantatory language and imagery. While these interests wax and wane across the histories of Western art, they explode in the theory and texts of the romantics, French Symbolists, Surrealists, and other modern practitioners of the literary, visual, and cinematic arts who follow in their footsteps. Two plausible inferences, not mutually exclusive, fall out of the historical presence of this classical body of dream literature: 1) these later groups and artists are, wittingly or not, repurposing ancient interests and texts on dreaming for their own aesthetic schemes and cultural milieus; and/or 2) there are things so deeply resonant about both the dreaming mind and symbolizing mind—their mystifying natures and origins, certain properties or tasks they appear to share (for narrative construction, information exchange, systematic coding of the otherwise unobservable), their ubiquity and utter familiarity amidst their alienatory and incomprehensible strangeness—it is virtually guaranteed that humans, across cultures and times, will feel some impulse to weave the convergent powers of dream and symbol into the fabrics of their arts, cultural activities, and worldviews. Undergirding those deep resonances we are likely to find shared networks of universal cognitive mechanisms at work.

Also prominent in his accounting of pre-romantic symbol theory, Todorov unpacks the bifurcating strains of classical rhetoric in ancient and early Christian Europe. In the Aristotelian/Quintilian strain that eventually comes to dominate the Western tradition, rhetoricians begin to question not just the epistemological authority but the moral integrity of figurative language and discourse. According to Todorov, it is with a statement by Quintilian—who demands “we must interpret *schema* in the sense of that which is poetically

or rhetorically altered from the simple and obvious method of expression”—when rhetorical/poetic figures are “defined for the first time as divergence. This definition will come to dominate the entire Western traditions; and yet it contains something very close to a condemnation.”⁵²⁵ In this camp, rhetorical schemes are meant to persuade of truth and right action, and figures of speech are treated increasingly as ornamental diversions designed to conceal (rather than reveal) truth. Such “misleading” figurative devices accomplish their deceptions by distancing themselves from “ordinary” language and commonplace idioms that more “obviously” match words to the things and ideas they “naturally” signify. The other camp, in which allegorists and symbolists must be placed, looks more favorably upon such “deviating” (perverted?) uses of language.

The central historiographical contribution Todorov makes to the story of symbol theory, however, comes in his coining and conceptualization of the so-called Romantic Crisis. For Todorov, the history of symbol theory can be divided into two broad epochs: 1) pre-romantic theory, and 2) romantic theory and all its post-romantic offshoots. To be fair, Todorov’s emphasis on the Romantic Crisis is preceded by uniformly rigorous attention to the network of more gradual but still crucial shifts in Western philosophy, rhetoric, and art criticism that have bearing on the development of semiotics and symbol theory. But that pre-romantic history will eventually arrive at a watershed moment, culminating in the intense critical interest in symbolism that blossomed in the late 1700s and early 1800s in the literary-philosophical circles of Western Europe. The Crisis reaches its apex with German Romanticism. It is then “resolved,” or at least finds energetic release, through an omnibus of competing symbolic theories and practices that emerge in other nations and regions, principally Britain, in the nineteenth century.

⁵²⁵ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 76.

Doing justice to the romantic aesthetic and symbol's place within that aesthetic in a short space is a fool's errand. I refer the reader to consult Todorov's work for a deep mapping of the period's philosophical and literary luminaries and their indispensable ideas. In place of that detailed mapping, five conceptual keystones to the romantic aesthetic, which Todorov gives good etiological background for, are captured below with some minimal elaborations:

- Coherence (Motivated Language, Dream Coherence, and Internal Unity):
Many romantics came to "reject one form of coherence, that of reason, in order to affirm another, that of dreams, and its system of associations."
Poetry's coherence comes in the internal harmonies among its structural segments, and by being "motivated"—i.e. by being structurally isomorphic or contiguous with that which it is representing. Whereas ordinary language is deemed arbitrary, poetry is deemed motivated and more organically situated to the reality it is at the same time representing. As a result, "imitation, once an omnipresent principal, is reduced, in the form of motivation between sound and meaning, to being only one among the numerous features of the work of art."⁵²⁶
- Intransitivity: Adumbrating the autotelism and "art for art's sake" attitudes of later periods, the romantics, according to Todorov, feel that "language may be rhetorical (for Novalis as for Kant, that term means 'instrumental') or poetic—that is, an 'expression for expression.'" Paradoxically, however, "expressions that express only themselves may be—or better still, are—at the

⁵²⁶ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 177.

same time invested with the most profound meaning.”⁵²⁷

- Inexpressibility and Multiplicity: Most romantics would agree that “art expresses something that can be said in no other way”—a statement that is part purely typological, part “mystic credo.”⁵²⁸ Poetic language furnishes a “superabundance of meaning” through its “multiplicity of secondary representations”; whereas nonpoetic language thrives on clarity, logic, and explicitness. That multiplicity “compensates for the lack of a principal representation.” While “logical language is adequate, poetic language is not”; however, “owing to its multiplicity it expresses the inexpressible.”⁵²⁹
- Symbolic Density: Goethe, who “does not conceal his preference for the symbol,” set the stage for many of romanticism’s founding tenets, including an insistence “on the laconic, condensed character of the symbol.”⁵³⁰ Symbolic density for Goethe is “opposed to discursive expansiveness,” which characterizes non-symbolic language performance. The paradigmatic Romantic symbol is not only condensed; it is also produced unconsciously (adumbrating Freud?); in turn, it provokes an “unending task of interpretation.”⁵³¹
- Syntheticism: Art seeks to create a unity of form and content, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, a fusion of contraries.⁵³² (This Keatsian notion of “negative capability,” beyond its epistemological and ethical

⁵²⁷ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 174–5.

⁵²⁸ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 189.

⁵²⁹ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 191.

⁵³⁰ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 204.

⁵³¹ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 207.

⁵³² Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 184.

cadences, could be applied, with some license, to certain reading skills or interpretation faculties that are needed to process second-order symbolic texts: i.e. an aptitude for doublethink—in the sense of holding several competing ideas in mind at once—is certainly a useful if not obligatory skill for efficient and effective “fusion” of meanings between imitative first-order representations with any second-order symbolic implications.)

In more “condensed” terms, we might say that the romantic symbol ventures to express the inexpressible (the *not there*) using dense figures of multilayered meanings—figures that are inlaid in a unified poetic field, that are aesthetically pleasurable on their own, but that are also emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, epistemologically satisfying at the same time, and often on an unconscious level. The symbolic half of “symbolic realism” receives a major momentum boost from the resolutions of the so-called Romantic Crisis.

Todorov concludes with chapters on Saussure’s semiotics, Freud’s symbolics, and Jakobson’s poetics. These sections provide valuable summary contextualizations of three pivotal figures in the trajectory of symbol theory and poetics during the twentieth-century. (Saussure is not addressed here but the latter two are.)

The influence Freud’s dream symbolics had on art, art theory and criticism, and narratology is especially well addressed. Todorov, intimating the questionable status of Freud’s scientific methods and legacy throughout his discussion, assesses that influence thusly: “I shall not pass judgment on the rightness of Freud’s method (that is best left to specialists in oneirology). I shall limit myself to pointing out his originality, which lies in his valorization of the associations that arise during the moment that follows the narration of the dream—thus, in the way he assimilates one type of relation—based on contiguity of

signifiers—to another, the symbolic relation.”⁵³³ In performances of “high art” (i.e. serious adult literature, film, etc.), the associative unconscious can be marshaled in the creative processes and transactions between artist and audience in all kinds of configurations. Artworks that are deliberately symbolical might enlist unconscious associative mental activities to sway the audience toward proper decoding of their symbolic intentions. And thanks to advances in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, we now know that even early-childhood language-learning capacities are shot through with mental operations, bodily coordination that are at least partly associational, partly physical and proprioceptive, and largely if not exclusively unconscious.

Freud’s major enduring breakthrough in the psychological sciences, in retrospect, lies in his “discovery” of the unconscious mind: that there is indeed an unconscious mind at all, and that non-conscious mind-brain operations form a dominant background force in guiding the human animal’s fundamental perceptions of the world and in activating emotional-physiological-behavioral responses to that world and the body’s status within it. Despite all the flaws in Freud’s conceptualizations and schematizations of the conscious/subconscious/unconscious “chambers” of the human mind, his ideas were absorbed or negotiated by countless artists who came after him. Whether they would admit to it or not, and whether they would do so happily or begrudgingly, many artists were doubtlessly compelled to grapple with some version of the Freudian theory of mind. Those negotiations could get reflected in their techniques and their works’ content, formal choices, and ideologies. In short, Freud’s impact on twentieth-century artists and their aesthetics cannot be understated. A towering figure such as this deserves (for better or worse) more than abbreviated attention in any history of symbol theory. But I leave my historical-

⁵³³ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 252.

theoretical discussion of Freud here. His sway will be signposted as needed when discussing the symbologies of specific writers, filmmakers, and their works. For now, the reader is encouraged to explore the secondary works on Freud cited in this dissertation (e.g. Todorov's and Petocz's *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism*) and, of course, primary works like *The Interpretation of Dreams* if moved to do so.

By Todorov's measure, Russian linguist Roman Jakobson might be as, if not more, important a figure as Freud to the developments of twentieth-century literary scholarship generally and the theory of symbolism specifically. A seminal figure in Russian formalism and modern linguistics, Jakobson devoted much of his studies to investigating how language operates within the signifying structures of aesthetic objects; his ultimate aim was to distinguish the special nature of "literature" and the "poetic" experience in contrast to non-literary discourse and non-poetic experience. His ideas circulated within many schools of twentieth-century literary criticism and theory, particularly those operating under the principles or modes of structuralism, formalism, and stylistics. It is not unreasonable to assume Jakobson's theories inflected the applied poetics and *techne* of living artists who would come in contact with his work as well. Todorov's summations of Jakobson deserve some recitation here.

A single encompassing question comes to "permeate the writing of Roman Jakobson," according to Todorov: namely, what is literature? Or, as the title of Jakobson's work *Qu'est-ce que la poésie* (1933) puts it: what is poetry? "His answer," writes Todorov, "despite minor terminological changes, remains astonishingly consistent."⁵³⁴ Foremost among Jakobson's ideas on the distinguishing traits of *poetry* and *poetics* is that of autotelism. Referencing Jakobson's *Questions de poétique* (1973) and "Linguistics

⁵³⁴ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 271.

and Poetics” (originally delivered by Jakobson as closing remarks for a 1958 conference at Indiana University), Todorov points to these illustrative passages:

The content of the notions of *poetry* is unstable and varies over time, but the poetic function, *poeticity*, as the Formalists have singled out, is a unique element, *sui generis*.... But how does *poeticity* manifest itself? In that the word is felt as word and not as a simple substitutes for the object names, not as an explosion of emotion.⁵³⁵

The focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language.⁵³⁶

In these combined statements, Jakobson appears to dismiss both the Aristotelian labeling function of words along with romantic/Imagistic notions that “poetic” words need to express explosive emotion or contain ideational complexes. Todorov squares Jakobson’s views like this:

The poetic use of language is distinguished from other uses through the fact that, in poetry, language is perceived in itself and not as a transparent and transitive mediator of “something else.” The term thus defined is, in 1919, *poetry*; it later becomes *poetics* (the poetic function), that is, the abstract category that is grasped through the perceptible phenomenon. But the definition itself has not changed. Poetic language is autotelic language.

Strong partisanship for autotelism seems, at first blush, to put Jakobson at odds with any

⁵³⁵ Roman Jakobson, *Questions de poétique* (Paris: 1973), 123–124. Qtd. in Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 272.

⁵³⁶ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Essays in Language of Literature*, ed. Seymour Chapman and S.R. Levin (Boston: Houghton, 1967), 302. Qtd. in Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 272.

argument that second-order symbolism signals or belongs properly to a “literary” experience, that symbolic devices are a valid tool in the artist’s “poetic” toolbox (what this dissertation affirmatively argues, with certain qualifications). If poetic language cannot be language that refers to “something else,” then polysemous second-order symbolism must be exponentially *non-poetic* since it wishes to refer to *multiple* “something else”s, to many things *not there*. This dissertation has maintained that while second-order symbolism is neither necessary nor sufficient for a text object to be deemed poetic, literary, artistic, etc., the presence of symbolism is a strong indication that we are operating in a marked zone of aesthetic experience—a space that demands specialized efforts of perception, cognition, and interpretation to “get at” the art therein, and that differ in nontrivial ways from efforts needed to engage with more discursive texts and first-order informational modes of communication.

But Jakobson’s views, under further scrutiny, reveal that he may have permitted certain phenomena like symbolism to be legitimate, if perfectly dispensable, features of a proper poetics. For Jakobson’s autotelism was not the same as *fin de siècle* “art’s for art’s sake” movements or other pure-language programs, which stump for the autonomy of language or the ecstatic value of linguistic forms devoid of meaning beyond their sheer sensorial furnishings. Todorov pegs these latter views—those promoting “autolanguage” and “autonomous discourse”—ultimately back to the romantic heritage, adding that “Jakobson and the Russian formalists are not the only recent champions of the romantic definition [of poetry]. After having been forgotten for a hundred years or so, this definition has become the watchword of all avant-garde poetics schools (even those that take a stand against what they call romanticism).”⁵³⁷ But Todorov also elucidates these important differences:

People have often been tempted to confuse the formalist conception of

⁵³⁷ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 273.

poetry with the doctrine of art for art's sake. That the two have a common origins (here called "German romanticism") is obvious. For Jakobson, the link is explicit; as for the first formulations of the 'art for art's sake' idea, they are only French echoes of German ideas: Benjamin Constant's, after a conversations with Schiller in 1804; Victor Cousin's, after a visit to Solger in 1817. But the differences are equally important: the formalist conception of poetry has to do with the function of language in literature (or of sound in music, and so on); the "art for art's sake" doctrine deals with the function of literature, or art, in social life. Thus, Jakobson is right to object to the unwarranted accusations: "Neither Tynianov, nor Mukarovsky, nor Shklovski, nor myself—none of us preaches that art suffices unto itself; we show on the contrary that art is a part of the social edifice, one component in correlation with others."⁵³⁸

Thus, we have a statement that could be seen as symbol-supporting: that art and its formal features are not pure means to their own end, that social effects and meaning must be not altogether evacuated from true poetic objects.

Furthermore, as his work evolved over the years, Jakobson, far from rejecting the legitimacy of any non-autotelic features of art objects, comes to openly endorse certain values and functions that things like imitative realism and play can have in literature. Contrary to thinkers like Sartre, who could make strong claims that "the poet has withdrawn from language-instrument" and "once and for all has chosen the poetic attitude which

⁵³⁸ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 273–4.

considers words as things and not as signs,”⁵³⁹ Jakobson’s poetics were less severe. They were more accommodating to the power and place of both signs and mimesis in art. Todorov explains:

The difference between Novalis (or Sartre) and Jakobson is not just that the first two define poetry as pure autotelism, whereas the third makes it possible to see the interaction of two components, imitation and play. There is more: Novalis’s poetic or prophetic discourse and the pamphleteer’s discourse adopted by Sartre are qualitatively distinct from Jakobson’s *scientific* discourse. [...] What interests Jakobson is not proffering revelations or denouncing his adversaries, but laying the groundwork on the basis of which description, *knowledge* of particular literary phenomena will be possible.

According to Todorov’s generous reading of Jakobson, Jakobson’s aims and methods were more descriptive, objective, and ecumenical, less prescriptive, normative, and exclusionary than other theorists who often get lumped in with him.

On such grounds, could make a case for symbolism having a legitimate seat at the table of Jakobson’s poetics. Especially in the setting of symbolic realism, second-order symbols reach into various dimensions of the poetic universe discussed above. They *playfully* hide in the first-order landscapes of *realistically* depicted objects and events. And if their material forms are arranged in imaginative, sensuously interesting ways by competent craftspeople with some sense of formal unity or other aesthetic design in mind, those objects and events may also be *enjoyed* for certain *autotelic* or *sensorial* qualities of the media signals in which they are being delivered (speech, writing, cinematography, etc.).

⁵³⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 6–7. Qtd. in Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 273.

Furthermore, interpreting second-order symbolic features of text objects can itself be a distinctly pleasurable if challenging mental activity. And the products of such deciphering might lend the interpreter a sublime sense of accomplishment and connection to an absent creative mind or group of people. (These latter pleasures remain independent of the content and value of the “messages” encoded in the symbolic fields—messages that might be judged morally abhorrent, intellectually bankrupt, or logically unsound in spite of any formal beauty or mental buzz generated from the acts of puzzling them out.)

Above all, Jakobson felt that authentic understanding of any artistic practice obliges one to rigorously theorize an artistic medium’s properties and mechanisms to derive the broader laws and principles that drive those mechanisms into legitimate artworks. The fusion of art theoretician and art practitioner was, for Jakobson, an ideal situation. Admiring the work of Novalis and Mallarmé in his formative years, Jakobson saw in them both “the inseparable conjunction of the great poet and the theoretician of language.”⁵⁴⁰ From his earliest days to his last, this remained true of Jakobson’s studies. A passage from Todorov is worth reciting here:

In his very first text on literature, Jakobson wrote: “The object of literary science is not literature but literariness.... If literary studies want to become scientific, they have to recognize the *device* as their sole ‘actor.’” (*Questions de poétique*, 15). And, fifty years later, in the “Post-scriptum” to his *Questions de poétique*: “Literariness, in other words, the transformation of a verbal act into a poetic work, and the system of devices that brings about such a transformation, is the theme that the linguist develops in his analysis of

⁵⁴⁰ Roman Jakobson, *Form und Sinn* (Munich: 1974), 176–7. Qtd. in Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 272.

poems.”⁵⁴¹

Considering his views and the lexicon used here, it seems highly unlikely that Jakobson would want to discount something like second-order symbolism as part of the “system of devices” that produce literary texts, mark literary experiences, or invoke “literariness.” (The terms *literary/literariness* could be substituted by *poetic/poetry* and *artistic/art* without distorting or bowdlerizing the intentions and broader scope of Jakobson’s work.)

For final word on Jakobson, I move briefly to a different source, which lends a broader retrospective look at his place in twentieth-century literary criticism and poetics. A definitional essay on *poetics* found in the University of Chicago’s Media Studies online glossary captures the competing strains of the formalist criticisms Jakobson helped spearhead and the poststructuralist movements that are here embodied in de Man:

In his “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” [...] Roman Jakobson made his wager for the coupling of literary studies and poetics: “Because the main subject of poetics is the *differentia specifica* of verbal art in relation to other arts and in relation to other kinds of verbal behavior, poetics is entitled to the leading place in literary studies.” Jakobson’s work was challenged by Paul de Man in the 1960s who suggested that the linguistic underpinnings of Formalism gave away the specious scientific nature of the project. De Man articulated a view of literary criticism [...] that in many ways was instrumental in ousting narrowly linguistic approaches to the interpretation of

⁵⁴¹ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 276.

literature and making way for his own rhetorical and deconstructive readings which emphasized the opacity of language.⁵⁴²

This dissertation confesses to seeing substantial theoretical, practical, and pedagogical value in the Jakobsonian effort to locate the *differentia specifica* of literary/artistic texts and experiences. It unapologetically argues for second-order symbolism as one possible *differentia specifica*. At the same time, it does not wish to adoringly valorize symbolism as a normative value-add feature contributing to some innate good of “high art.” It simply makes the case that symbols can be bound to an artist’s intended meanings; as such, if readers, viewers, critics, and students wish to locate those meanings, symbolism must be fully understood and fully appreciated as one of those distinct mechanisms” by which “poetic” objects can operate.

Unity, Brevity, and Symbolic Shadows (Poe)

Edgar Allan Poe’s essays “The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale” (from his 1842 review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*) and “Philosophy of Composition” (1846)⁵⁴³ seem better known in literary circles today for their alleged satirical edges as for the precepts they espouse. Poe may well be winking in certain moments of these tracts, as he was known to do in his criticism and essays; but its precepts are not meant to be pranks. Achieving poetic “Beauty”—particularly in short modes of verbal art like the poetic lyric and short story—comes through achieving unified effects through unity of indispensable parts (of a poem or short story),

⁵⁴² “Poetics,” *Theories of Media*, University of Chicago, Online glossary, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/poetics.htm>.

⁵⁴³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale,” from his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, *Graham’s Magazine* xx, nos. 4–5 (April–May 1842). Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” *Graham’s Magazine* xxviii, no. 4 (April 1846).

through brevity and concision, and through arresting effects of tone and imagery. These are all fairly standard conventions of “good” writing today, so it seems rather unlikely that Poe really intending the opposite of these basic ideas.

Significantly, these conditions also open up opportunities—opportunities that were certainly not lost on Poe—for exploitation by symbolic and allegorical devices. Poe’s own works ripple with such symbolic resonances. The very activity of coding and decoding becomes itself a central subject matter or event in several of his short stories. That Poe was likely an exponent of deploying some symbolic/allegoric strategies in his own art is evidenced by this dictum, which rehearses several key motifs of the symbolic attitude: “Allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses, makes its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant appositeness.” By no means an enthusiast of “vulgarized” or simple forms of allegory, Poe clearly does admire the shadowy suggestions of an allegory “judiciously subdued”—i.e. a narrative or poem that quietly, slyly emanates more hidden symbolic effects. Poe is essentially paving the critical road for the romantic symbol to enter into the American short story.

From Poe to Pound: The Wide (and Undervalued) Reach of the French Symbolists

Incidentally, Jakobson provides a seamless segue into examining (all too briefly) the wide yet undervalued reach of the French Symbolists in the historical progression of symbol theory and symbolic praxes in twentieth-century literature, art, and film. Tracing Jakobson’s influences and literary pedigree, Todorov sequences an intellectual genealogy that bears repeating here:

Novalis [the pen name of Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, an early author and mystic philosopher of German Romanticism] and Mallarmé,

in fact, are two names that appear in Jakobson's writing from the very beginning. Moreover, the latter source has its own origins in the former, although the affiliation is indirect: Mallarmé lived after Baudelaire, who admired Poe, who absorbed Coleridge—whose theoretical writings were a condensed version of the writings of the German romantics, and thus of Novalis. Mallarmé presented to his French (and Russian) readers a synthesis of romantic ideas on poetry—ideas that had found no echo in what was called romanticism in France.⁵⁴⁴

This succession model—Novalis > Coleridge > Poe > Baudelaire > Mallarmé—is an expedient heuristic for plotting some important benchmarks in the historical lineage of late-stage symbol theory and the more mature, conventionalized programs of symbolic realism we bear witness to today. A few emendations could broaden Todorov's formula:

Novalis/Goethe > Coleridge > Poe > Baudelaire > Mallarmé > Eliot/Pound/Jakobson.

French Symbolism was partly a reaction against competing trends in literature and art, particularly naturalism and other forms of self-reportedly “scientific” or “objective” forms of mimesis. Resuscitating, while adapting, certain tenets and techniques properties of romanticism, the Symbolists valorized the imagination, mystical or quasi-mystical spirituality, dreams and dream logic, poetic indirection, and a logic of stark yet mystifying images that was both personally coded (known almost exclusively to the author) yet eschewing of the first-person perspective (unlike their romantic predecessors). Charles Baudelaire, who admired and translated the works of Poe, composed what most consider to be the movement's foundational work: the poetry collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil) (1857), whose influence would stretch well into the literary modernisms of the next

⁵⁴⁴ Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, 272–3.

century. Baudelaire's precepts and aesthetic would be developed by Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Rimbaud during the 1860s and 1870s.

During the 1880s, the Symbolist aesthetic was articulated and circulated in a series of manifestos written by its exponents. The movement received its most well-known formal codification in 1886 with "Le Symbolisme," a manifesto published in *Le Figaro* by Greek poet and art critic Jean Moréas (who wrote in French). The following passages from Moréas's essay connect up well with several conceptual motifs of this dissertation and work to illuminate some of the core appeals of second-order symbolism:

Enemy of education, declamation, wrong feelings, objective description, symbolist poetry tries to dress the Idea in a sensitive form which, however, would not be its sole purpose, but furthermore that, while serving to express the Idea in itself, would remain subjective. The Idea, in its turn, should not be allowed to be seen deprived of the sumptuous lounge robes of extraneous analogies; because the essential character of symbolic art consists in never approaching the concentrated kernel of the Idea in itself. So, in this art, the pictures of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena would not themselves know how to manifest themselves; these are presented as the sensitive appearance destined to represent their esoteric affinity with primordial Ideas.

The accusation of obscurity that has been made as regards such aesthetics by readers with broken staffs is not surprising. But what do we make of this? The Pythian Odes of Pindar, Hamlet of Shakespeare, the Vita

Nuova of Dante, the Second Faust of Goethe, the Temptation of Saint-Antoine of Flaubert were not they also taxed by ambiguity?

For the precise translation of its synthesis, it is necessary for symbolism to take on an archetypal and complex style; of unpolluted terms, periods which brace themselves alternating with periods of undulating lapses, significant pleonasms, mysterious ellipses, outstanding anacoluthia, any audacious and multiform surplus; finally the good language—instituted and updated—, good and luxuriant and energetic French language from before Vaugelas and Boileau-Despréaux, the language of François Rabelais and Philippe de Commines, Villon, Ruteboeuf, and so many other free writers hurling their acute language in the same manner as the Toxotes of Thrace hurled their snaky arrows.⁵⁴⁵

Moréas's polemic, stressing how “the essential character of symbolic art consists in never approaching the concentrated kernel” of the ideas or abstract messages clothed in the luxuriant robes of the poetic terms and images themselves, rings clear. His invocations of Shakespeare, Dante, and Goethe add pitch and color to his clarion call. A biopoetic case needs to be made for the deep nature and cognitive-emotional appeals of symbolic art's methods of sly suggestion, truth by indirection, energetically enigmatic language, snaky paths and circumlocutions, mysterious textual lapses and ellipses, and surplus meaning—as opposed to direct “head-on assaults” (Kubrick's words used to characterize less poetic approaches to filmmaking and film meaning).

⁵⁴⁵ Jean Moréas, “Le Symbolisme,” *Le Figaro*, Sept. 18, 1886. Published online on *Mutable Sound* website, Oct. 3, 2009, trans. C. Liszt, <http://www.mutablesound.com/home/?p=2165>.

Not that such methods went without their detractors. Indictments of elitism, impenetrability, and willful obscurity were abundant. To wit, a brief look at Stéphane Mallarmé's legacy is instructive for understanding those anti-Symbolist responses and repudiations. According to *fin de siècle* scholar Petra Dierkes-Thrun, Mallarmé's "famous Tuesday salon, *Les Mardistes*, featured artists and intellectuals, such as W.B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, Stefan George, and Paul Verlaine"; his essays and poetry would be popular "among the artistic circles in *fin de siècle* Paris"; and his work even "had a lasting influence on Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism" in the visual arts.⁵⁴⁶ However, disapproval among critics and mass audiences alike, both during Mallarmé's time and well after, proved to be the rule rather than the exception:

Mallarmé was heavily criticized (and still is to this day) for being too obscure. Of course, Mallarmé himself considered his poetry only accessible to an elite group of readers. He claimed, [...] "If a being of medium intelligence, and an insufficient literary preparation, opens by chance a book thus made and claims to enjoy it, he has misunderstood it; it's necessary to put things in their places."

Damian Catani defends Mallarmé's poetic elitism in the modernist context, however, claiming, "Mallarmé did not seek to derive a universally pertinent source of solace exclusively from language, but from those more concrete, tangible manifestations of modern life that were invariably shaped and motivated by economic or political factors, [that] were instantly

⁵⁴⁶ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, "Stéphane Mallarmé: Symbolism and Decadence," online essay post for *Oscar Wilde and the French Decadents*, seminar in Comparative Literature and French, Stanford University, Winter 2013–14, <https://wildedecadence.wordpress.com/2014/03/02/stephane-mallarme-symbolism-and-decadence/>.

recognizable by ‘*la Foule*,’ (the crowd), and [that] unlike language, demanded no degree of concentrated intellectual engagement. Mallarmé’s reason for embarking on non-linguistic avenues of enquiry...is related to his awareness...of living in an *interregna*, a period of historical transition in which ‘*la Foule*’ is not yet ready to grasp his aesthetic in its abstract theoretical form.”

Incidentally, this idea of *interregna* thrums a thematic pulse throughout the work and aesthetic of Kubrick, who very much wished to both riddle and raise the consciousness of his mass audience—“*la Foule*.” Other artists who work in analogous styles of symbolic realism, or symbolic surrealism, are likely to be balancing out a similar intellectual-aesthetic ledger: forever negotiating with their implied readers and potential audiences, compromising between coterie elitism and LCD (lowest common denominator) pandering.

Finally, the migrations of French Symbolism into the Anglophone literary world were largely tied to the publications of the works of British poet and critic Arthur Symons: namely, his essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” published in *Harper’s* in 1893; and his collection of essays *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, published as a book monograph in 1899 and republished with additional materials in 1919. Symons’s tracts, which analyze and promote the major Symbolist poets of the time, are widely recognized to have made major impacts on Yeats (Symons’s intimate friend and colleague), Eliot, and Joyce—all of whom struck various idiosyncratic symbolic orientations within their works.

Early Modernism: The Promotion of Symbolic Concretism by the Exulted Trio

The AngloEuropean Early Modernists introduced groundbreaking, trajectory-

changing twists and contortions in the fabric of symbol theory and poetic practice. Turning their initial engagements with the French Symbolists (sometimes positive admiration, sometimes negative recoil) towards their own artistic missions, the exulted trio of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce—through their poetry and fiction, criticism and review articles, and critical manifestos—assumed an avant-garde position in inventing, promoting, and codifying novel attitudes and techniques related to the literary-symbolic aesthetic. The effects of these attitudes and techniques remain solidly with us in the literary and related arts today: responses directly and indirect to Early Modernism are evident in countless artworks that followed, in the critical expectations of academics and literary professionals, in popular audience appreciation, and in pedagogical practices and tools of instructional institutions. The literature of modernism (or modernisms to be more accurate) combined with its vast and ever-growing bodies of commentaries and criticism is too massive, and massively complex, to make anything but rough rule-of-thumb generalizations here. Any declarations of a monolithic modernist “take” on symbolism would be, at this point in critical history, naïve and easily overturned. I revert to breezily glossing the usual suspects here, sowing the field with a few random seeds, inviting seasoned scholars of modernism to correct errors and deepen the soil.

Pound presents an interesting case. His works, the movements he spearheaded early in his career (imagism and vorticism), and his evolving attitudes toward literature are often characterized as reacting in the precise opposite direction of the Symbolists and artists who embraced ghostly suggestiveness, indirect polysemous reference, or subjectively derived coded scales of meaning and emotion. Early in his poetic career, Pound read and reacted to the French Symbolists with intensity: some parts of their verse and philosophies clearly

resonated, others did not. In letters and reviews, he excoriated Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. He advised his growing cohort of writers, poets, and artists he mentored from Paris to vie for direct, concrete forms of expression. At the same time, he was clearly engaged with, if sometimes maddened by, the Symbolists: Pound was, after all, compelled to invest his time reacting to *this* particular group of poets. According to Scott Hamilton, in his masterly rethinking of Pound's relationship to the Symbolist movement *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (1992), Pound simply chose certain Symbolists over others to admire: "Although Pound openly rejected both Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's conception of poetry, his interest in such poets as Tristan Corbière, Jules Laforgue, Laurent Tailhade, and Jules Romains certainly links him to the critical problems raised by a symbolist aesthetic."⁵⁴⁷

In his verse if not his manifestos, Pound toggles between being both suspect of and beholden to the aesthetic powers of symbol, allusion, suggestion, ambiguity, polysemy, and open multiplicity in meaning. Pound is often painted as attempting to eschew such things with his gestures toward concretisms and with his totalitarian fascist politics—the latter of which, indeed, hold no quarter for ambiguity and plurality. Such characterizations are accurate only to some degree. Critical works like Hamilton's have come to adroitly, and happily, complicate such arguments. And of course, confounding the picture of Pound as an arch-concretist who prioritized clarity and objectivity in art and imagery is this nontrivial fact: much of Pound's own verse ended up being as obscure and impenetrable as the Symbolists', and much of this may have to do with his *embrace* of multivalent signs, as seen below.

Several popularly cited passages from Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska, A Memoir* (1916)

⁵⁴⁷ Scott Hamilton, *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 7.

function retroactively as manifesto statements for imagism (1912) and Vorticism (1914). In these passages are hatched several ideas about Pound's views of symbolism and the Symbolists. Critical and casual references can be prone to cherry-picking the most sensational lines from Pound's text while disregarding surrounding qualifications and nuances. Such bowdlerizations could be contributing to widespread confusions and misleading critical impressions about what Pound's stance was (at least during this time period) toward the French Symbolists, the place and proper forms of symbolism, and the power of the poetic image. In these passages, we certainly see Pound roundly "rejecting" the Symbolists. At the same time, a careful reader will conclude that this is not exactly wholesale rejection, but rather a gesture toward adaptation or complication to what Pound considers to be Symbolism's normative, arithmetical, correlational view of symbolics:

To hold a like belief in a sort of permanent metaphor is, as I understand it, "symbolism" in its profounder sense. It is not necessarily a believe in a permanent world, but it is a belief in that direction. Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in "association," that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word. They made it a form of metonymy. [...] The symbolist's *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1,2, and 7. The imagiste's images have a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra.

Moreover, one does not want to be called a symbolist, because symbolism has usually been associated with mushy technique.⁵⁴⁸

Disregarding Pound's rather confused (or confusing) applications of *metaphor*, *symbol*, and *metonymy* here, and forgiving his oddly oversimplified characterization of all the Symbolists

⁵⁴⁸ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska, A Memoir*, 1916 (New York: New Directions, 1970), 84.

performing elementary symbolic arithmetic (pejoratively insinuating that they are nothing more than “mere” allegorists), we do witness a crucial moment in which Pound *embraces* symbolism. He simply stipulates parameters: imagistic (and therefore “good”) symbolic significations will be variable, fluid, and dependent upon, one assumes, certain values readers bring to the symbolic “formula” of the text. Thus, we have Pound negating one iteration of the symbolic aesthetic and replacing it with another (the novelty of which remains arguable).

Pound’s prescriptions and proscriptions for symbolic techniques might be best illuminated by aggregating together several passages culled from *Gaudier-Brzeska* and two earlier essays: “Prolegomena” (published in 1912 in *Poetry Review*) and “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (published in 1913 in *Poetry*), which were both republished in the 1918 essay amalgam “A Retrospect.”

An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term “complex” rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we may not agree absolutely in our application.

It is the presentation of such a “complex” instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁹ Pound, “A Few Don’ts,” *Poetry Review* 1, no. 6 (March 1913): 200–2006. Text captured from *The Poetry Foundation* website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69409/a-retrospect-and-a-few-donts>.

Symbols.—I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use “symbols” he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.⁵⁵⁰

Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something. Don’t use such an expression as “dim lands of peace.” It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol. Go in fear of abstractions.⁵⁵¹

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX. And from this necessity came the name “vorticism.” [...]

It is as true for the painting and the sculpture as it is for the poetry.⁵⁵²

Pound’s preferred type of second-order symbol is one that mixes a concrete compression-on-the-page with radioactive potentials for meaning. The image, the vortex, the symbol—all seem to be about creating energy packets that compact, contain, and release swirling waves of information or feeling. Discursive abstractions are rejected, natural objects and events remain. Indeed, “the proper and perfect symbol” for Pound is the natural object. But these

⁵⁵⁰ Pound, “Prolegomena,” *Poetry* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1912): 72–76. Text captured from *The Poetry Foundation* website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69409/a-retrospect-and-a-few-donts>

⁵⁵¹ Pound, “A Few Don’ts.”

⁵⁵² Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska.

objects and events must bristle with signifying power of *some* kind. If such poetic images do not signify in a more conventional linguistic sense, they must conjure up some reactive perceptual or emotional exchange—which themselves could only be a product of some strong if unconscious *signaling process* looping between word/text and reader/mind. However it happens, it is deemed a supreme poetic victory: for “it is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.”

Pound’s specifications and tenets, in some iteration or another, received wide circulation if not adoption among members of his Parisian entourage—which included of course Eliot and Joyce, but also Hemingway and other American ex-patriots, as well as visual artists, and many, many more. The table is thus set for a strong symbolic realism to take hold of the Western literary imagination: narrative artists as well as poets and painters now have certain trade tools, tenets, and an *imprimatur* to invent works that will radiate surplus meaning and multiplicity but through concrete, non-extraneous details of mimetic narrative and stark non-ornamental images. An aesthetic space has been cleared for certain conjunctions: marrying a text’s hard, objective, microcosmic “front end” with a “back end” of intellectual-emotional complexes and macrocosms. Eliot’s *objective correlative*, as formulated in his essay “Hamlet” (written 1919/published 1921), percolates with similar conjunctions. The special linking/signaling power of the objective correlative come via its evocation of emotion by object (especially a *linguistic* object): “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the

emotion is immediately evoked.”⁵⁵³ Eliot’s thinking here, as it often does, tends to skirt two paradoxical ideas: the idea that something (a word or image) can invoke something else (emotion or idea) with perfect objective clarity and grace; and the still-inchoate idea, which Eliot will develop and commit to with greater zest later, that language is autonomous and the best poetry is that which seldom points to anything beyond its own textures. It seems that either way a correlative must be signifying in some way, abstractive at some level somewhere in the loop of cognitive reception and interpreting that language moment. Language being our primary first-order representational tool, a non-symbolic path using conventional segments of language (which is neither babble nor nonsensical language of pure play) seems paradoxical and logically, if not neurocognitively, impossible. In short, the objective correlative could be thought of as deeply symbolic in many ways.

Joyce’s short-story cycle *Dubliners* (1914), meanwhile, became the vanguard prose text of symbolic realism, displaying all the paradigmatic trappings of the “genre”: cross-story patterns of imagistic vortices, objective correlatives, emotional epiphanies, and symbolic resonances, but couched austere in mimetically presented narratives that were about the “real” Dublin of the author’s time and experience. There was good reason this work became the primary focal point of W.Y. Tyndall’s *The Literary Symbol* (1955)⁵⁵⁴ for good reason. Of course, soon thereafter, Joyce’s narrative experimentations began moving farther afield from easy-to-digest conventional realisms. Mimetically digestible or not, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) would become one of the English language’s most richly allusive, densely symbolic, allegorically layered works in history.

Symbol and Midcentury Psychology: Freud and Jung

⁵⁵³ T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems,” *The Sacred Wood*, 1921.

⁵⁵⁴ W.Y. Tyndall, *The Literary Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

Freud's influence on symbol theory is discussed itinerantly in earlier pages. Jungian psychology is, of course, also steeped in symbolisms: their nature, manifestations, and meanings. Jung's psychology captured the imagination of the public and artists alike during its mid-century heyday. His notions of the collective unconscious, however, are roundly and scientifically unfounded, reverting too often to intimations of mystical supernatural orders of interconnectedness. Nonetheless, one might reasonably pose that perhaps Jung's collective unconscious was forecasting, without the help of our contemporary scientific tools and theories, both the importance of the mind-brain's unconscious mechanisms and the fundamental neo-Darwinian ev-psych principle of the mind-brain's evolved universal cognitive architecture: a mind-brain that develops reliably across conspecifics of *homo sapiens* and is fitted to Earth's shared environment. Such a situation could conceivably create a shared but fluid set of primordial interests, salient patterns of attention-capturing stimuli, and thus mental-emotional-aesthetic predilections for deriving repetitious kinds and contents of symbolic imagery in our cultural heritages.

The Raiding of the Symbolic Castle (Edmund Wilson)

Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (1931)⁵⁵⁵ reviewed the symbolic successes and failures of a set of influential writers and poet of his day: Yeats, Valéry, Eliot, Proust, Joyce, Stein, Axel, and Rimbaud. Wilson's work was an impactful critical work in American letters. Although it was by no means without its own criticisms. In a contemporaneous review, William Troy, for instance, note the following of Wilson's approach:

The term Symbolism itself is probably incapable of exact definition

⁵⁵⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (New York: Scribner, 1931).

and in the course of Mr. Wilson's study it is used to include so many things that it seems almost to depart from its original meaning. [...] It is when Mr. Wilson attempts to fit writers like Proust and Joyce into his scheme, prose writers depending less directly on imagery for their communication, that he is forced to extend the application of his term. Here, symbols, with their "multiplied associations," are supposed to include also characters, situations, places, motifs, patterns of behavior.

[...]

As a technique Symbolism represents the effort to communicate, by means of a unique personal language, ideas, feelings and sensations more faithfully than they are rendered through the conventional and universal language of ordinary literature. The function of this language is "to intimate things rather than state them plainly"; it depends on suggestion rather than statement. The arch-type of the Symbolism poet is Mallarmé, the superb technician of French verse whose imagery was so personal that few people in his lifetime were able to understand his work any better than the later writing of Joyce is understood in our own day. From Mallarmé (who was influenced by Poe) was derived the method behind the early Celtic symbolism of W. B. Yeats; and Paul Valéry may be considered as a disciple of Mallarmé who has, in the perfection of his verse, refined on the master. T. S. Eliot has openly acknowledged his debt to two other earlier Symbolists—Tristan Corbière and

Jules Laforgue.⁵⁵⁶

And as Colm Toibin has asserted more recently, “Wilson was not a rigid ideologue; he thought on his feet and if the thinking did not suit a theory, then he stood his ground. This means that books like *Axel's Castle* and *The Triple Thinkers* contain great essays but no overall vision of literary theory or practice.”⁵⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Wilson’s work was central in bringing the Symbolist movement and the concepts behind it to the literary forefront during the 1930s.

Significantly, as Troy understands it, Wilson was eyeing some combination of symbol and naturalism as the next step in literary evolution:

In the last chapter, there is something like a stock-taking of contemporary literature, with a consideration of its possible directions in the near future. There are, according to Mr. Wilson, two alternative courses to follow—Axel’s or Rimbaud’s. The hero of Villier’s *Axel* stands for all that increasing individualism, that cultivation of one’s private fantasies in the face of contemporary realities, that incarceration in one’s own dark tower which has characterized all the successors of Symbolism. Both in his writing and in his career Rimbaud suggests the second alternate—the escape from twentieth-century industrialism and democracy, the cult of the primitive and the childlike. It is Mr. Wilson’s conviction that neither of these directions is possible or desirable and that we must look for some combination of the Symbolist vision with the Naturalistic sense of fact. But to those writers

⁵⁵⁶ William Troy, “Symbolism as a Generating Force in Contemporary Literature,” review of *Axel's Castle* by Edmund Wilson, *The New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1931, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/23/home/wilson-castle.html>.

⁵⁵⁷ Colm Toibin, “Edmund Wilson: American Critic,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 4, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/04/books/review/04TOIBIN.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

whom he has discussed he believes we owe a tremendous debt: “they have yet succeeded in effecting in literature a revolution analogous to that which has taken place in science and philosophy...and they have revealed to the imagination a new flexibility and freedom.” Mr. Wilson does not, however, undertake to prescribe what we should do with this new freedom; he does not offer any cohesive program; his final faith is in the “untried, unsuspected possibilities of human thought and art.”⁵⁵⁸

This dissertation’s theorizing of a symbolic realism finds certain supports in these comments. Moreover, the high-stake discussions of such matters continues to prove symbol’s ongoing import and challenge to artist, critic, and broader audiences alike.

The Literary Symbol at Midcentury (The American New Critics and Chicago School)

The works of the New Criticism played formative roles in foisting the literary symbol to the forefront of literary discussion and institutional pedagogy in the U.S. and other Anglophone regions. At times contentious both within and without their own circles, the New Critics nevertheless hold an impactful and mostly defensible position in the critical activity of symbol promotion. Chicago School practitioners might describe rather than prescribe symbolic elements in the literary products they analyzed. And the language of both swept through literary establishment during the 1950s, as references to symbolic form became an almost unquestioned established norm rather than an unconventional approach to art or criticism. The following list tallies a few key works that emphasize, or simply assume, symbolic modes of meanings-making are at play in literature; or that theorize in some profitable way the differences between the literal/figurative, denotative/connotative,

⁵⁵⁸ Troy, “Symbolism as a Generating Force.”

foreground/background levels of language and literature: William Empson's *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), W.Y. Tyndall's *The Literary Symbol* (1955), Harry Levin's "Symbolism and Fiction" in his collection *Contexts of Criticism* (1957), Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and Isabel Hungerland's "Symbols in Poetry" in her collection *Poetic Discourse* (1958).⁵⁵⁹

A brief digression using Tyndall's work *The Literary Symbol* may prove a useful here. Ontologically, Tyndall falls largely in line with those critics, artists, and philosophers (e.g. Cassirer and Langer) who view the symbolic device as quasi-mystical objects: a vehicle or relational state-of-mind that somehow embodies or expresses what cannot be said in language, what cannot be apprehended using more prosaic, propositional thought alone. In the end, it seems not unfair to consider twentieth-century thinkers like "crypto-mystics" of a sort: they become (understandably) stymied by the hazy origins, combinatorial powers, self-referential nature (almost to the point of *mise-en-abyme*), and recursively iterative manifestations of symbolic thought in general. The problem only increases when studying those highly self-interrogating artworks of modernism and postmodernism, which are *themselves* interested in such questions, and which lead to even more dizzying circles of self-reflexive analysis of signification itself. Such intellectual puzzles can leave some resigned to lean on the qualities of pure pleasure or the state of ineffability which some symbolic art provides, or on a Neoplatonic deification of that mysteriousness, rather than prompting for

⁵⁵⁹ William Empson, *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions: 1930, 1947, 1953). Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, 1947 (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1975). Charles Feidelson, Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953). W.Y. Tyndall, *The Literary Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955). Harry Levin, "Symbolism and Fiction," *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). Isabel Hungerland, "Symbols in Poetry" *Poetic Discourse* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958).

more scientifically adequate, foundationalist, conceptually unified answers for explaining those mysteries.

Part of this reversion to mystical causes or fuzzy logic must be due to the scientific-historical reality some of these thinkers were coming from. Evolutionary studies, cognitive linguistics, and brain science had not matured enough to arm them with the useful scientific knowledge or conceptual frames that could enable the prodding and finessing of such questions down more enlightening paths. Nevertheless, many of their contributions remain important to revisit, and those of Tyndall were particularly influential in and symptomatic of the field of literary criticism during the late-1950s/early-60s. Tyndall's work appears to have become a footnote in literary critical history. Perhaps this is a conscious oversight, perhaps it simply got awash in the heady tides of this transition period of literary studies and its aftereffects. Despite the book's epistemological shortcomings and its occasional quaintness (from our so-called more enlightened vantage point), the work deserves a bit of a resurrection, in my view. It could stake a more exulted place among the hallmarks of applied criticism and poetics theory.

I leave this section with a nod to Cleanth Brooks and a passage from "The Language of Paradox" in *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Here Brooks speaks to how non-annotated connotations, multi-planar implied analogies, and the tack of approaching difficult emotional situations using metaphor (the "not there"s of literary texts) are integral to "the matter at hand" (i.e. poetry, literature, art); they are not mere window dressing. Such ideas are reflective, once again, of what needs to be biopoetically explained about second-order symbolisms. Such techniques, says Brooks, are what allows poetry and art to soar and to triumph in the end, despite the seeming enigmas they may be confronting in form, content, or

the world at large:

Paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all—as the scientist may properly be said to do so.

[...]

We may approach the problem in this way: the poet has to work by analogies. All of the subtler states of emotion, as I. A. Richards has pointed out, necessarily demand metaphor for their expression. The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.

But in dilating on the difficulties of the poet's task, I do not want to leave the impression that it is a task which necessarily defeats him, or even that with his method he may not win to a fine precision. To use Shakespeare's figure, he can

with assays of bias

*By indirections find directions out.*⁵⁶⁰

Philosophers of Symbol (Peirce, Whitehead, Cassirer, Langer, Goodman)

Along with Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce is universally recognized as the

⁵⁶⁰ Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*.

fountainhead of semiotics at the turn of the century. Peirce's linguistically informed philosophies of sign and symbol, which continued to grow and develop across his lifetime, remain towering forces not just in semiotics but in diverse fields related to signification and language: from literature and linguistics to sociology and the sciences of signaling in biology, biomechanics, and ethology. His tripartite theory of icon/index/symbol feeds some major questions of this dissertation: What makes a mind that can symbolize—and not *just* iconize or index—special and distinct from other animals? In turn, what is it about that distinctive cognitive skill and its ramifying effects that feels so aesthetically powerful? Peirce's ideas are noted more fully in the next chapter, as refracted through the biolinguistics and evolutionary anthropology of Terrence Deacon.

Alfred North Whitehead's examinations of symbol in *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effects* (1928) offer occasional pearls of philosophical insight. His tract ranges widely, defining and classifying kinds and causations of symbol, from the most fundamental (sense-perception) to "higher" (religious art and music), but much of the philosopher's discourse is desultory and underwritten by vague notions of "society" and symbol as emotion conductor. Nonetheless, certain passages about the fundamental role symbol plays in constituting the workings and quality of the human mind offer up some illuminating if not probative value and can be adduced later for the ev-cog argument:

No account of the uses of symbolism is complete without this recognition that the symbolic elements in life have a tendency to run wild, like the vegetation in a tropical forest. The life of humanity can easily be overwhelmed by its symbolic accessories. A continuous process of pruning, and of adaptation to a future ever requiring new forms of expression, is a

necessary function in every society. The successful adaptation of old symbols to changes of social structure is the final mark of wisdom in sociological statesmanship. Also an occasional revolution in symbolism is required.

There is, however, a Latin proverb upon which, in our youth, some of us have been set to write themes. In English it reads thus:—Nature, expelled with a pitchfork, ever returns. This proverb is exemplified by the history of symbolism. However you may endeavor to expel it, it ever returns. Symbolism is no mere idle fancy or corrupt degeneration: it is inherent in the very texture of human life. Language itself is a symbolism. And, as another example, however you reduce the functions of your government to their utmost simplicity, yet symbolism remains. It may be a healthier, manlier ceremonial, suggesting finer notions. But still it is symbolism. You abolish the etiquette of a royal court, with its suggestion of personal subordination, but at official receptions you ceremonially shake the hand of the Governor of your State. Just as the feudal doctrine of a subordination of classes, reaching up to the ultimate overlord, requires its symbolism; so does the doctrine of human equality obtain its symbolism. Mankind, it seems, has to find a symbol in order to express itself. Indeed “expression” is “symbolism.”

When the public ceremonial of the State has been reduced to the barest simplicity, private clubs and associations at once commence to reconstitute symbolic actions. It seems as though mankind must always be masquerading. This imperative impulse suggests that the notion of an idle

masquerade is the wrong way of thought about the symbolic elements in life. The function of these elements is to be definite, manageable, reproducible, and also to be charged with their own emotional efficacy: symbolic transference invests their correlative meanings with some or all of these attributes of the symbols, and thereby lifts the meanings into an intensity of definite effectiveness—as elements in knowledge, emotion, and purpose—an effectiveness which the meanings may, or may not, deserve on their own account. The object of symbolism is the enhancement of the importance of what is symbolized.⁵⁶¹

Whitehead's fine points about symbol's ineluctable entanglements with human mental, emotional, social, and political life further advance how second-order symbolism must be tied to deep, universal mechanisms of our cognitive architecture (that, of course, can get tuned up or down by cultural cues, traditions, and technological progress).

For Ernst Cassirer's work on symbolism, I turn to the concision of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP)*:

More than any other German philosopher since Kant, Cassirer thus aims to devote equal philosophical attention both to the (mathematical and) natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and to the more humanistic disciplines (*Geisteswissenschaften*). In this way, Cassirer, more than any other twentieth-century philosopher, plays a fundamental mediating role between C. P. Snow's famous "two cultures." He also plays a similarly mediating role between the two major traditions in twentieth-century academic philosophy—the

⁵⁶¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effects (Barbour-Page Lectures University of Virginia, 1927)* Chapter III, "Uses of Symbolism" (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 61–62.

“analytic” and “continental” traditions—whose radically different (and often mutually uncomprehending) perspectives on the relationship between scientific and humanistic elements in their subject gave rise to a fundamental split or gulf between philosophy as it came to be practiced in the Anglo-American world, on the one side, and as it was practiced in most of the rest of the world, on the other.

[...]

The three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* itself appeared, as noted above, in 1923, 1925, and 1929 [...] The conception of human beings as most fundamentally “symbolic animals,” interposing systems of signs or systems of expression between themselves and the world, then becomes the guiding philosophical motif for elucidating the corresponding conditions of possibility for the “fact of culture” in all of its richness and diversity.⁵⁶²

Donald Verene add this final thought regarding Cassirer’s mark on symbol theory:

The work of Ernst Cassirer is concerned perhaps more than that of any other contemporary philosopher with myth and symbol. [...]

Cassirer’s theory of the symbol is essentially a reshaping of Kant’s idea of the schema. The symbol, Cassirer maintains, is not an accidental instrument of thought: it is the medium through which all thought occurs. Without symbols we could not accomplish the fundamental task of thought, that of

⁵⁶² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cassirer/>

apprehending the universal in the particular. A symbol, Cassirer maintains, is both sensuous and intellectual.⁵⁶³

Suzanne Langer, meanwhile, is firmly situated in the tradition of viewing symbol as a means beyond language for expressing the inexpressible, emphasizes symbols as specially designed (by whom is unclear) non-discursive devices uniquely suited to encode and convey otherwise unutterable feelings, and intuition as the most proper decoder of those symbols. Langer's key works in this area are *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942) and *Feeling and Form* (1953). Her views are neatly condensed in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

In *Feeling and Form*, written eleven years later as a sequel to *Philosophy in a New Key*, art was characterized as the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling. Every work of art involved (1) abstraction from actuality, thereby becoming mere semblance, a created realm of illusion, (2) plasticity (the capacity of being manipulated in the interests of expression), and (3) expressiveness whereby the symbol became transparent. A focus on the meaning of art works was replaced by a discussion of their import or significance. Intuition became the link between the qualities of the artwork that constituted it a symbol and the import the work of art held for the observer. Through intuition, we perceive the "felt life" of the artist's

⁵⁶³ Donald Phillip Verene, "Cassirer's View of Myth and Symbol," *The Monist* 50, no. 4 (October 1966): 553–564. Obtained via *Anthony Flood: Philosophy or Misophosy*, website, posted October 9, 2008, <http://www.anthoniflood.com/verenecassirersviewmythsymbol.htm>.

expression.⁵⁶⁴

Langer modulates the emphases and inferences of her symbol theory across the body of her work, but if there is a common denominator it would be this: Langer foregrounds precincts of mind that had been neglected, or at least underplayed, in previous accounts of the symbolic faculties in philosophy, psychology, and art criticism—namely, the emotional precincts of mind and the power intuition has in developing interpretations and weighing significances of symbolic art and ritual. Yet Langer’s approach turns out somewhat lopsided in the end. Human longing to express ineffable feelings and mental states, coupled with intuitions for seeking out and decoding symbolic conveyances of such feelings, are important pieces of the puzzle; and they do put us one step closer to a more secularized, non-Freudian, non-Jungian view of the power of symbol: i.e. Langer’s symbols function as passports into otherwise inaccessible zones of the interior lives of other human beings; but they do not function as mystic portals into the divine *pneuma* of the ancient allegorists, the non-corporeal Oneness of the romantics and Transcendentalists, the psychosexual dramas of repression and fantasy of the Freudians, or the collective unconsciousness of the Jungians. Despite this needed critical progression, nebulous notions of intuition and unutterable feeling-states cannot alone adequately account for all or even most instances of an artist deploying second-order symbolism across the ages, or for the full aesthetic-sociopsychological dynamic involved when a reader interprets a piece of art. More seems needed.

Nelson Goodman winds up the symbol-philosophy pedigree of Whitehead / Cassirer > Langer > Goodman. Some of his works and concepts have been treated in prior chapters.

⁵⁶⁴ Peg Brand, “Susanne Katherina Knauth Langer,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998). Accessed via <http://www.anthoniflood.com/langer/routledge.htm>.

Below, I reiterate and develop ideas most salient for this dissertation's scope of knowledge. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* puts it, "one of the great contributions of Goodman to philosophy is his investigation of kinds of reference or symbolization,"⁵⁶⁵ particularly in *Languages of Art* (1968), which *SEP* describes thusly:

As its subtitle, *An Approach to a General Theory of Symbols*, indicates, this is a book with bearings not only on art issues, but on a general understanding of symbols, linguistic and non-linguistic, in the sciences as well as in ordinary life. Indeed, *Languages of Art* has, amongst its merits, that of having broken, in a non-superficial and fruitful way, the divide between art and science. Goodman's general view is that we use symbols in our perceiving, understanding, and constructing the worlds of our experience: the different sciences and the different arts equally contribute to the enterprise of understanding the world. As in his works in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of language, Goodman's approach is often unorthodox and groundbreaking, and yet never in a way that fails to be refreshing and suggestive of future developments.⁵⁶⁶

While *Languages of Art* contains important insights on many fronts of symbol theory, it is a section in Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* that lands as most pertinent and useful to this dissertation's bid to thinking through a biopoetics of second-order symbol. Goodman establishes a five-spoke symptomatic system of classification for "when" symbolic art "is."

⁵⁶⁵ "Goodman's Aesthetics," Section 3.1: Modes of Reference, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/#ModRef>.

⁵⁶⁶ "Goodman's Aesthetics," Section 3: The Theory of Symbol Systems in *Languages of Art*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/#TheSymSysLanArt>.

Though far from unassailable, this schematic possesses much terminological value and conceptual merit. The breakdown and Goodman's explanation of it are extracted below:

Now, of course, to function as a symbol in some way or other is not itself to function as a work of art. Our swatch, when serving as a sample, does not then and thereby become a work of art. Things function as works of art only when their symbolic functioning has certain characteristics. [...]

The question just what characteristics distinguish or are indicative of the symbolizing that constitutes functioning as a work of art calls for careful study in the light of a general theory of symbols. That is more than I can undertake here, but I venture the tentative thought that there are five symptoms of the aesthetic: 1) *syntactic density*, where the finest differences in certain respects constitute a difference between symbols—for example, an ungraduated mercury thermometer as contrasted with an electronic digital-read-out instrument; 2) *semantic density*, where symbols are provided for things distinguished by the finest differences in certain respects [...]; 3) *relative repleteness*, where comparatively many aspects of a symbol are significant—for example, a single-line drawing of a mountain by Hokusai where every feature of shape, line, thickness, etc. count, in contrast with perhaps the same line as a chart of daily stockmarket averages, where all that counts is the height of the line above the base; 4) *exemplification*, where a symbol, whether or not it denotes, symbolized by serving as a sample of properties it literally or metaphorically possesses; and 5) *multiple and complex reference*, where a symbol performs several integrated and interacting referential functions, some direct and some mediated through other symbols.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁷ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 67–8. Italics mine.

All of these properties are useful to and can enrich any biopoetics of second-order symbol. Number 1, syntactic density, speaks to the tried-and-true principles of unity and internal coherence, for instance: whereby if an artist shifts, omits, or adds one feature of a work, other parts are going to be effected, and its overall design may have to be recalibrated or its total form reshaped. Number 4, exemplification, speaks to ideas of embodiment and the organic symbol: features in the art are sensory duplicates of certain features of the very reality other signs in the art seems to be referring to. And numbers 3 and 5, relative repleteness and multiple complex reference, re-articulate most of the definitional features and powers of what I have come to call second-order aesthetic symbolism. My replete aesthetic field (RAF) of second-order symbols is, thus, a very direct derivation of Goodman's concepts and terms.

Goodman's aesthetics and the terminological schemes he develops for thinking through the nature of symbol are, without question, analytically rigorous, penetrating, and illuminating. Scholars and teachers of literature, film, visual art, music, and dance could only benefit from grappling with his schematics and, if desired, reconstituting some of his ideas for use in their classrooms, or in their own writing and thinking about how the arts represent, symbolize, and induce meaning-making experiences. Nonetheless, certain concepts of Goodman remain unsatisfying or in need of refinement. This is at least partly due to his extreme epistemological constructionism and coherenitism, which tends to deny empirically verifiable foundational knowledge.⁵⁶⁸ Goodman's ideas, thus, sometimes beg for firmer groundings in both current scientific literature on the psychology of representation and more traditional scholarship in poetics and symbolism.

⁵⁶⁸ Goodman calls it "my own skeptical, analytic, constructionalist orientation" (*Ways of Worldmaking*, 1).

Symbol Theory in the Social Sciences and Beyond (Burke, Baudrillard, Sperber, Barthes)

A good number of social scientists have formally investigated or more casually weighed in on the nature of symbol and symbolic activities in human social formations in recent decades, with varying degrees of sway and success. Since this dissertation could hardly do justice to a summary assessment of them all, here I simply mention a few stalwarts whose insights have proven particularly bright or have withstood good scrutiny, and which remain most salient to this dissertation's biopoetic bailiwick. These sections deserve further elaborations at a later date.

Kenneth Burke's *On Symbols and Society* (1983) cannot go unmentioned. The *sui generis* literary scholar presents a blistering range of erudition and theoretical "dazzle" in its pages. Many parts land, others not so much. The most salient points to a biopoetics of second-order symbolism. First, humanity is the "symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animal."⁵⁶⁹ Getting out in front of the ostensible banality of this statement, Burke rhapsodizes on the gravity of this sociobiological fact:

The "symbol-using animal," yes, obviously. But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our "reality" for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? [...] And however

⁵⁶⁹ Burke, Kenneth. *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 60.

important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall “picture” is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that’s one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality.⁵⁷⁰

Burke nearly veers into the autonomous-language camp, where reality becomes wholly a linguistically mediated social construction. But that is not really where Burke goes. He skates a fine ontological line between a biologically informed naturalism and the commonsense but often taken-for-granted notion that the conscious (and unconscious) existence of every human individual, particularly those in modern civilizations, is an existence ensconced in, infused with, and guided by a symbolic ecology. Our bodies, our environments, our brains are all constituted by an astonishing interplay of physical “motions,” to be sure; but Burke reminds us that our cognitive-emotional selves and our social spaces consist of, or are at least are inextricably bound up, with what he calls with “symbolic actions” (which range from any use of language inside or outside our heads to math, maps, money, rituals, etc. Burke asks, “When a bit of talking takes place, just what is doing the talking? Just where are the word comings from?” His answer: “Some of the motivation must derive from our animality and some from our symbolicity.” His example: “We hear of ‘brainwashing,’ of schemes whereby an ‘ideology’ is imposed upon people. But should we stop at that? Should we not also see the situation the other way around? For was not the brainwasher’ also similarly motivated? Do

⁵⁷⁰ Burke, *On Symbols*, 58.

we simply use words, or do they not also use us?”⁵⁷¹ (Revealingly, both the tangents and nested recursions of the symbol-making mind are bodied forth in Burke’s recursive thinking and prose style, which can be at turns penetrating and impenetrable.)

The second point of emphasis in Burke is his sense of and orientation toward the negative nature of symbols—that is, the “not there” quality of all signs:

Language referring to the realm of the nonverbal,” writes Burke, “is necessarily talk about things in terms of what they are not—and in this sense we start out beset by a paradox. Such language is but a set of labels, signs for helping us find our way about. Indeed, they can even be so useful that they help us to invent ingenious ways of threatening to destroy ourselves. But even accuracy of this powerful sort does not get around the fact that such terms are sheer emptiness, as compared with the substance of the things they name. Nor is such abstractness confined to the language of scientific prose. Despite the concrete richness of the imagery in Keats’s poems, his letters repeatedly refer to his art as “abstract.” And the same kind of considerations would apply to the symbol systems of all other arts.⁵⁷²

The abstract, negative, “not” qualities of symbol systems become the lynchpin holding together the evolution of language according to Terrence Deacon’s biolinguistic theories. The “not”ness is also in many ways what drives the existence, appeal, and challenge of something like artistic second-order symbolism as well.

Sociologist Jean Baudrillard could be mentioned for his theories of *simulacra* and *simulation*. I deploy related terms in these pages, like *the safety of the simulacrum*, but

⁵⁷¹ Burke, *On Symbols*, 59.

⁵⁷² Burke, *on Symbols*, 59.

without the ideological colorings Baudrillard intends with his coining and usage of the terms. They are used more as a descriptive shorthand for the safe (i.e. simulated representations do not present real-life threats or immediate life consequences for the audience) mental and emotional spaces we inhabit when immersed in a symbolic text. *Simulacrum* simply implies states of mind involving symbolic play, script-acting, and mental modeling that we go to when contacting textual objects—whether first-order or second-order, fiction or nonfiction. I would posit the simulacrum is on special display when we engage with fictional texts, even more so if those fictional texts are steeped in polysemous signifying events and objects.

Anthropologist Dan Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism* (1974) might be one of the first works to really start tracking symbolism down into its evolutionary-cognitive origins. His answers are not always very satisfying or complete: his final conclusions are in certain ways based on a strained distinction he makes between symbols and signs, which leaves his reader underwhelmed. But his thinking embraces an early version of an ev-cog framework and primes the pump for something like this biopoetics of artistic symbolism to develop. Pointing to an array of ethnological studies to support his position, Sperber is especially firm in contrasting his approach with the semiotic or what he calls the semiological point of view. Some illustrative passages are provided below:

I argue against this semiological view. [...] I develop a cognitive view and show in particular that symbolic interpretation is not a matter of decoding, but an improvisation that rest on an implicit knowledge and obeys unconscious rules. By asserting that symbolism is a cognitive mechanism, I mean that it is autonomous mechanism that, alongside the perceptual and conceptual

mechanisms, participates in the construction of knowledge and in the functioning of memory. [...]

Further, I suggest a hypothesis that the basic principles of the symbolic mechanism are not induced from experience but are, on the contrary, part of the innate mental equipment that makes experience possible. [...]

I have not tried to write an erudite work and the reader will not find here any history of theories of symbolism. M⁵⁷³ any important authors are not even mentioned and at least one—Sigmund Freud—is only cited for a minimal and marginal part of his contribution to the study of symbolism.

The relationships Freud speaks of are typically unconscious, inevitable, universal, and limited in range. Symbols, in his schem of things, represent the human body, parents, children, brothers, sisters, birth, death, nakedness, and, above all, the area of sexual life, the genitals, and sexual processes and intercourse. [...] The underlying logic is that of a trivial party game: “If it were sexual phenomenon, what would it be?”⁵⁷⁴

Ethnographers have reported a considerable number of cases of perfectly conscious sexual symbolism, data which the partisans of the Freudian view of symbolism tread by supposing that “primitives” are less repressed than we.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷³ Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. Alice L. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), xi–xii.

⁵⁷⁴ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, 36–7.

⁵⁷⁵ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, 43.

Symbolic processing appears to have two aspects: one, a displacement of attention, or *focalization*; and the other, a search in memory, or *evocation*.⁵⁷⁶

Sperber's explanatory logic for the unconscious improvisational nature of symbolic referred to above tends to get messy. But it basically boils down to the importance of contextual clues and priming, mixed with intuitive social and emotional prompts, in the development of symbolic activities and traditions in human cultures around the world. Above all, his assertions about the innate cognitive mechanics of symbolism are much welcome at this late stage in the history of symbol theory. And his specific concepts of *focalization* (displaced attention) and *evocation* (inducing memory search) are keenly relevant to the nature of second-order symbol: namely, the way it puts on high display the indirect "not"ness qualities of a text whose surface cues primarily demand attention, and the associational processes that symbolic deciphering entails and that surely tap into and depend upon several kinds of memory faculties (long-term/short-term, semantic/episodic, crystallized/fluid).

Finally, more could certainly be written on Roland Barthes's expansive if sometimes confounding theories related to semiotics and codes. His three-level meaning hierarchy (informational, symbolic, significance/obscure)—developed in works like "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills" and *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*—present some overlaps with and terminological alternatives to the interpretative schema needed by any reader or viewer of artworks that seem to partake of some second-order symbolisms.

⁵⁷⁶ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, 119.

A Note on the Marxist Unconscious

Beyond the psycho-spiritual, emotional, cognitive dimensions of second-order symbolologies that a critic might want to identify and analyze, Marxist-leaning critics might be disposed, not without warrant, to tease out the appeals—and lurking threats or downsides—of such obscurantist, sleight-of-hand poetic techniques. These exact points are taken up in a later section. Their thought process might sound something like this. The power dynamics and economic relations that inhere between capitalists, labor, and consumers operate under certain articles of opacity, obscurantism, concealment. According to classical Marxist theory, the capitalist classes are benefited by keeping hidden certain means, methods, and time expenditures that create the surplus value (their profit) of the commodities they own and market. The origination of that surplus value, as produced by contracted labor, can be increased if kept out of sight of consumers and reified into abstract price quantities. This ultimately benefits members of the elite, hegemonic, owner classes, who will naturally be in favor of keeping the greater system working for their own self-enhancement and ever-increasing profits. Sure enough, one can draw compelling parallels between important Marxist concepts, such as character-masking and reification, and the conceptual-psychological terrains of second-order symbolologies. Paul de Man does exactly that in his privileging of allegory (transparency) over symbolism (obscurity).

Nonetheless, one might pose a more positive attitude about symbolic and enigmatic art. Most second-order symbolologies of obscurity will only go so far—there is usually some form of resolution or complex of signifieds at the “end” of the signifying rainbow. If irresolution is the intended effect, that is still a resolution of some sort: the “answer” is irresolution. Perhaps artists who wish only to obscure, without any hope of granting their

artist (consumer) a propositional or emotional truth or logic or inner insight may be scripted as akin to deceptive masked capitalists classes (if one wished to go there); whereas those who have something of truth and substance underneath the concealment and darkness are more likely to be granted approved status; indeed this indirectness rather than directness may reflect a tapping of deeper cognitive appeals: for being led to water, but not being forced to drink; by uncovering the hidden the secret, by decoding the coded; and one hopes there is after the effortful procedures required of such unmasking and un-puzzling, that we do see the glimmers of something truthful or at least interesting and useful for life or pleasure—i.e. our symbolic/enigmatic artists, one hopes, are not simply car salesmen or capitalists by another name, striving to obscure labor-power and surplus-value relations by means of obfuscatory contracts and the reification of market forces that turn social relations into commodities in order to mask and increase their power and profit.

One can argue that aesthetic works that are highly symbolic, formally or stylistically byzantine, or opaque/enigmatic can exercise certain faculties of intellection that help readers/viewers/consumers/citizens to become more attuned to the hidden and encrypted, more prone to deploy critical, deeper inspections of all things around them—whether the object of their critical gaze is a text that calls for symbolic, allusive interpretation or a socioeconomic and political reality that similarly demands close scrutiny, rethinking, and possible restructuring.⁵⁷⁷ Thus, a Marxist hermeneutics applied to one's current *in vivo* social

⁵⁷⁷ The last item in this list, *restructuring*, is not really a property shared by artworks, in that an artwork is an expressive artifact of the past, an intentional representational object of one or more human minds made for other minds to experience as is. This is *prima facie* different from a system of laws and policies that regulates the ongoing, unfolding, high-stakes “performances” of living human beings acting, surviving, socializing, flourishing, trading, and dying in the present and future realities of their life cycles. When we read *Hamlet*, we will never be asked to “restructure” it, to rewrite a new *Hamlet* to govern our lives by (modern updates of old works are special exceptions that do not apply to the point here). Whereas, when we inspect systems of social formations and political economy, the end-game will always circulate toward this kind of question: Can/should we change, modify, or maintain the *status quo* for the best way of living with others in the world to hold?

formations and political economies shares certain characteristics of aesthetic transactions asking for decrypting, decoding, puzzling out the obscured signifiers of texts. Both dynamics derive in some sense from a profound psychological desire to see what is concealed, what is underneath, what might be lightened or transferred from the opaque—a universal desire, one hopes/thinks. The subtlety of this relationships is key: the mind wishing to come to resolution out of opaqueness and obscured ambiguity.

As suggested previously in this dissertation, the mental activity needed to untangle the branching trees of causalities underneath 1) the complex economic systems that have taken root in our byzantine civilized world, and 2) the equally if not more complex transit systems that relay signals between the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious part of our mind-brains—such mental acts and efforts must tap some of the same cognitive mechanisms deployed for untangling the tangles of art objects. Especially those objects that are replete with “hidden” or suppressed devices of symbolic-mythical resonances. Paul Ricoeur brings together the workings of consciousness generally with the act of hermeneutics generally:

Consciousness, far from being transparent in itself, is at the same time what reveals and what conceals; it is this relation of conceal/reveal which calls for a specific reading, a hermeneutics. The task of hermeneutics....has always been to read a text and to distinguish the true sense from the apparent sense, to search for the sense under the sense.⁵⁷⁸

This ever-enchanted dialectic between concealment and reveal, between the problem and solution, between the confusion and the resolution, between the strange and the familiar, between the gaps of openness and the bridges of closure, between the muddle of

⁵⁷⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “The Critique of Religion,” *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 215. Cited in Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 27.

incomprehensibility and the relief of translation, between the seemingly evident yet just out of reach, between the known self and the unknown other, is reproduced with a certain kind of intensity and imaginative play in second-order symbolic fictions. And the complexity and play can intensify even further when those symbolic messages comment *on* things like political economies and the relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness itself.

Symbol “Dictionaries” and “Encyclopedias”

Search today for “symbolism” on Amazon or Google Books and a host of symbol “dictionaries,” “encyclopedias,” and “guides” will populate your returns. Of these, Michael Ferber’s *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* is by far the most scholarly in tone, thoughtfully written, well organized, and disciplinarily useful, as it is geared specifically toward serious students and other teachers of literature. Ferber’s insights about teaching and researching the literary symbol are also quite unparalleled (at least from my reading of the field), and they are thus extracted at some length below. Other instances of this “subgenre,” however, are not as illuminating as one might first hope. Oxford’s *Dictionary of Allusions* and Penguin’s *Dictionary of Symbols* each offer an impressive number of entries; however, their organizational schemas and the contents of each entry tend to be rangy, random, or puzzling. Some of their entries seem too brief to be useful while others seem overlong and crammed, mishmashes of geographies, times, and cultural domains. Meanwhile, dictionaries like *The Secret Language of Symbols* are informed by popular cooptations of Freudian or Jungian psychology, tintured with a New Age horoscope-esque quality, and/or ultimately less useful (if not pernicious) to serious studies of how symbols operate within our art and our minds. Despite (and partly because of) the failure and disappointing features of texts in this

subgenre, what these symbolic compendia do demonstrate, if nothing else, is this: the sheer historical magnitude and cultural ubiquity of symbolic traditions and devices; the ever-present psychological appeal and curiosity symbolic potentialities hold for humans; and the pulsating, intractable, anarchic qualities of the symbolic universes the human mind has created for itself.

Here is Fletcher, offering his reflections and pragmatic insights into the world of teaching and researching the literary (second-order) symbol:

The idea for this dictionary came to me while I was reading a student essay on Byron's "Stanzas Written on the Road between Florence and Pisa" [...]. After a promising start the student came to a halt before these lines: "the myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and- twenty / Are worth all your laurels, though ever so plenty." His copy lacked footnotes, and he lacked experience of poetry before the Romantics. With disarming candor he confessed that he had no idea what these three plants were doing in the poem, and then desperately suggested that Byron might have seen them on the road somewhere between Florence and Pisa and been inspired to put them in his poem the way you might put plants in your office. I wrote in the margin that these were symbolic plants and he had to look them up. But where, exactly, do you send a student to find out the symbolic meaning of myrtle? The *Oxford English Dictionary* was all I could come up with, but I felt certain there must be a handier source, designed for readers of literature, with a good set of quotations from ancient times to modern. But there is no such book.

A dozen times since then I have asked colleagues and librarians if they knew of one. They were all sure they did, or thought “there must be one,” but they could never find it. Several of them came up with Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, but that work, whatever its uses, is the last thing I would recommend to a student. [...]

Only slightly better are two recent ones: Hans Biedermann’s *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them*, translated from the German, and Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant’s *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, translated from the French. Both range widely but unsystematically over the cultures of the world, packing Mayan and Chinese meanings next to those from medieval alchemy. [...]

If no adequate dictionary exists, but everyone thinks it does (because it must), that seemed a good reason to write one. It was also a reason not to write one, for if even the Germans have not produced one, as it seemed, it might be beyond mortal powers. After all, anything can be a symbol, and a comprehensive dictionary might require thousands of entries. After some hesitation, however, I decided the thing can be done, and the present book is the result. Its title is somewhat misleading. It would be more correct, if ungainly, to call it *A Selective Dictionary of Traditional Western Literary Symbols and Conventions, Mainly in Poetry* [...].

[...]. This dictionary covers only traditional symbols, those that have been used over many years by many authors. Most entries begin with the Bible or the classics and trace examples through to fairly recent writers, with

an emphasis on British literature, and especially on Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantics; they also typically include a few examples from Italian, French, Spanish, German, or Russian literature (especially from Dante and Goethe). The tradition is more stable than I had first guessed, at least until the twentieth century; nightingales and cypresses carry with them their ancient associations, and even where they are invoked in new ways those connotations may still be in play.

There is no need, moreover, to take up the significance of the lathe in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the pistols in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the mysterious sound in Act 2 of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, the madeleine in Proust, or the leaden circles of sound from Big Ben that permeate Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. These must be worked out by the reader in each case, and no dictionary on a reasonable scale could help much. What readers need to know, in any case, are the traditional symbols, the routine furniture of literature over thousands of years, which often appear without explanation, and which gradually gain in connotation as the tradition lengthens and alludes to itself. Whether it informs the meaning of an individual work is often a subtle question—Does it matter that the bird that seeks “your cradle narrow / Near my Bosom” in Blake's “The Blossom” is a sparrow, with its associations of lust? [...]—but the question cannot even be entertained without a knowledge of the tradition.

[...]

That all the references are to western literature, counting the Bible as one of its prime sources, would not seem to require a defense, but more than one colleague has questioned my “western-centric bias” and urged that I undertake a truly multicultural dictionary of the all the world’s literary symbols. It sounded like a wonderful project, but not for me, or for any one mortal. Two days reading through Chinese and Japanese poetry in translation gave me a glimpse into what it might entail. The swallow, I learned, is seen as a harbinger of spring, just as it is in western poetry: the thirteenth-century poet Chiang K’uei ponders the time “When swallows come to ask where spring is.” But another common image for spring, plum blossoms, is not common in western poetry. Since plum blossoms often appear amid late-winter snow, they are tokens of hardiness and courage as well as forerunners of spring. [...]

This is a dictionary of symbols in literature, not myth, painting, folklore, dreams, alchemy, astrology, the Tarot pack, the Kabbalah, or the Jungian collective unconscious. Myths come into it, of course, insofar as they take literary form, but no proper names have entries. The reader who misses them can easily find several excellent dictionaries of classical mythology. [...]. By “literature” I mean for the most part the “high” literature of the standard western canon. To modern eyes this tradition may seem an elite affair, in contrast not only to proverbs and ballads but to fairy tales, popular plays and songs, seasonal rituals, and other kinds of folklore, from all of which this dictionary might have drawn more than the few examples it has. The limits of space (and time) must be the main plea against having done so,

but one should remember that a great deal of Greek literature was “popular” in its day, as were Shakespeare and many other writers, and many bits of folklore live on in them that have died out among the folk. I have also tried to include a few references to less well-known writers. Those with a particular interest in women, African-American, Latin-American, or “post-colonial” writers may find them underrepresented, but this dictionary does not seem the right place to argue for a new canon. It is my sense, too, that at least through the nineteenth century, women, blacks, and other “others” did not use symbols in ways notably different from the dominant tradition. [...]

This dictionary depends on no particular definition of “symbol.” I have chosen to err on the side of generosity rather than exclude something one might want to know, and many instances come closer to metaphor, allusion, or even motif than to symbol strictly defined. I also include some conventions, commonplaces, or “topoi,” the standard ways a thing has been represented. So I include dawn, death, dream, nature, and certain other subjects not so much for what they have stood for as for what other things have stood for them.

For several reasons the great majority of examples is taken from poetry. Nearly all the oldest western literature is in verse, and until the modern era the poetic genres were the most prestigious and most frequently published. Poetry tends, too, to be denser in symbolism than novels or stories, though there is plenty of symbolic prose fiction. It is much easier, too, to scan poetry for key words or ideas than to scan prose [...]. I have been able to find fifty occurrences of a symbol in a dozen poets in a few minutes, but for novelists I

can mainly rack my memory or that of colleagues. I have nevertheless included quite a few prose examples, helped at times by scholarly studies of one symbol.

[...]

This is not to say that whenever a nightingale appears in a poem it must mean all the things it ever meant, or that it must allude to all the previous appearances of nightingales. What Freud said about cigars is sometimes true of literary symbols: sometimes a nightingale is just a nightingale, or little more than a way of saying that night has come. On the other hand, most poets have absorbed the traditional language of poetry and assume their readers or listeners have done so too. The implied reader of most poetry is an expert on nightingales, even if that reader has never heard or seen one. If it is possible for a nightingale to make an “innocent” appearance after 2,800 years in western literature, it must be under special literary conditions that somehow both invoke and erase the associations the nightingale has acquired, as perhaps Coleridge does in “The Nightingale” as early as 1798, or Wallace Stevens much more recently in “The Man on the Dump,” where the nightingale is included in the great garbage pile of worn-out poetic images. To repeat an earlier point, the ideal is to know the tradition and then decide in each case to what extent it is still in play.⁵⁷⁹

The urgent need to “know a tradition” for proper understanding and interpretation of literature to occur perhaps stands tallest among Ferber’s many noteworthy observations.

⁵⁷⁹ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–5.

Coda: Allusionary + Illusionary Texts = Symbolic Realism

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.

— T.S. Eliot⁵⁸⁰

This oft-recited quote by Eliot sets the table for thinking not only about the importance of intertextual allusions and reconstituted (aka borrowed or stolen) devices of image, plot, theme, character, and symbol within the artistic traditions—especially when those allusions and “thefts” are left unmarked by the author, as concealed references the reader must discover on her own—but also about the importance of honoring, sometimes by modifying, certain distinct conventions and traditions within the arts.

In his gloss on “Intertextuality,” Daniel Chambers recognizes a distinction between self-aware allusive-rich texts and texts that emphasize a realistically simulated environment of verisimilitude. I propose to call these *allusionary* vs. *illusionary* texts. And my primary if hesitant claim in this addendum section is basically this: allusionary + illusionary = symbolic realism.

An allusionary “self-conscious form of intertextuality [...] credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition. By alluding to other texts and other media this practice reminds us that we are in a mediated reality, so it can also be seen as an ‘alienatory’ mode which runs counter to the dominant ‘realist’ tradition which focuses on persuading the audience to believe in the on-

⁵⁸⁰ T.S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger,” *The Sacred Wood*, 1921 (New York: Bartleby.com by Alfred Knopf, 2000), <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw11.html>.

going reality of the narrative. It appeals to the pleasures of critical detachment rather than of emotional involvement.”⁵⁸¹ I would go further and argue that allusionary texts offer more than just “pleasure of recognition”; for there are also distinct pleasures in the intellectual work that must be clocked to apprehend the intertextual comparisons, conceptual re-framings, and intellectual abstractions within those spaces of “critical detachment” mentioned by Chambers at the end of his passage. In other words, there are both immediate pleasures of recognition and the more delayed pleasures intellectual fulfillment available within allusionary texts. When an author is able to “elegantly” mix these pleasures with the pleasures supplied by illusionary works of verisimilitude and transport, the potency, value, and brilliance of symbolic realism begins to emerge.

* * *

The convergence of all this history is in many ways crystallized in the neat theoretical proclamation, bowdlerized in this chapter’s epigraph, by contemporary American writer Jon Gingerich:

Freud believed that dreams disguise our unconscious thoughts by translating them into a language of symbols. We do this, he hypothesized, to prevent our conscious minds from censoring content we find too disturbing. Hence, Freud thought that by interpreting our dreams we could decode our unconscious, and doing so could help us discover repressed wishes or resolve some inner conflict.

Fiction works the same way. Writing is most successful when it avoids browbeating the reader with instruction and instead communicates in a language

⁵⁸¹ Daniel Chambers, “Intertextuality,” *Semiotics for Beginners*, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem09.html>.

of suggestion. Metaphor, imagery, metonymy—the strategy of injecting thematic concepts into character behavior or transmuting human properties onto objects are all examples of using those dreamlike “symbols” to suggest some larger idea that isn’t implicitly stated on the page. Symbolism doesn’t exist in fiction merely to paint pretty pictures. It’s actually an exercise in economy: symbolism allows writers to energize the work while gradually letting elements on the page accrue metaphysical weight. It allows the writer to supply the literal fundamentals while exploring metaphorical spaces. Symbolism isn’t just a storytelling “trick.” It’s the lexicon in which stories are told.

Gingerich goes on to proffer, rightly in my estimation, that a narrative saddled “with instruction belies the idea that your reader is smart enough to pick up on those implied, orbiting ideas we call a theme.” His prescriptive follow-up is a bit pat and normative, but all in all, it is difficult to argue against his value scale:

Symbolism helps alleviate this because it allows the writer to become much more “invisible” in the story. The best fiction moves from the specific to the abstract; it offers clear particulars the reader can unpack to discover larger thematic elements. It also allows you to turn off those guiding arrows and keep the narrative strategy muted. Learn to let go; trust your audience to pick up on those symbolic cues, and trust in your own descriptive powers to carry the narrative fundamentals. This grants the reader narrative permission to participate in the story instead of reminding them that they’re merely observing it.

[...] Storytelling comes with a default organizational quality. Anything you say about a character defines a character; and everything that comes into a

story, the reader assumes, is there to inform us. This is precisely why symbolism is such a big deal in literature; it's a far more economical and tasteful means of linking elements than mere cause and effect. There's a reason literature professors harangue students with the imbroglio of "what did the writer mean by this?" or "what is the author saying here?" Quality writing asks the reader to plumb the depths. It provokes questions. Let those questions fuel your story. It's one of the reasons we keep flipping pages.

Try turning your readers into listeners. The art of storytelling predates the written word by tens of thousands of years. That's one of the reasons "voice" is such a big deal in literature. Pay careful attention to language. Think about what images your words will evoke in a reader's mind. You can offer commentary without derailing into a tedious info-dump by using careful, precise words that adequately describe the world of the story. The more vivid the experience, the longer lasting our memories will be of it.

[...]

A lot of confusion arises when we throw around terms like "suggestion" and "symbolism." [...] Symbolism, when used properly, is an exercise in clarity: it traces a specific image to a reoccurring meaning that's central to the story. Writing is a confrontational endeavor that should definitely provoke a lot of questions, but it should never confuse. Writing offers new ways of seeing; the things that happen in the "real world" are

messy, and literature coordinates this clutter and helps us make sense of them.

It offers new realities for the purpose of better understanding our own.⁵⁸²

Clarity and revelation (of *something*) through solvable enigma and suggestion, not instruction and exposition. Abstract knowledge and vision offered by way of concrete imagery and mimetic detail. While Gingerich's proclamations ring a bit didactic and limiting to the power of symbolism, his pragmatic valuations are not altogether off base. Perhaps we should read Gingerich's advisories as a more recent attempt to reconcile the enduring, jostling strains of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic approaches to symbol, knowledge, and mind: i.e. literary symbols are not best thought of as mysterious ineffable forces of nature, which mirror the very incomprehensibility of nature itself. Nor are they simple discursive rational speech either. But most literary symbols do perform a "rational" function: most do point to something that can be apprehended using close attention, reason, and co-creative imagination—namely, ideas or emotions being evoked in some *other* way by the narrative or text itself, or ideas or things outside the text that are still relevant to the text at hand. Of course, there is no codebook given beforehand to make sense of these signifiers. The audience must construct that particular codebook for themselves using several "instructional" supports: their "inspired" wits, their reading and life experiences, and their prior contacts with art; the textual and contextual cues of the artwork itself; their immediate emotional and sensory experience of that artwork; and, with any luck, a few hints from the artists to help us along the path to successful decoding and interpretation.

And, now, the biopsychological/biocultural mechanics of this historically pervasive yet invisible hand of symbolism in the arts are left to be explained.

⁵⁸² Jon Gingerich, "Symbolism: Storytelling and the Invisible Hand," *LitReactor*, Oct. 30, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/symbolism-storytelling-and-the-invisible-hand>.

CHAPTER 6

Toward a Biopoetics of Symbol:

The Replete Peekaboo Aesthetics of Symbolic Realism and Other Ev-Cog Updates

Somehow, despite their cognitive limitations, our ancestors found a way to create and reproduce a simple system of symbols, and once available these symbolic tools quickly became indispensable. This insinuated a novel mode of information transmission into the evolutionary process for the first time in the billions of years since living processes became encoded in DNA sequences. Because this novel form of information transmission was partially decoupled from genetic transmission, it sent out lineage of apes down a novel evolutionary path—a path that has continued to diverge from all other species ever since. The incessant demands of efficiently reconstituting a symbolic system in each generation would have created selection pressures to reshape our lineage's ape brain.

— Terrence Deacon⁵⁸³

Homo sapiens are about pattern recognition. Both a gift and a trap.

— William Gibson⁵⁸⁴

This chapter presents modest evolutionary-cognitive (ev-cog) updates to and reformulations of traditional symbol theory, in a movement toward a biopoetics of second-order symbolism, implied referential complexes, and polysemic sign structures.

Homo Symbolicus⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸³ Terrence Deacon. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), 45.

⁵⁸⁴ William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (New York: Putnam's, 2003), 22.

⁵⁸⁵ The “*Homo Whatever-cus*” conceit has been overused and abused by now. But I will keep it, acknowledging my unoriginality. One day I hope to write *Homo Sporticus*, a history of sport in human evolution, where the Greeks and Roman will factor in significantly, and maybe Sparticus himself can make an appearance.

CHAPTER 7

A Symbolics of Literature:

The Psychologies and Cycles of the Short Story

What Freud said about cigars is sometimes true of literary symbols: sometimes a nightingale is just a nightingale.... On the other hand, poets have absorbed the traditional language of poetry and assume their readers or listeners have done so too.

— Michael Ferber⁵⁸⁶

Allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses, makes its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant appositeness.

— Edgar Allan Poe

⁵⁸⁶ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4–5.

CHAPTER 8
A Symbolics of Cinema:
Symbolic (Sur)realism in Kubrick and Lynch

A filmmaker has almost the same freedom as a novelist has when he buys himself some paper.

I think that for a movie or a play to say anything really truthful about life, it has to do so very obliquely.... Ideas which are valid and truthful are so multifaceted that they don't yield themselves to frontal assault.

If you really want to communicate something, even if it's just an emotion or an attitude, let alone an idea, the least effective and least enjoyable way is directly. It only goes in about an inch. But if you can get people to the point where they have to think a moment what is it you're getting at, and then discover it, the thrill of discovery goes right through the heart.

— Stanley Kubrick

Life is very, very complicated and so films should be allowed to be too.

There is a plot. What would be the point of just a bunch of things? There's a story, but the story can hold abstractions. I believe in story. I believe in characters. But I believe in a story that holds abstractions, and a story that can be told based on ideas that come in an unconventional way.

The ocean of solutions is within, enliven that... It's a world of clues, a world of mystery but the mystery can get solved, you can find a lot of answers for these things within.

— David Lynch

CONCLUSION

Emergent Questions, Research Opportunities, Spreading the Joyful Seduction of the Symbolic Peekaboo

If we would have new knowledge, we must get us a whole world of new questions.

— Susanne Langer

Here I want to emphasize our daily and evolutionary reliance on symbol, the enchantment of symbol, how symbolic forms guide us whether we want them to or not, for better or worse. For symbols are powerful cognitive tools, which like any tool can be used for good or for ill. They are shortcuts, and the best shortcuts are based on previous learning and sustained thought. For symbols to be effective, then, both sides of this coin are needed. If you apply a shortcut without prior calculations and forethought and experience/contextualizing of the land, you may very well be confronted with a cascade of errors that gets you lost and leads you into danger; but a shortcut based on prior deep contextualization and inferences and validations and past success can be powerful indeed: symbols, like shortcuts, can be efficient and productive, can be pleasurable and exhilarating, even as they run the risk of potential error and infidelity to reality (as any abstracted concept does).

In his concluding section of *Three Cultures*, Kagan discusses four ideas the public should embrace to better understand the full implications of how the three disciplinary cultures of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities fit together. The second speaks directly to the power of symbolic phenomena and meaning-making:

A deeper appreciation of four ideas might repair the public's current misunderstanding of the three cultures.

[...]

Second, the public should understand that symbolic meanings, not the events captured on film by a camera, comprise the primary information humans rely on as they conduct their day's responsibilities. These meanings are influenced, in a major way, by the specific referents the word intends. Every concept must specify its referents clearly, even though no concept guarantees a permanently faithful description of the event as it occurs in nature—this view is unavailable to human eyes, ears, or minds.⁵⁸⁷

This speaks more generally to the salient position symbolic competencies take in the overall cognitive profile/toolkits of our species and any individual's daily behaviors, to say nothing of their salience in how we interact with an artform like film or literature. The passage intriguingly enough also suggests how critical it is to keep our terms clear, to update our concepts while also updating our discourse communities with what our referents are—this crucial practice applies whether speaking to public audiences or, and perhaps more importantly, to fellow scholars both within and between fields who are after all trying to create reliable knowledge (without a shared system of referents for their concepts and words, scholars will be creating more babel than knowledge). Kagan also notes that potential error and infidelity to reality and that any symbolic concept, by nature, carries—our sensory and mental capabilities allow us only unfixed provisional glimpses of any fixed external (and internal) reality that might exist, can parse that reality only in a few ways that are dependent on brains that are always changing between and within individuals—yet those glimpses do seem to be enough that symbolic representations of that reality can be useful, pleasurable, indeed indispensable for survival and flourishing.

⁵⁸⁷ Kagan, *Three Cultures*, 252.

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