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READING IN THE DARK: MODERNISM AND THE ABSENCE OF GOD

by

GREGORY ERICKSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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by

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The innovations and difficulties of modernist artistic texts have often been interpreted as a reaction to the reported death or perceived absence of God. But God did not totally disappear from modernist texts, and indeed can be found inscribed and disguised within their very structures and ideologies. My dissertation reexamines several high modernist works by engaging with recent theories of “negative theology” to interpret this absent/present God.

Although God and religion, like traditional literary criticism and theory, are generally regarded as forces against chaos, negative theology (ancient, medieval, and postmodern) reveals the disruptive side of the God-idea. I locate modernism’s “atheology”—a position between atheism and theology—as a force of disjunction. Modernism’s replacements for God, although they often attempt to control or totalize complex and fragmented texts, also contain this negation and become forces of rupture. These (a)theological ruptures can be found in a paradoxical need for absolute knowledge and a subjective doubt in its possibility, the textual tension between unity and fragmentation, and a contradictory belief and distrust in traditional logical syntax.

By defining theological forms of negation from the medieval Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius through Hegel, and then examining postmodern negative theology, I show how modernism's relationship to the divine can be positioned between a determinate god and an indeterminate god. This contradictory god is expressed by recent theorists like Jacques Derrida—his god is a totalizing interpretive force of logocentric unity in *Of Grammatology* and a radical openness towards impossibility in later works such as *The Gift of Death*—but is also found embedded in imaginative works of the early 20th century, producing a tension between an onto-determinate theology and a negative-indeterminate atheology. My project examines how these negative and contradictory god-ideas manifest themselves in the subversive metaphorical structures of a Henry James novel, in the art and music of Marcel Proust's writings, in the development of atonality and the twelve-tone row in the music and essays of Arnold Schoenberg, and in the disruptive, divine, and repressed presence of the literary vampire throughout the 20th century.

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A long time ago, in my first year in the program at the Graduate Center, I took a class on James, Proust, and Woolf with Mary Ann Caws and a course on Biblical Narrative with David Richter. As almost an afterthought to both classes, I wrote a short five page “improvisation” on the Golden Bowl and negative theology, and I started a paper on deconstruction, atheism, and theology. My remaining years in the program have been my attempt to work out and combine ideas that began in those two short projects. This dissertation is one result.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Portraits and Frames

"Whither is God?" he cried: "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?"

F. Nietzsche (*Gay Science* 125)

One morning in 1917, in La Rochelle, I was waiting for some school friends who were to accompany me to the lycee. They were late. After a while I found myself at a loss as to how to amuse myself. I decided to think about the Almighty. He instantly toppled out of the sky and disappeared without leaving any word or explanation. "He doesn't exist," I said to myself with polite surprise, and thought the matter settled.

Jean-Paul Sartre (*The Words* 210)

The news of the death of God cannot really reach our ears until its reverberations are traced in the notions of self, history and book. The echoes of the death of God can be heard in the disappearance of the self, the end of history, and the closure of the book.

Mark C. Taylor (*Erring* 7)

Frame I: "Whatever"

An introduction, of course, is never an introduction, can never be written first. Like Hegel's famous preface, it "announces a project and a project is nothing until it is realized" (Hyppolite 4). One always "returns" to the beginning, not knowing how to begin and having already begun.

And the end of our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And to know the place for the first time. (Eliot 222)

This project, then, begins without beginning, and without knowing how to begin. To introduce "modernism and the absence of God" by rehearsing a chronological history of a divine absence I could begin with Nietzsche and his death of God. But this is already problematic, for it was Hegel who perhaps introduced to philosophy the thought that

“God himself is dead” (*Lectures Vol. III* 219). The problem with beginning with Hegel is that we should perhaps really start with Meister Eckhart in the 12th century or Pseudo-Dionysius in the 6th and a “negative theology” (*via negativa*), which introduced the idea of God as negation or God as “nothing.” “I pray to God to rid me of God,” wrote Eckhart, and Eckhart and Dionysius’s negative theology presented, within a Christian framework, a being beyond being that could not be given a name or even said to exist. Yet negative theology, as some have suggested, can also be located in Paul’s letters where Jesus “empties himself” or makes himself “nothing” (Philippians. 2:7), or in Plato’s idea of the *Khora*,¹ the negative space that precedes all existence or being. But a god who neither “is nor is not” perhaps preceded even Plato in an ancient legend of a mountain, a man named Moses, and a burning bush that doesn’t seem able (or willing) to properly name or define him(it)self. We are now far from modernism.

If I travel forward in time, toward and past modernism, the “death of God” moves from Nietzsche to modernism to radical theologians, makes the cover of *Time Magazine*,² and then firmly establishes a position in Nietzsche-influenced postmodern theories of absence. Both popularly and academically, the various forms and theories of the death of God seem to represent major shifts in 20th century epistemology. But did they change how we think in some profound and lasting way? Did they change how we view and interpret the past? How did (do) they change how we view and read the movement in art and literature called modernism? My writing is of a particular intellectual time—a view from the turn of the 21st century of the first decades of the 20th. It represents a unique

¹ See Jacques Derrida’s “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” or Hent de Vries *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*.

² *Time Magazine* 22 October 1965.

intersection of theory, criticism, and literature that makes no grand claim of universal discovery, but an inquiry into a specific cultural moment.

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon shows God's giant finger writing "Whatever" on the wall as Biblically attired bystanders react with disappointment. In some ways this captures my position as well as any introductory paragraphs could. As the cartoon depicts, God and reading and writing are related; they always occur simultaneously. Yet what or how this takes place is necessarily an unanswerable question. Perhaps it is best then to say that this work begins with *difficulty*, a topic I will be addressing throughout. The difficulty of imagining God, or of imagining no God; the difficulty of reading modernism; the difficulty of late 20th century or early 21st century theory.

Portrait I: The God of Modernism

Modernism and Atheism

The early 20th century was obviously an explosive time of change across the liberal arts and the ideological roots of modernism are impossible to pinpoint. One can explain forms of modernism as explorations of the Freudian unconscious, responses to Frazer's anthropological ideas, visions influenced by modern technology, philosophical responses to the theory of relativity, or new expressions of a Marxist, Nietzschean, or Feuerbachian atheism. We still believe in God, said Nietzsche, because we still believe in grammar, but modernism questioned both of these statements. Do we still believe in God? Do we still believe in grammar? Can we recreate or eliminate either one?

The ambiguous beginning of modernism in the arts can be located at various moments and in various works: Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the 1910 post-

impressionist exhibit in London, the opening bassoon solo in Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," the furor over Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* at the Armory Show. As the art historian Barbara Rose says, "'This is what I see,' was replaced by 'this is what I think I see'" (qtd. in Hughes, 18). In an era that stressed doubt and the role of the subject, artists came to question the concepts of dualism, causality, and truth. Although clearly art of other periods has engaged in debate with these concepts, it was in modernism where these doubts manifested themselves at the level of grammar and syntax.

This experimentation broke with Edwardian, Romantic, and Victorian ideas of narrative, perspective, harmony, description, and time. However one defines modernism, its most obvious features are in its stylistic experimentation, and the new forms changed the relationship between the art and the person reading, listening, or viewing. Whether it was cubism, futurism, surrealism, imagism, musical atonality, or stream of consciousness narration, the various movements and techniques provided both new challenges and new agency to the perceiver. If, for example, the novels of John Dos Passos or the paintings of Joseph Stella portrayed a more intense experience of the new American city, it was the act of the reader or viewer engaging with the difficulty of the work that created this experience. The increased importance of subject in relation to object is affirmed by Ezra Pound, who quotes with approval a Russian critic who stated "you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some new particular thing" (qtd in Schneidau 269). Because modernism grows out of doubt—in God's existence, in artistic representation, in absolute knowledge—and because of the difficulty of its demanding syntax and complex

narratives, it is positioned as a rich but fierce battleground for theological and philosophical issues.

In the West, our idea of God—who he (it) is, how we relate to him (it)—has historically been (perhaps alongside economics) the most influential aspect of culture. What we write, read, and eat, how we acknowledge births and deaths, how we wage war or encourage peace, are all connected to our ideas of the divine. And although ideas about God have rarely remained stable, it has been primarily in the last two centuries that the doubt of his very existence has become an important and intellectually fashionable way to think.

In the early 1900's the Western world was experiencing radical ideological changes. Influenced by German Biblical interpretation, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, works of modernism challenged both stylistic and philosophical assumptions and belief. Most of the major figures that influenced modernist thought—Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Darwin—were often perceived as offering ideas to replace or dissolve religious ways of thinking. Although statements of doubt in traditional forms of religion and divinity proliferated throughout the 19th century, it was in the artists and thinkers of the early 20th century where this absence and doubt first manifested itself as a crisis that was reflected in the very production and perception of art. For Wallace Stevens, God was the “supreme poetic idea” and “in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations” (*Opus Posthumous* 186). For Marcel Duchamp, it was “mad foolishness to have made up the idea of God” (Cabanne 107). Like many modernists, Stevens and Duchamp felt it was time to create an art that would replace the old ideas of God and religion.

Influenced by enlightenment thinking about the subjectivity of time, knowledge, and God, much modernist art reflected these developing atheistic or agnostic epistemologies.

Freud represented the atheistic views of many modernist artists, writers, and thinkers. For Freud, religion was created out of guilt and remorse to give hope and consolation. In works such as *The Future of an Illusion*, God is essentially portrayed as a protective “Father” figure, formed out of the subconscious, and both religion and God are concepts that modern man should strive to outgrow. By the 1930’s, however, after *Civilization and its Discontents*, even Freud was questioning his conclusions. He realized that the irrationality of the super ego was perhaps insurmountable. Like Aron in Schoenberg’s opera, *Moses und Aron*, Freud felt that man needed certain illusions and he even considered the possibility that his views could be illusory.

But modernist atheism, whether Freudian or Nietzschean, was not the opposite of religious faith. Their atheism was what Jean-Luc Marion, in *God Without Being*, calls “regional” atheisms, or a disbelief in a specific and determinate concept of “God.” This determinate concept of God now seems a limited one, and as Hent de Vries says, it leaves an “infinite number of other concepts untouched” (57). Many thinkers now see modernist atheism as “[n]ot radical enough to reject completely the notions of center and centeredness” (Taylor, *Erring* 26). From this point of view, modernism’s limited atheism was consequently sublimated into their desire for certainty and order. So, although often atheist in orientation, modernism is still part of a Christian epistemology; it belongs to the same onto-theology it fights against. Modernist humanism retains the goal of moral progress toward some form of human perfection, and continues to believe in the march of history, the unified individual, the autonomous, ultimately coherent object of art, and a

belief in a single discernable relationship between signifier and signified. All of these concepts can be linked to a Christian and theological orientation of reality, and a determinate unified god that makes stable meaning possible. Modernist atheism inverts the Judeo-Christian creator/creature relationship and transforms a God-centered theology into an human-centered anthropology based on these same forms of belief. "God" may disappear, but the belief in an autonomous self remains. The Bible may no longer contain the Word of God, but the "book" and the "work" are still determinate and determining concepts of closure. Modernist art, literature, and music, then, can be seen as ultimately affirming the underpinnings of traditional theology they often claimed to leave behind.

"God's real name was God."

One form of modernism's contradictory rejection of God is represented by James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The novel, published in 1916, is divided into five chapters, each of which can be seen as a struggle to come to terms with changing ideas of God and language. In the first section, a young Stephen Dedalus, discovering the confusing world of language, explores the gap between signifier and signified, asking and searching for something solid to attach the sounds of words to. He ponders the words "belt," ("That was a belt round his pocket. And belt was also to give a fellow a belt." [5]), "suck," and "kiss." He wonders what each one can possibly mean, and he questions the perplexing variety and gradations of definitions words can have. Joyce will develop each of these words into themes, exploring their different meanings throughout the novel. Stephen experiences "kiss," for example, as a kiss from a

prostitute, a kiss from his mother, and the feel of the Host on his tongue. Finally, Stephen explores the word “God.”

God was God’s name just as his name was Stephen. *Dieu* was the French for God and that was God’s name too; and when anyone prayed to god and said *Dieu* then God knew at once that it was a French person that was praying. But though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in their different languages still God remained always the same God and God’s real name was God. (13)

Stephen’s search for a definition is also a search for the God who stabilizes meaning. Stephen and the novel are tentatively expressing modernism’s distrust of inherited language and religious traditions, a distrust that will increase throughout the novel and into *Ulysses*. For young Stephen, God is the only force that can bridge the gap between the signifier and signified. He believes that nothing means anything *real* except for God who, despite different names, has a “real name.” God alone can assure true linguistic *presence*; for Stephen he is the transcendental signifier.

Although Stephen’s first prayer is “addressed neither to God nor saint” (92), he later, after attending a religious retreat focusing on the eschatological, turns his guilty conscious over to God: “It was true. God was almighty” (134). He prays desperately for forgiveness, goes hungrily to offer his confession, and plans a pious life. Stephen briefly considers becoming a Jesuit priest, but, in the famous “epiphany” scene of watching the “bird girl” wade in the water, he feels the call to art instead. By the end of the novel Stephen admits to losing his faith and defiantly will not “poison” himself by paying

“false homage to a symbol behind which are massed twenty centuries of authority and veneration” (265).

Although Stephen ultimately rejects the church’s God, he replaces him with an artistic creator god who “like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (233). This god is the god of the modernist artist. Like many modernist thinkers, Joyce and his Stephen replace one center with another without disturbing the base of the scaffolding. No longer does it/he have a “real name,” but still a divine creative force looms over his creation and controls through his linguistic presence. Stephen’s quest for a controlled stable text, is also, in a sense, the reader’s and both are theological quests conducted in the absence of a determinate god. This determinate god of presence and unity can also be seen in the older Stephen’s aesthetic theories, where he proclaims that one must “apprehend the [aesthetic image] as one thing. You see it as one whole” (230). Again, like his younger self, Stephen locates a force to check the endless chain of differed meaning and substitute representation. This god, without the name of God, manifests its monotheistic presence as a singleness of vision and a faith in a coherent and unified text. Stephen, who at the end of the novel is leaving for the continent, like Joyce himself does not escape Ireland, but takes it with him and recreates it in his art. Modernism, like Joyce, does not escape God, but brings him along as well, recreated but recognizable in their texts.

Philosophical Roots

To read modernism through the lens of postmodernism's rearticulation of negative theology requires an awareness of the continental philosophical tradition that is in the background. Ways of thinking about God in the 20th century—in modernism, theology, and literary theory—are formulated, at least in part, using elements of 19th century philosophy. However complex and varied critical and theoretical writing became in the second half of the 20th century, it has continued to engage in rereading and rewriting the 19th century philosophical traditions of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, for the most part against the grain of the original author's intentions and against earlier interpretations of their works. For our purposes, we will examine two directions in their thought that 20th and 21st century theorists and theologians have been especially drawn to. The first is how each of these philosophers was involved in creating new ways of interpreting or understanding what we mean by the word and concept "God." The second is ways that their works claim to position their thought outside of or at the end of the metaphysical and ontotheological traditions in philosophy.

The "Death of God," as it has been developed through modernism, existentialism, atheism, and theology is read through and around the work of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Primarily associated with Nietzsche, for whom it was a central point throughout his writings, the death of God begins with Hegel, who has been labeled the "first and most important *modern* death of God philosopher" (Taylor, *About Religion* 33). Although, as Charles Taylor points out, "no serious philosopher currently accepts Hegel's central ontological thesis, that the universe is posited by a Spirit whose essence is rational necessity" (538), interest in Hegel has continued to increase throughout the 20th century

and into the 21st. Derrida maintains that “we will never be done reading or rereading Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point” (*Positions* 77), and for many commentators, the work of much of late 20th century continental philosophy can be best understood as an extended responses to and critique of Hegelian philosophy.

Hegel’s importance throughout the 20th century has been an appropriately dialectical and agonistic one, often playing the role of the “other” against which 20th century movements in philosophy have reacted. Because of his desire to find an absolute, final, and closed system explaining all knowledge, Hegel and his totalizing propensities are often seen to “represents the position that critics feel compelled to negate” (Taylor, *About Religion* 2). Despite this resistance, other aspects of Hegel’s thought continue to influence contemporary thought. Building in a large part on Alexandre Kojève’s readings of Hegel, French and continental philosophers and theorists since the middle of the 20th century have consistently read Hegel into their own philosophy. Kojève’s influence was to emphasize Hegel’s themes of negation, the end of history, and the disappearance of man, all themes that have deeply occupied later thinkers. For Derrida, Hegel represents “the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing” (*Grammatology* 26), and these aspect of his thought make him central to many of the theologians, theorists, and writers throughout this work.

Although the increased interest in Hegel has resulted in a new interest in some of his lesser read works such as his early theological writings and his later *Lectures on Religion*, his most influential work continues to be his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The *Phenomenology of Spirit*’s basic goal, to lead the intellect to a realization of how it comes

to process and possess knowledge, seems simple if ambitious. Essentially, the “phenomena” being examined is the phenomenon of knowing. Hegel’s interest is not in *what* we know but *how* we know. What happens in the process of coming to *know* something? Hegel’s focus throughout his work is on the complexities of perception as they affect the perceiver or subject rather than the object of knowledge. But to maintain this separation between subject and object becomes impossible, and where Hegel’s project truly becomes difficult is the realization that the “activity of thought in determining the object is indistinguishable from the activity in determining itself” (Lauer 47). Hegel’s whole process in the *Phenomenology* “if followed out thoughtfully, will be seen to depend more and more on the subjective activity of the knower, the thinker” (Lauer 55).

Hegel’s labyrinthian path that he develops in the *Phenomenology*, one that he insists is the only route to understanding, adds layer upon layer of complexity, basically continuing to tell us that what we think we think we know when we know we don’t know. This question of *knowing* is central to 20th century art and theory. Modernists, through cubist painting, atonal harmony, and fragmented narration, will redefine how we perceive, complicating the conceptual areas of time, space, and perspective. Later 20th century thinkers will increasingly claim the impossibility of knowledge. Although Hegel’s grand conclusion claims the possibility of absolute knowledge, for modern thinkers, his process casts his own conclusions in doubt, and contemporary focus is on his complex dialectical progression rather than his spiritual conclusion.

The certainty of knowledge is ultimately a question of faith and a theological issue, and Hegel’s conclusion rests upon his theology. Hegel is “engaged in tracing

phenomenologically the development of human consciousness to which, he is convinced, the development of religious consciousness integrally belongs” (Lauer 263). Despite his conclusion, however, his conflation of subject and object throughout raises the question of whether his process leads to a divinization of the human or a humanization of the divine. Quentin Lauer and others³ have pointed to some of the difficulties and contradictions in Hegel’s teleological path to the Absolute. For Lauer, although “human knowing is authentic only as a finite manifestation of infinite divine knowing. . . [t]he divine and the human (God and man) are not identical, but the thoroughgoing consciousness of one is the thoroughgoing consciousness of the other” (20). Lauer also points out that Hegel’s synthesis in the absolute leaves the possibility of an additional and alternative step that may go beyond God: “Whether, when it reaches the ultimate in self consciousness, human consciousness will cease to be religious remains to be seen” (Lauer 275).

Although Hegel’s language and ideas are rooted in Christianity and although he suggests that his entire philosophy is an extended ontological proof of God’s existence (appendix to *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*), later atheistic philosophers often found the roots of their thinking in Hegel. In Hegel’s theories of phenomenology the subject is necessary for the object and therefore lead to the conclusion that without the world of man, God is not God. Following this logic and reading against Hegel’s final conclusions, Robert Solomon finds an atheist: “[Hegel] was not the great abstract thinker of Christianity at all, but rather the precursor of atheistic humanism in German philosophy” (57). Solomon concludes that Hegel “formulated the very doctrines which would soon bring Christianity to its knees (57). “Where the New Testament Golgotha

³ See, for example, Jean Hyppolite, Robert Solomen, and Mark C. Taylor.

murders a man returning him to God, Hegel's Golgotha murders God and returns him to man" (59). Hegel's Christian reading of this negation of God in his own thought is that although "negation itself is found in God . . . a reversal takes place: God, that is to say, maintains himself in this process, and the latter is only the death of death. God rises again to life, and thus things are reversed" (3: *Lectures* 323). This emphasis on meaning in negation is a touchstone of 20th century thought and it is easy to see why postmodern minded Christian theologians have been attracted to Hegel.

Hegel is an important figure in almost all of Mark Taylor's arguments, who stresses the "continuing relevance of Hegel's religio-philosophical vision" (*About Religion* 2), in his "postmodern a/theology." Although Taylor acknowledges that for Hegel, God is completely and absolutely knowable, and represents a complete concept that is both an epistemological structure and an ontological ground, Taylor sees Hegel as a (post)modern death-of-God theologian because his philosophy ultimately *negates* all divine otherness and brings God into the realm of human speculative thinking.

Any conclusion about Hegel invites (participating in his own system) negation and reversal of any conclusion. Although he is often criticized for the idea that his system (the "end of philosophy" as he thought) could lead to a totalizing "absolute knowledge," Hegel always provides a means for his own subversion. The process of *reading* Hegel doesn't, to our modern sensibilities always support his ultimate conclusions. And, as philosophers since Kierkegaard have discovered, to negate Hegel can serve to confirm his dialectic. If we allow ourselves to doubt Hegel's absolute conclusions, then his methodologies provide the model to subvert his own ideas. For Taylor, the "god whose existence Hegel's system supposedly demonstrates is not a

transcendent center of creative self-conscious but the immanent structural ground of the cosmohistorical process, which gradually becomes self-conscious in the course of its own development” (*About Religion* 34). This is the Hegelian God that is open to postmodern reinterpretation, a task that Taylor and others accomplish through a reading of Kierkegaard. For Taylor, any complete closed system excludes something, and Kierkegaard is the philosopher who offers a corrective to Hegel (*About Religion* 36). Other thinkers, as well, have located the roots of postmodernism in the combined thought of Hegel and Kierkegaard, using Hegel’s dialectical methods and Kierkegaard’s critiques of reason.⁴

For Hegel, God is *the* Concept; for Kierkegaard, who spent his writing life refuting Hegel, God must *resist* conceptuality and *escape* categorization. Christianity, for Kierkegaard, is thoroughly ineffable and cannot be experienced rationally. We cannot believe through reason, but only by *virtue of the absurd*. Kierkegaard’s concept of God, as well, defies reason; God is “infinitely and qualitatively different.” His God is an “Absolute Paradox,” where, unlike Hegel, the divine and the human are not one and cannot even be connected, but are instead separated by a terrifying abyss. God, for Kierkegaard is impossible to contain, totalize, or understand. Kierkegaard’s “God” is a “name” that substitutes for “the Unknown,” that is forever unknowable. “What then is the Unknown? It is the boundary to which reason repeatedly comes . . . it is the different, the absolutely different” (*Philosophical Fragments* 55). Kierkegaard’s God is beyond or at the limit-point of knowledge, unreadable by reason.

⁴ Twentieth century theology’s path to the postmodern, for example, can be defined by the debate between Karl Barth, who resurrected much of Kierkegaard’s thought in his influential reading of Paul’s letters, and Altizer’s “Christian Atheism,” which was heavily Hegelian.

Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms places as many as four or five different *personae* into a philosophical work, forcing the reader to carve out positions arrived at by the conflict between viewpoints, rather than following the argument of a single voice. This essentially literary, and modernist, technique of using multiple voices prohibits the reader possessions of his texts, which mirrors Kierkegaard's ideas of the perception of the Christian Divinity.

While philosophers like Hegel questioned reason and Kierkegaard rebelled against it, Nietzsche's philosophy subverts both reason and ground. Nietzsche's critique of ground played out as his critiquing the theological ground of the metaphysical tradition, and Nietzsche's philosophy aims to "erase the theology inscribed within Kant's transcendental critique" (Hart, *Trespass of the Sign* 73). Nietzsche's characterization of the metaphysical tradition as onto-theological, as inheriting its ground from a faith-based theology, is picked up by major 20th century thinkers from Heidegger to Jean-Luc Nancy.

Nietzsche focuses much of his writing on how philosophers have been "tyrannized by logic." In language and terms that both Kierkegaard and Derrida could agree with, Nietzsche breaks down and destructs what centuries of philosophers have accepted as rational. For Nietzsche, philosophers had been historically under the influence of the "prejudice of reason," and have believed in the "fictions" of "unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, being" (*Twilight* III: 5). Nietzsche's solution is for the philosopher to step away from, outside of, all these ways of thinking, including, of course, religion and God. Yet he realizes that so much has been "built upon this faith, propped up by it," that its denial produces consequences beyond "capacity for comprehension" (*Gay Science* 343). Nietzsche's madman, we should remember, not only

proclaimed that “God is dead,” and that “we have killed him,” but also admitted that he was desperately searching *for* God (*Gay Science* 125).

Nietzsche’s attacks on religion and Christianity are familiar. His view was that God was thought to exist only because people needed him to: “How many still reason: ‘Life would be unbearable if there were no God . . . consequently there must be a God!’” (*Dawn* 90). Postmodern critiques of Nietzsche argue that many of his statements about religion involve the assumption that he can somehow step outside of Western theological traditions. As David Allison says, “Nietzsche is himself fully bounded by the tradition he so strongly attacks—i.e. by what has now come to be called the language and thought of onto-theology, what Nietzsche himself simply called God” (xx). Furthermore his writings on the “God-hypothesis” are concerned in most part with the existence of a transcendent and determinate deity, which is limiting in the same way that modernism’s “regional” atheism is.

In Allison’s influential collection, *The New Nietzsche*, essays by Heidegger, Deleuze, Blanchot, Altizer, Derrida, and others helped change the direction of Nietzsche scholarship, often by re-reading the death of God to take into account recent postmodern and continental thought. Alphonso Lingis, for example, interprets Nietzsche’s “death of God” as destroying the idea of Being that “is not a ground, but an abyss, chaos . . . a quite new, nonmetaphysical or transmetaphysical understanding of beings, of things” (38). Lingis pushes his reading further than most previous interpreters: “the ground is not identity, the One, but original difference” (40). Other essays in the collection, most appearing in English for the first time, recast Nietzsche’s death of God in equally

challenging terms. Maurice Blanchot reinterprets Nietzsche's famous pronouncement about God.

God is dead. God: this means God, but also everything that, in rapid succession, has tried to take its place—e.g., the ideal, consciousness, reason, the certainty of progress, the happiness of the masses, culture, etc. . . . [T]here is nothing man can rely on, nothing of any value other than the meaning given to it in an endless process (121).

Like Derrida's phrase "God, for example," Blanchot's passage places God into an endless line of substitution. The examples Blanchot gives—reason, certainty, ideals—are the God substitutes that modernism and Nietzsche can be found reverting to after their dismissal of a determinate god. Elsewhere Blanchot will give his own definition of God that stresses God's indeterminate nature: God is the "revelation of the word as the place in which men are held in a relationship with that which excludes all relationships" (*Space* 187).

As Nietzsche says, in regard to a belief in God, so much has been "built upon this faith, propped up by it," that its abandonment has consequences beyond our "capacity for comprehension" (*Gay Science* 343). These consequences, as read by Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille, Heidegger, and Derrida, and then, in a post-deconstructive vein by Mark Taylor, Kevin Hart, Hent de Vries, John Caputo, and Derrida, again, provide the context for my interrogation of the modernist God-idea.

God and Theory

Nietzsche says that “the waters of religion recede and leave behind morasses and shallow pools” (“Schopenhauer as Educator” 148; IV). Whether we see modernism wading through these shallow pools, merely muddying the soles of their shoes, or if we see it stuck struggling in the mire, depends on where we locate ourselves. Have these shallow pools all but evaporated? Or is the God-idea so firmly entrenched in the Western consciousness that a mere century or so of disbelief can’t begin to shake its foundations? As theories of atheism and the death of God worked their way through philosophy, literature, criticism, and theology, how did they change how we read, wrote, created art, and listened to music? Conferences and books now often claim to offer a “vantage point” from which to view the 20th century, but if the last century had a lesson, it is the difficulty of locating a point “outside” from which to view anything. Religious and theological thinking, ingrained in the very roots of our metaphysics are, perhaps more than any other cultural creations, impossible to step outside of. But paradoxically (and this is my project), methodologies borrowed from theological thinking perhaps give us tools we need to attempt such a step.

Theologians (both contemporary and ancient) have often pointed to a God beyond our comprehension, to concepts created by and yet outside of language, and to the irrational nature of belief. Modern radical theological thinkers, like Mark Taylor, point to the “death of God” as a crisis that has changed (or must change) our sense of history, identity, and writing. Each of these elements is intertwined with creating and perceiving art, and our understanding of time, plot, narrative, and the object of art. Early 20th century modernist literature, art, and music portray the struggle with these

epistemological shifts in the theological current and are ineffably caught in this web (which may or may not be dissolving) of history, identity, and art (or teleology, humanism, and writing), at the same time that they grapple with the idea of God's death or absence.

Although "modernism," was by no means a monolithic movement (modernisms is, of course the currently preferred term) many modernist works share a doubt in absolute certainty, and a conflict between unity and fragmentation, and between traditional and experimental forms of representation that can be examined through this theological lens. Modernist art and literature are, often despite themselves, part of a Christian tradition. Whether it is Stevens trying to find new ways to replace the dead metaphors of religion, Gertrude Stein and Arnold Schoenberg looking for new and less teleological artistic languages, or T.S. Eliot writing experimental forms of poetry and yet struggling to express older religious systems, modernism is found in the tension between continued Christian forms and forces influenced by newer theories of doubt and atheism.

Several recent works by major philosophers point to the ubiquity and inescapability of Christian ways of thinking in the West, even within the disbelief of the 20th century. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the "only current atheism is one that contemplates the reality of its Christian roots" (113).

Christianity is inescapable from for the West. . . . Although the de-Christianization of the West is far from being a hollow phrase, the more it takes hold and the more visible it becomes, the more we are bound within the very fabric of Christianity. (Nancy 115)

If, as Nancy says, “*all* our thinking, our very being is Christian through and through” (115), then, although the existence of the Christian God that we have created can be questioned, its theological significance to our thinking cannot. Since these theological paradigms exist both “in” the literature and “in” the interpretative methodologies created to interpret the literature, the very act of reading and critiquing acknowledges the theological. Modernism anticipates and leads to postmodernism, which in turn uses and reinterprets modernism, and yet both are formed out of conscious and unconscious Judeo-Christian ways of thinking. As readers, writers, and interpreters, both creators and created, we can feel trapped in a cycle; we are both contained and containing.

Although by the late 20th century thinkers often turned to different branches of “theory” as a way to escape traditional religiously grounded modes of thinking, they too can often be seen as unconsciously affirming much of what traditional theology does. The 20th century has, as Herbert Schneidau says, “typically congratulated itself on being liberated from theologization, while its very notions of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are, fairly obviously, covert theologizations” (249). For Mark Taylor, the very existence of most theory is questionable after the death of God: “[i]f the origin is unrecoverable, theory, as it has traditionally been understood, becomes as impossible as classical theology” (*About Religion* 79). In other words, although many fields in the liberal arts engaged with theory to help them escape the monotheistic and theologically determined thinking of previous centuries, their theoretical search for concepts such as unity just exchanged overt faith for covert belief. The underlying assumption of much theory is a belief in some *one* force (divine or theoretical) in and through which all understanding is possible. Taylor points out that even the word *theoria* is “embedded in a metaphors of vision and sight that is

inextricably bound to certain presuppositions of Western philosophy and theology.”

This mastered and controlled “gaze of theory,” suggests that despite its intentions, “belief and ideology were not left behind but merely changed their names” (*About Religion* 52).

If we accept the presence of Christian paradigms in what can be called a post-Christian world, one way to construct a literary theory is, not to replace systems of thought with new ones, which will then be domesticated by the existing structures, but to locate and revise current paradigms—to radicalize the theology that plays within the text and its interpretation. This process will look to dismantle and deconstruct the theological element in order to understand the “play of its pieces” (Nancy 121), and to find, in the margins and traces, in the metaphors, paradoxes, and non sequiturs, elements of the theological. This route is not exclusively one of literary interpretation and will necessarily also use the literary text to comment on theory and theology. Derrida has described his use of literature as an attempt to locate a non-philosophical site from which to question philosophy (“Deconstruction and the Other” 109). Although, as Derrida admits, this is ultimately impossible, we analogously need to search for a non-Christian site from which to question the religious presence in literature and literary theory. The difficulty or even impossibility of this quest is not a hindrance but a necessity. For Derrida, it is when a concept becomes impossible (forgiveness, confession, the gift, the secret, faith), that it finds a new starting point, when it becomes useful again, and, as we will see, the subject of the impossibility of knowledge participates in a theological process. In other words, the theological impossibility of the religious opens and reveals its own presence, however fragmented and secularized. Without actually being *theological* we can use radical, negative, or postmodern theology to discover gaps and

ruptures where we are not expecting them, and to question and rework our literary theory and criticism. Although the texts and passages may be familiar, by beginning with the theological we learn new ways to ask questions. All questions limit their answers, and postmodern theology can help us to rephrase our interrogations and to open new and fresh modes of inquiry.

The concept of “atheology” (or “a/theology”) as drawn by Georges Bataille and Mark Taylor probably represents this approach more accurately than “negative theology.” Negative theology, while it may no longer necessarily entail a desire for a “hyper essence” or a path to a transcendent experience, also is never completely rid of these associations. Atheology, while it means something different to Bataille and Taylor (hence the slash in Taylor’s spelling), always stands for a position between atheism and theology, between or outside of faith or disbelief. Rather than being opposed to theology, a postmodern atheology opposes ontotheology, it “remains stubbornly ‘ateleological’ and ‘aneschatological’” (Taylor, *Erring* 155).

Postmodern (a)theology problematizes many of the same issues that postmodern literary theory does. As Kevin Hart says, if the “concepts upon which classical discourse on God have been founded—‘origin,’ ‘end,’ ‘self-identity,’ are . . . shown to be incapable of providing such a foundation . . . theology is shown to founder upon its own foundations” (38). These concepts—origin, end, self-identity—are founding concepts of God and are the very ones that 20th century art, music, and literature has both questioned and relied upon. These tensions exist on both conscious and unconscious levels. To slightly rephrase Levi-Strauss, I will be trying to see “not how men think in theological terms, but how theology operates in men’s minds without their being aware of this fact”

(*The Raw and the Cooked* 4). If Christian ideology is always already a part of how we create and comment on art, regardless of our actual belief, and if the negative or *apophatic* aspects of theology has always been a (albeit often an unconscious or resisted) part of all forms of Western theology, then the movements of postmodern, negative, and mystical theology can help us to understand modernist imaginative creations and our theories of interpreting them.

Of course, looking back at modernism involves an attempt to locate our own vantage point. Where are we now? The end of religion? The “death of God?” The “return of religion?” “Post-Christian?” “Post-secular?” If late 20th century thought allowed god to creep back in through the cracks, and if the “return of religion” demands “new attention, new description, and new critique” (Tracy 177), then how does this change how we interpret secular texts? The “return of religion,” as Gianni Vattimo and others have labeled it, describes mostly a return of respectability to discussions of religion in philosophical discourse. This return of religion, as Derrida comments, is a surprise only to those who “naively” thought that other opposing systems such as “Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism” had to put an end to religious thinking (*Religion* 5). What, then, is the significance of the return?

This return of religion, most obvious in its academic manifestations in continental philosophy,⁵ is not a return to a confessional religion or a determinate God; although approaches vary, they do have in common using ideas based in religious traditions and demonstrating how these ideas have remained a part of our language and perception. The rise of postmodern theology, post-secularism, and philosophical discourse on religion

⁵ An issue explored in many recent books, for example *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*.

raises important questions for literary theory. What connections are there between the emerging postmodern theology and the various manifestations of postmodern literary theory? Is literary theory necessarily theological? Is postmodernism necessarily theological? Can theology be secular?

My methodology neither assumes nor depends on either faith or disbelief by author, critic, or reader. Although Hart sees “theology without a firm basis in faith” as “arid, pointless, and ultimately dangerous” (*Trespass* xxxii), my use of theology does not come from a position of faith. I see the negative and the affirmative aspects of theology in both secular literature and hermeneutics, and I see the role of the absent/present God as rendering actual belief essentially beside the point. Nor am I connecting literature to religious language (comparing the language of the King James Bible to *Moby Dick*) nor to religious models of narrative (Augustine’s *Confessions* to *Robinson Crusoe*). And while certain modernist writers like Kafka and Borges lend themselves to a theological reading, I will primarily examine writers who do not. If, as is my point, theological ways of thinking are *re-created* within modernist’s atheism by a desire for an absent God, then it will be more convincing to see how texts create theological spaces and fragments in seemingly secular terms.

Chapter Overview

Each of my chapters examines ways that manifestations of God act “within” texts of modernism, and are also a part of our interpretation of them. I will look at God as a figure of presence and absence, as an urge to totalize, as the limit point of knowledge, as “wholly other,” and as “absolute interruption,” to see how these forces play out

(epistemologically, ontologically, metaphorically) in texts. I will demonstrate the inherent paradoxes of an atheological interpretation, that the God-idea makes knowledge possible and impossible, and that both modernist literature and postmodern thought are contained within this same space. A space created simultaneously by us—by our belief and artistic creation of God—by God, by our disbelief in God, and by our need to believe.

Chapter two develops the themes and methodological ideas that I will be using throughout this work. By focusing on four texts—the Book of Exodus, Pseudo-Dionysius’s *The Divine Names*, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Jacques Derrida’s essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”—I demonstrate the contradictory nature of discourse about God and the God-idea as we find them in these text’s discussions of the name of God, negative theology, and concepts of the author and of “writing.” Each of these texts is based around a search for a definition of “God,” and tries to articulate the significance of their definitions. In all of these works, I point to the tension *between* two ideas of god—a determinate God and an indeterminate God—and concentrate on tropes of negativity, as well as various ways of relating negative theology to theories of language and art. This tension, as I will demonstrate in my readings of James, Proust, Schoenberg, and others, is the key to understanding the relationship of many modernist texts to the idea of God.

Chapter three is a reading of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* within some of the contexts that have been traced out, especially seeing the novel as a work of negative theology or atheology. *The Golden Bowl*, chronologically poised on the edge of modernism, filled with sacrifice, loss, and mystery, provides an ideal starting point for

our investigation. By concentrating on the difficulty and ambiguity of the novel and then locating them in the development of the metaphor of the bowl and the concept of “nothing,” I show how they form a web of competing and contradictory god-ideas. The bowl—as an object, as a title, and as a metaphor of containment, emptiness, and fracture—suggests the god-idea in its moves towards completion, destruction, manifestation and contradiction. As the governing metaphor of the novel, the bowl encircles readers and characters, and both reader and character search for something beyond negation. The bowl is a symbol of absolute grounding and the destroyer of knowledge, a test of faith and evidence of doubt.

The emptiness inside the bowl suggests the word and concept of nothing, which is a constant touchstone of the novel. “Nothing,” like the empty and cracked bowl, forces questions of the possibility and impossibility of knowledge, questions which the novel forces into the theological. The metaphorical structure and the dark and negative side of theology in the novel explored through the contexts of the nothing and silence they produce, help us open larger questions that will resonate throughout my remaining chapters.

The structure of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* suggests a religious or Christian model in its teleological progression to an epiphany and in the grace-like descent of the mysterious “involuntary memory.” For the narrator of the novel, art functions as a form of religion that can lead him to salvation. Chapter four begins with Proust’s development of the theme of art as religion or artist as the divine, ideas which are developed and demonstrated through the text’s oblique metaphors of God and religion. While Proust uses Christianity and Christian art as a model for the redeeming

experience of secular art, it is the negative and subversive element of Christianity that shapes his novel and artistic ideas. Proust's metaphorical images of religion—churches, steeples, stained glass, flowers, paintings, women—will ultimately work against the art/religion of the novel, as Christian art spills over into his godless world, violently testing limits and questioning perception.

If in *À la recherche*, art acts as religion, then music acts as God, both containing and initiating the narrator's thoughts and actions. In the second half of chapter four, I explore the novel's development of music and musical aesthetics. Proust's presentation of music, while it provides a model for the narrator's final epiphany, also creates a paradoxical god-idea that both suggests a unity and denies its possibility. By reading each of the scenes of musical perception, I will show how they follow similar patterns of perception, memory, and erotic association. I then read these patterns through the musicological binary of *absolute* versus *referential* music. The concept of absolute music whereby music can only refer to music is born out of an 18th and 19th century desire to locate an "Absolute" in art and music that *through* its abstraction achieves a more "pure" religious experience. In the novel, what the narrator learns through music is that, ironically, only when it becomes separate from the erotic associations of the outside world does it acquire a reality more true than nature. Only as absolute music—music without reference to any outside reality—does it become a guide that shows him how he can merge life and art. But as a god-idea, Proust's music is both determinate and indeterminate, and I conclude this chapter by demonstrating how the musical themes in the novel can also be read against the grain, and against the absolute.

Proust's contradictory exploration of the language of music speaks to the attitudes towards music in the early 20th century. The slow stretching and then dissolving of music's tonality reflects shifting views towards language and towards faith. Chapter five looks at the development of Arnold Schoenberg's early atonality and his later twelve-tone system, relating them to epistemological shifts of the early 20th century and to contemporary developments in poetry, specifically in the poems of William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. There are some clear parallels between the 20th century distrust of teleological narrative, the syntax of both poets, and Schoenberg's new method of composition. By examining the metaphorical resonance of two moments of "silence" in Schoenberg's compositional career, I demonstrate how the reworking of music's "grammar," first in free atonality and then in twelve-tone serialism, questions the concepts of unity, creator, and coherence in music and poetry.

Schoenberg's musical innovation and theorizing function as a spring board to a discussion of the modernist dilemma between fragmentation and unification, which we first saw in the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. After locating this tension in a vortex of poetry, theology, and philosophy, I point to its manifestation in Schoenberg's twelve-tone opera, *Moses und Aron*, where he translates what had been a modernist aesthetic crisis back into a theological debate. The opera brings questions of the image, the idea, and the ineffability of artistic language to the very edge of comprehension, when it leaves them in silence, contradicting and unresolved.

In the opera, Moses claims that God is unknowable, indescribable, and ultimately a mystery. Aron answers that this is not a God that people will accept, and that he must be representational in order to be real to anyone. This is a familiar argument that

resurrects the debate between Kierkegaard and Hegel. When Aron argues that Moses' mystical God and tablets of law are also just images, no better or worse than his Golden Calf, Moses, in the end, doubts his own creation and smashes the tablets, singing "O word, thou word that I lack." By reading both the opera and the history of twelve-tone analysis, I explore ways in which this opera develops these questions and ways in which it explores the gaps between meaning and communication—gaps that ultimately open up into postmodern questions for our 21st century. When we examine the opera in light of postmodern theological thought, Schoenberg's musical language, the analysis of atonal music, and the opera negate each other, denying interpretations, and creating layers of complexity and ambiguity that are finally godless and silent.

The God of Exodus and of Schoenberg's opera is a God of smoke and fire, a terrifying volcanic figure that humans dare not approach. This image, both Biblical and modernist, is a liminal figure that blurs the line between god and monster. My final chapter looks at the figure of the monster who represents a chaotic force of absolute interruption and divine rupture in much the way the indeterminate god functions. Gods and monsters are all indefinable spaces of difference and contradicting hermeneutical activity—an activity that traditional interpretation has tried to suppress. The appropriation of the God-idea into modernist texts, while it is often part of a move for stability through identifying the other, instead often manifests itself as the indeterminate god of disruption. Monsters, as a literal threat or a literary trope, define boundaries and demonstrate a need for stability, but ultimately are instead an atheological force of chaos or disruption in the texts.

In *Dracula*, the vampire acts as a figure of chaos and discontinuity who disrupts the concepts of life and death, human and divine, and mind and body. Although the vampire is depicted in the novel as antithetical to Christianity, the novel can be read to show Dracula and god as interchangeable and indistinguishable. *Dracula* presents “religion” in such a contradictory and subversive manner that to position the novel as Christian is to see the vampire not as opposed to Christianity, not as some pre-Christian evil force, but as a part of Christianity. By closely examining the novel’s subversive depictions of religion, religious symbols, insanity, women, and writing, this chapter portrays *Dracula*, published in 1897, as asking theological and aesthetic questions of boundaries, essentialism, and writing that will haunt the entire 20th century.

To examine the legacy of *Dracula*, I will then read two highly contrasting vampire texts from the 20th century: an almost forgotten text that claims to offer a “philosophy of the vampire,” and then a late 20th century popular culture phenomenon that offers a postmodern critique of earlier monster texts. Since part of the slipperiness of gods and monster is their inability to either exist or not exist, the 1928 book, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, by Montague Summers, who was both a Catholic priest and a believer in actual vampires, is a text that, while it appears to be outside of 20th century thought, actually can be seen as relevant to a postmodern monster theory that is rethinking ideas of fact and fiction. Summers’ book, his endless vampire anecdotes, and his mysterious personality are 20th century figures of disruption, questioning the boundaries between reality and fantasy, determinacy and indeterminacy, and monster and God.

The vampire's presence and evolution in 20th century popular culture from *Nosferatu* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reflect the movement of negation and absence that we see in the figures of high modernism, theology, and postmodernism. By focusing especially on *Buffy*, a recent television series (1997-2003), I offer a reading of both *Dracula* and modernist monsters from the point of view of the vampire in both postmodern and popular culture. *Buffy* revises the vampire mythology into a popular but postmodern narrative, dissolving the boundaries that *Dracula* blurred; the lines between God and monster, good and evil, author and text are completely absent.

Like the postmodern God, the monster always returns from the dead, changed but familiar, present and absent, to haunt our writing and reading, and my conclusion takes the idea of the monster forward into modern speculative science and back into Plato's idea of *Khora*. This space, on the edge of comprehension, postmodern and ancient, cosmic and mythic, existing between a determinate and indeterminate God-idea, can be seen as a never ending confrontation with the god-idea and the monsters of chaos.

Portrait II: "Good-bye you bastards."

Jean-Paul Sartre, as a late modernist author, an influential atheistic thinker, a philosopher of nothingness, and a theorist of phenomenology, touches on the various ideological worlds that define this project. We can find in his writings many of the questions—not quite modernist anymore, but not yet postmodern—that will concern us. In *La Nausée* he creates a protagonist struggling to write a biography. In a central scene, Antoine Roquentin wanders through a museum looking at portraits. He admires these powerful 19th century men—for their strength, for their bravery, their "right to

immortality” (83)—but something also sickens him. At first, they appear more solid in existence than he, but this impression fades. Finally, they lack any sense of reality to him: “under the brush, their countenances had been stripped of the mysterious weakness of men’s faces” (89). As he exits the gallery he addresses the portraits, “Farewell, beautiful lilies, elegant in your painted little sanctuaries . . . good-bye you bastards” (94). The very next day Roquentin gives up his project of writing a biography, convinced of his inability to complete the task. “How can I, who have not the strength to hold to my own past, hope to save the past of someone else?” (95). Roquentin’s experience in the museum has convinced him of the emptiness of portraiture, the impossibility of an idea of the self, and of the futility of attempting to give shape and form to any object through art, plastic or literary. Unlike Joyce’s Stephen, Sartre’s Roquentin loses the belief in both the autonomy of self and of art. And while Stephen sees history as “a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (*Ulysses* 34), Roquentin realizes that history is only a collection of randomly captured moments (146-48).

Roquentin’s dilemma is one that is central in the production and interpretation of 20th century art. Is any sort of autonomous representation—of oneself, of another, of history, of God—possible? What is this “mysterious weakness” that the brush (or the pen) cannot capture? Is the reason that Roquentin then abandons his biography due to a realization that there is something “mysterious” in any object that is impossible to capture in any art? Is the “weakness” in the work itself or in its perception? And is it possible to see the weakness as a cultural shift away from faith in representation?

If, as is often suggested, the “death of God” is partly responsible for the lack of confidence in representation, and if “God” stands for an indefinable entity, then is the

mysterious weakness a remnant of a God that art either still desires or reveals? What if Roquentin had been looking at Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Brancusi's non-representational portrait of Joyce (three straight vertical lines and a spiral)? Or Gertrude Stein's word "portraits" of Picasso and Matisse? Do they somehow "represent" in a way theologically more appropriate to our age? Or is the object, along with God (and the author), also dead? This relationship of disbelief to the death of the subject is also the theme of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, which opens "Where now? When now? Unquestioning, I, say I. Unbelieving" (3). Sartre and Beckett's novels, poised between the worlds we label modernist and postmodernist, both stare directly into what Sartre called a "God-shaped hole" in their acknowledging the presence of an absence, and the dilemmas this negation poses to a creator. But although their modernist sensibilities express the impossibility of mimetic or representational art, at the same time their postmodern emphasis on absence can be seen as opening gaps to allow something else in; to negate negation into an act of creation.

Frame II: Dissolving the Frame

While the modernist breaks from the tradition of a representational portrait, the postmodernist seems to reject the portrait altogether, questioning the idea of borders and difference that are necessary for the imagining of a subject. Viewing Van Gogh's famous painting of two shoes, Derrida asks, "how do we know it's a pair?" (*The Truth in Painting* 259), dissolving the perceived autonomy of the painting. But although the postmodern may appear to resist all stable meaning, sacred or profane, for some theologians the movement from abstract art to the "frameless" art of the late 20th century

can be seen as a move not away from, but towards the possibility of the religious or the theological. For Thomas Altizer, one of the major early figures in the “death of God theology,” postmodern art “dissolves the frame of the easel, passing into the world beyond it, and that world is a purely and totally anonymous world” (*Total Presence* 32-33). Altizer goes so far as to say that “total and immediate presence” can *only* be realized through 20th century art and literature. He reads Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, for example, as a religious text where there is “a presence in which the dark and negative passion of God becomes immediately at hand” (*History as Apocalypse* 254). In a similar interpretation, Mark Taylor writes of installation art that “does not reveal an alternative order but implies a nameless blank that repeatedly eludes the apprehensive subject” (*Notes* 103). For Taylor and Altizer, these representations of negativity offer hope of religious renewal or possibility at the same time, and in fact because, they deny a representation of God. Like much late 20th century theology they use postmodern art, modernist literature, continental philosophy, and earlier religious traditions such as negative theology and mysticism to develop complex and radical ideas about the role and place of God, even in his absence. It is on this complex interplay between 20th century theology and atheism, the creation and perception of modernist music, art, and literature, and new possibilities in literary and critical theory that my work will focus.

Chapter Two

Reading God/God Writing: The Irrational and Difficult Name

Reading God

The Divine Name

When the young Stephen Dedalus says “Dieu was the French for God and was God’s name too” (*Portrait* 13), he opens the possibility for an interpretation of God of which even the pun-conscious James Joyce seems not to have been aware. Young Stephen’s tentative exploration into the name of God provides both an entry point and a structuring principle for Joyce’s novel and for my critical methodology. A central theme in the work of philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Hent de Vries is that the very pronunciation of God’s name (in French) goes to the heart of God’s contradictory nature.¹ “Any *à dieu*, any toward-God, seems also—and at the same moment—an *adieu*, a bidding farewell to and taking leave of the God it had seemed to address or addressed in vain” (de Vries 70). *A dieu/adieu* points to the idea of God always containing a self-effacing or deconstructive element; it contains a desire for God, a dismissal of God, and also suggests a non-God. The god-idea, as represented by this formulation is inescapably present and represents a trope outside of traditional ideas of God.

Adieu accentuates the fact that every discourse, even the most secular, profane, negative, or nihilistic of utterances, directs and redirects itself unintentionally and unwittingly toward the alterity for which—historically, systematically, conceptually, and figuratively speaking—“God” is, perhaps and so far, the most proper name.” (de Vries 26)

¹ The idea of the *adieu* has been discussed in various other works as well, most notably in Derrida’s essay “Levinas and the *à dieu*.”

Although this counter movement, both towards and away from a performative speech that both creates and dissolves a divine being, feels characteristically postmodern, it also has been located as far back as a sixth century Christian mystic.

About 1300 years after a Palestinian author first wrote down an old fairy tale about a man, a woman, a snake, and an angry god in a garden, and 1300 years before Nietzsche declared that the gardener god was dead, this mystic, posing as the first century Christian, Dionysius, published a long treatise on the Biblical names for God. Pseudo-Dionysius, (his real name is unknown) and his theological treatises, *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*, have become touchstone texts for philosophers and theologians since Martin Heidegger, and he is a major figure in the renewed interest in negative theology or apophatics,² along with Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius.

The Divine Names interprets the various names the Bible gives to God: good, light, beautiful, God of gods, Lord of Lords, Holy of Holies, eternal, existent, Cause of the ages. Early in the work Pseudo-Dionysius presents an initial paradox: “and so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has all the names of everything that is” (56). For Pseudo-Dionysius, to give God any name is to fix his position and identify him in a way that denies his divinity. Yet while Pseudo-Dionysius shows the impossibility of giving a name or a description to God, he acknowledges the sacred authority and necessity of the Christian Bible, which gives these names to the divine. God’s multiple names, on the other hand, while they may realize different aspects of the divine, present a challenge to his unity. The Dionysian challenges to God’s unity and being and his dialectic that God is both knowable and unknowable,

both immanent and transcendent, are part of a long philosophical and theological tradition that has extended into our own time into the works of Heidegger and Derrida.

The Divine Names develops the complexities of a being beyond being, one who cannot be named and is beyond all language who nevertheless, in some ways, can only exist in and be created through an imperfect—and yet “sacred”—text, that he himself has authorized, inspired, or written. Pseudo-Dionysius realizes the difficulty of this position, yet insists that “we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed ” (49). One problem with this statement is the ambiguity of what it means to be “divinely revealed.” Are sacred scriptures divinely revealed to the authors and therefore divine in their essence, or does the divinity occur in the writing or reading of them? Does the divine exist in us or in the text?

Although he gives no definitive answer to this question, Pseudo-Dionysius often sees the divine coming from the text—an “enlightened beam of the sacred scripture” (50-51)—and nowhere else: “Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity” (50). Interpreting God as the “Source of all unity,” and thus the author of sacred scriptures, and yet defining him as “unknowing of what is beyond being . . . something beyond speech, mind, or being itself” (49), creates a paradoxical negative theology that anticipates much postmodern philosophy.

This divine “something” that both is and is not, as Pseudo-Dionysius develops it, is central to his whole epistemology and suggests very modern questions. For Pseudo-Dionysius, “if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent,

² Pseudo-Dionysius’s relevance for contemporary continental philosophy and critical thought in its critique of the metaphysics of being and presence has been written about by Hent de Vries, Jacques Derrida, Kevin

then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge” (53). If God, as the source of the Bible and Unity, can still only be known by the manner in which he cannot be known as he is described in his own sacred text, where does he reside? Or, if our only knowledge of God is Biblical, and yet God is totally beyond all knowledge, what is the Bible? Since the Bible is the paradigm of Western texts, the Book that defines all books, by extension we can ask, where and what are reading and interpretation?

While Pseudo-Dionysius credits God with being the source of all unity—a characterization close to one given later by atheistic French postmodernists—he also insists that the “one and triune must not be understood in any of our own typical senses” The logically contradictory idea of God as unity *and* differentiation is one of his main themes: “All the scriptural instances of unity and differentiation is a mystery beyond our mind’s ability to fathom and known only through revelation.” God, then, is the source of all unity, but not as we can understand it. To describe God in the “sort of language we must use about God” is to say that

He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. (109)

The overall structure of *The Divine Names* reveals the movement back and forth between unity and fragmentation and between negation and positivism. *The Divine Names* begins with a statement of negative theology, then turns to the positive, and then to the negative again in the conclusion. He announces at the beginning that the point of theology is to arrive at “a union superior to anything available to us by way of . . . discourse or of intellect” (49). Then, after attempting to demonstrate his points through the positive

Hart, Jean Luc-Marion, John Caputo and others.

discourse or intellect, his conclusion returns to the negative, stating that we must find our “way up through negations” (130). The reality of God, Dionysius seems to say, lies both towards and away from language and *between* knowing and unknowing. If God makes understanding possible, and if it is the very *idea* of God that makes us try to make texts cohere, conversely the God of *The Divine Names* is also precisely what does not cohere.³ The language *toward* God and *of* God must then partake in both a necessary negative *and* affirmative.

Theological interpretations throughout Western history have affirmed the paradox of Pseudo-Dionysius, sometimes looking to God to affirm unity, sometimes to deny it. In most cases, however, God has been interpreted in ways that stress his positive and determinate characteristics. Traditional interpretations have been based upon signs that have their ontological basis in God, and most thinkers, theologians, and critics, therefore, have tended to stress God’s unity. Since man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, God has represented an absence, and the aim of interpretation has been to recover the original “presence” lost in the Fall and the destruction of the Tower of Babel.

While clearly these theologically conditioned ideas of unity have been called into question by postmodern thought, we need to continually re-examine the unconscious motivations behind our interpretive methods, to sense how the traditional theological

³ A controversial mystic Jewish text, the *shiur qomah*, written about the same time as *The Divine Names*, portrays the same impossibility of defining or capturing God, although at first it seems to express an anthropomorphism that Pseudo-Dionysius is opposed to. On the surface it is a literal description of God, yet it is one in which even the cloak of God is unimaginable:

Such is the quality of the garment of the Creator

No eyes are able to behold it, neither the eyes of flesh and blood,

Nor the eyes of his servants.

Elsewhere the text literally gives the dimensions of god, but with such unimaginable numbers that God becomes impossible to imagine. Each finger of God stretches from one end of the earth to another. Paradoxically, by *putting* god in human terms, the text demonstrates the impossibility of *imagining* god in human terms (Carmi 199).

concepts still guide our ways of thinking. Most literary interpretation continues to look for reason and order beneath confusion, and for a development and realization of narrative. Psychoanalysis of our literary and cultural theories could see Christianity, not replaced by modernism or postmodernism, but repressed and functioning as an unconscious or buried “master narrative,” to use Jameson’s terminology. While this buried Christianity continues to function in how we think about language, plot, and knowledge, our readings of the *adieu/à dieu*, and of Joyce’s *Portrait* and Pseudo-Dionysius’s negative theology point to the complex, contradictory ways this subliminal theologizing of the name of God can function in modernist texts. Modernism, in its fragmented syntax and epistemological doubt was, in some ways, a radical new attempt to read the name of God.

“God”

But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14, NRSV)

From the ancient Hebrews to Pseudo-Dionysius and the Kabbalists, from James Joyce to Jacques Derrida, the name of God has continued to fascinate commentators and philosophers. The Biblical God’s first attempt at self-description and naming in Exodus 3:14 has been famously read in many contradictory ways. The Hebrew is *ehyeh* (“I am”), *ašer* (“who” or “that which”), *ehyeh* (“I am”). Etymologically the Hebrew suggests the cultic name for the god of Israel, YHWH, and is actually the third person form or “He causes to be.” The Hebrew is also ambiguous as to the tense of the verbs and it can be

translated “I am what I shall be,” or “I am what I am.” Modern theologians have often focused on the action-like qualities of the statement, preferring something like “I will be what I shall do.” But no translation gives a fixed answer. Is God naming himself or is he describing his character? In more contemporary terms, is God “reducing himself to a metaphysics of presence or rendering himself immune to it for good and all?” (Kearney, “The God” 155). Or is God’s answer performative, an act of negative theology that answers Moses’ question by not answering? By speaking, as Kierkegaard points out in *Fear and Trembling*, one loses one’s “singularity.” By entering the medium of language, the speaker is “translated” into the “universal” or “general” (113).⁴ Although Kierkegaard is writing of Abraham here and not God, he points to the necessity of God not speaking the answer, of not speaking his name.

In an essay entitled “The God Who May Be,” Richard Kearney interprets the God of Exodus in a way that denies knowability in any sense (negative or positive) and focuses on what he calls the “Monstrous” character of God (164). Kearney sees the tradition of naming God to fall either on the side of a positive metaphysics or a negative non-metaphysics, both which insist on an either/or definition, which he feels is too absolute. He cites Augustine as an example of a theologian who comes down squarely on the side of metaphysics. Augustine translates the name as *Que est, misit me advos* (*Confessions* XIII) or “Because he is IS,” as Kearney renders it. In a 20th century example of metaphysical naming, Martin Buber paraphrases the name “as the one who will always be there, so shall I be present in every time” (qtd. in Kearney 159). The opposite, or non-metaphysical, view is found in a contemporary theologian like Jean-Luc

⁴ This reading is also discussed in depth in Derrida’s essay “Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)” (*The Gift of Death* 59-62)

Marion who builds on Pseudo-Dionysius, Nietzsche, and Heidegger to interpret the God of Exodus as a “God without Being” or God as “pure gift.” Kearney compromises with previous positions by positing God as “neither being (onto-theology) nor non-being, but as something between the two, an eschatological promise that may be” (167). Kearney’s “God-who-may-be” is one of the newest in a line of philosophical-theological moves that attempts to locate the God-idea in ways that will retain their relevance for a postmodern age.

Contemporary names and definitions of God—as “wholly other,” “*tout autre*,” “Absolute Interruption,” or “*causa sui*,”—offer different viewpoints which shift the way one sees the surrounding world. Derrida will use “God, for example” (“How to Avoid Speaking” 110), placing the name as just one link in a chain of substitution that immediately moves it out of the realm of the divine. In discussing Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*, John Caputo, who wants there to be a God, also gives the faithless critic an opening for a secular/theological criticism: “Whether you believe in God or not . . . whether you give credence to biblical stories or not, the name of God as the name of the *tout autre* is a fundamental—a messianic—name and a *general structure of experience*” (*Tears and Prayers* 202, my emphasis). These different names and definitions reflect a struggle with the ontology of language and the epistemology of knowledge that directly relate to our relationship with literature. To name or define God (or to refuse to do so) is to make a statement about the nature of reality, the process of imagination, and the perception of texts. God is, after all, primarily a literary character and a construction of language, so each interpretation of his name is a reading of a literary text. The essential

question, “is God a ‘thing’ or a way of ‘doing something?’” by analogy asks, “is reading a ‘thing’ or a way of ‘doing something?’”

By redefining who or what God is or isn’t, whether theological, philosophical, or literary, thinkers and writers often try to create for themselves a language space that does not define or attempt to portray or capture a determinate God. As Marion says, we should attempt is to “think God without pretending to inscribe him or to describe him” (*God Without Being* 45). But in many ways this is a language and a discourse fighting against itself, and the leap from determinate to indeterminate, or to a God “without being,” is a treacherous one. Western language and literature comes out of a Judeo-Christian tradition: a tradition that emphasizes sacred texts, a language of presence, a monotheistic creator, a reader’s or author’s sense of self, a directional history, beginnings and endings, and clear cut borders delineating works of art. Can we use language to step outside of language? Does there exist a non-theological site of critical or artistic language? For Kevin Hart, “the vocabulary of the West is so thoroughly saturated in Christian themes and motifs that no discourse can proclaim itself not to be Christian in some of its effects without risk of embarrassment” (“Absolute Interruption” 192). This conflict, although there are glimpses of it in medieval mysticism, asserts itself in art and criticism’s existential crises in the 20th century, and is at the core of postmodern thought and theory.

Deconstructing Theology and Theological Deconstructions

I. Deconstruction and God

It is a classic move of Derridean deconstruction to demonstrate that the language used to critique something partakes in the language of that thing and therefore does not have a ground on which to base its argument. In *Writing and Difference*, for instance, Derrida demonstrates that Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, never actually achieves what it sets out to do because Foucault's language continually falls back into the discourse of rationality that he claims to step outside of. For Derrida, despite Foucault's stated effort to not write the "history of the language of reason" but the "repressed silence" of irrationality, of "*madness itself*" (x-xi), his efforts necessarily are based on "a logic, that is, an organized language" (*Writing and Difference* 35).⁵ Increasingly, the work of a critic has come to involve an awareness of these blind spots where one is grounded in the ideology and discourse of which one is speaking, and also endeavoring to find a place which, although, it cannot be "outside," at least flickers on the margins of the ground of one's subject. It is here where the work of postmodern theologians can assist us in reading the (a)theology of modernist texts. Although what I am broadly calling "postmodern theology" has its roots in medieval mysticism, Gnostic religions, and 19th century philosophy and skepticism, late 20th century theology truly becomes postmodern when it grapples with Derrida and his deconstruction. Influential works of postmodern theology in the early 1980's stem directly from the death-of-God theologians discovering, confronting, and reading Derrida's theories of deconstruction.

⁵ Commentators, like Christopher Norris, who see Derrida primarily within a philosophical tradition, see this as *the* most important theme of his early writings. Of course, many writers would also claim that the distinction between philosophy and the other humanities is no longer (or is once again) impossible to make.

Published in 1967 and translated into English in 1976, Derrida's *Of Grammatology* was the most influential text in the spread and rise of deconstruction and its incorporation into theology. Derrida's main thrust in *Of Grammatology* is to put into question the long metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy, a tradition of systems that he calls "logocentric." For Derrida, logocentrism always relies upon an origin of "truth" which can be traced back through the spoken word to the Word of God or the "transcendental signified." In *Of Grammatology*, the "book" is a theological and logocentric unit that can no longer be set apart from its surrounding context, and the "text" supercedes that book as the object of study. This leads Derrida to call optimistically for a mode of interpretation that famously is "no longer turned toward the origin," and "tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (*Writing* 292).

For Carl Raschke, deconstruction was "the dance of death upon the tomb of God" (28), and initially deconstruction was regarded as essentially antagonistic to religion and theology. Influential early explicators of deconstruction such as Gayatri Spivak and Jonathan Culler clearly determined that it was not theological and was indeed antithetical to religious thought: "This terrifying and exhilarating vertigo is not 'mystical' or 'theological'" (lxxviii), Spivak insisted in her introduction to *Grammatology*. And whether they condemned or tentatively acknowledged deconstruction, philosophical theologians agreed. For Edward Greenstein, applying deconstruction to theology "would deny any guarantor of a center . . . such as God, or any foundation of absolute knowledge, such as the mind of God" (53). As deconstruction moves into a second generation, however, its relationship to theology has changed.

While recognizing this aspect of deconstruction, theologians, beginning with influential works in the 1980's by Thomas Altizer (*Christian Atheism*), Mark Taylor (*Deconstructing Theology* and *Erring*) and Kevin Hart (*The Trespass of the Sign*), pushed the application of Derridean ideas to religion in previously unexplored directions. In much the same way that the Apostle Paul focused on the death of Christ to invent a new religion, they focused on the death of God to re-invent Christianity. Building on the "Death of God Theologians" that Time Magazine featured so famously in 1965 and on earlier "dialectical theologians," all of these theologians sought to mediate somehow between the God of Faith and revelation on the one hand and the absence and emptiness of God in modern consciousness on the other. Their methodologies and conclusions, however, differ considerably. Altizer sees in modernism and in the death of God a move towards a more transcendent God, one that can lead to a form of salvation in the present world. Hart looks to deconstruction to find a "non-metaphysical theology" that he sees as an essential movement within modern Christianity. Ultimately, for Hart, a purely non-metaphysical theology is shown to be impossible, but deconstruction allows a system in which the negative and the positive are always at play; God is never truly metaphysical or non-metaphysical, but necessarily both. In his groundbreaking work, *Erring*, Taylor develops what he calls an a/theological relationship of God and/as *writing*. For Taylor, "deconstruction is the hermeneutic of the death of God and the death of God is the (a)theology of Deconstruction" (*Deconstruction and Theology* xix). His attempt is nothing less than to create "a new opening for the religious imagination" (11).⁶ Each of

⁶ Taylor's work, especially in recent years, has developed in new directions that, while still marginally "religious," can not be classified as Christian or really even "theological."

these works, while using deconstruction, is doing so in a way that is unquestionably religious and Christian.

Derrida, of course, is himself Jewish, and there has certainly been a Jewish development in this area as well that draws the deconstruction/theology comparison in specifically Jewish terms. One aspect of the split between Christianity and Judaism can be seen in the terms of the history of literary criticism. Jewish tradition gave the concept of the divine text to Western Culture, and although the divine text is usually seen as a key to an ultimate reality, for Judaism, the key lies in both the contents of the book and its interpretations. In contrast to the Christian claim that they had a final interpretation and that the word was now literally God incarnate, Jewish interpretation is based on the principles of multiple meanings and endless interpretability. Jewish “interpretation—as opposed to incarnation—was the central divine act” (Handelman xiv). For Susan Handelman, “literary criticism has become a kind of substitute theology” (xiii), and she points to the theological roots of modern literary interpretation and the resurgence of the rabbinic hermeneutical model in modern literary theory. Her central thesis is that rabbinic “thought patterns and structures have been displaced and reemerged in secular thought” (xvi). As opposed to the Greek/Christian tendency to search for unity, to gather various meanings into a *one*, the “rabbinic tendency, by contrast, is towards differentiation, metaphorical, multiplicity, multiple meanings” (Handelman 33). In *Midrash and Literature*, Geoffrey Hartman also writes of the close relationship between Jewish Scripture and “literature” and between literary and rabbinical hermeneutics.

The problem we face, strangely enough, is not that we cannot define Scripture but that having gradually redefined fiction in the light of

Scripture we now find it hard to distinguish between them. We see both within a global definition of what textuality is; and the same merging occurs as we recover a knowledge of midrash, so that literary criticism and midrashic modes begin to blend into each other. (*Midrash and Literature* 12).

For both Hartman and Handelman, the structure and practice of traditional Jewish hermeneutics are useful and necessary in understanding contemporary and postmodern modes of literary criticism

Emmanuel Levinas, probably the most influential philosopher of “God” in the 20th century as well as a Talmudic scholar, also acknowledges that Jewish interpretation resembles contemporary modes of theory such as deconstruction (*Otherwise Than Being* 47-48). Like Handelman, he points to the split between Christianity and Judaism in terms of its relevance to understanding textuality. For Levinas, the “notion of the incarnation, of God made human, visible and palpable, is alien to the Jewish tradition. In Judaism, God is not incarnated but inscribed in the Jewish sacred texts” (Davis 106-7).

For Levinas, the Talmud is no less authoritative than the Bible, and, although primarily known as a philosopher, his Talmudic readings present a model of interpretation that touches on the relationship between postmodern theologies and literary criticism. In Levinas’s Talmudic reading, “contradictions, disagreements, and ambiguities do not appear as unwanted disturbances to be overcome” (Davis 108). In one example, Levinas cites a Talmudic story in which Moses is transported into the future to hear a lesson given by a Rabbi. Moses is disturbed because he cannot understand the lesson and then is further surprised when the Rabbi attributes the wisdom to a revelation

made to Moses himself on Mount Sinai. Levinas's point is that the story illustrates how the author does not understand the meaning nor control the interpretation of his own text (*Otherwise* 134).

Levinas suggests that Judaism lies close to atheism: "the destruction of the numinous concept of the sacred, entail the risk of atheism" (*Difficult Freedom* 15). Although Levinas justifies the special or sacred status of the religious texts he is working with, Levinas's arguments, as Colin Davis points out, could "potentially dislodge the Bible and the Talmud from their privileged position" (117). Levinas does not attribute "inspiration" to the presence of a determinate divine figure. Instead, for him, inspiration is the "excess of Saying over the Said," which is a feature of language that relates the inevitable failure of the Said to contain the Saying. In this theory Levinas goes along with theories of the death of the Book, "where meaning, immobilized in the characters, already tears the texture in which it is held" (*Otherwise* 110). But, as Davis asks, "if inspiration and the surplus of meaning are inherent in all language, how are the Bible and the Talmud different from any other text?" Levinas's only answer to this question is that the Holy Scripture contains "another secret" (*un autre secret*) or an "additional essence that purely literary texts have perhaps lost" (*Otherwise* 171).

Throughout his Talmudic readings, Levinas gives several guiding principles of interpretation that reflect the influence of Derrida's deconstructive thought. Within these texts a Bible citation is not to be regarded as an unquestionable authority, but as an invitation to the reader to explore the context of the quotation. One must, in interpreting exert extreme, even violent pressure on the text (Davis 111). Since nothing in the

Talmud is arbitrary, anything may be a legitimate subject for interpretations: unusual spellings, etymologies (even if questionable), and ambiguous syntax.

II. Différance and Negative Theology

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida offered a definition of God: “God is the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge” (92). Since much of *Grammatology* is about deconstructing pure and absolute knowledge, this can be seen as a denial of God. However, like all of Derrida’s definitions and concepts, his idea of God hardly remains stable. Whether it is “trace,” “*différance*,” or “God,” his “vocabulary is forever on the move” (Spivak lxxi); it reads against itself, erases itself, and is redefined. In Derrida’s later works, God can still be any totalizing force, but it can also be “that without which one would not know how to account for any negativity” (“How to Speak” 76-77). This is a statement that allows for more flux, and stresses indeterminacy over determinacy. And although Derrida still claims to be “rightfully described as an atheist” (*Circumfessions* 155-56), he has also said, “God exists because religions exists. Even if it doesn’t exist.”⁷

As has often been discussed,⁸ Derrida’s shifting terminology resembles the God of negative theology. An important term, whether trace, *différance*, or God, is “neither a concept nor even a name; it does not lend itself to a series of names, but calls for another syntax and exceeds even the order and the structure of predicative discourse. It ‘is’ not and does not say what it ‘is’” (“How to Speak” 74). This statement of ambiguous

⁷ Spoken in remarks at the conference “Circumfession: Religion and Postmodernism” at Villanova University, September 2001.

⁸ See Toby Foshay’s introduction in *Derrida and Negative Theology* for a review of the history of the discussion of negative theology and Derrida.

negation recalls Derrida's familiar neologism, *différance*, meaning simultaneously to differ, *differre* (Latin, meaning to disperse), and to defer. *Différance* was his most influential concept within deconstruction and presented serious challenges and questions for theology. "*Différance* makes. . . the theist worry about what we affirm when we affirm our God, even as it makes the atheist worry about what is denied when God is being denied" (Caputo, *Tears* 13). The mysterious non-presence of *différance* has many parallels with the god of negative theology, which are difficult to fully capture, because for both, to understand fully is in some sense to lose the concept. For Derrida, *différance* has neither existence nor essence. "It belongs to no category of being present or absent" (*Speech and Phenomena* 134). "There is no name for this; not even essence or Being—not even the name '*différance*,' which is not a name" (*Speech* 159). While it is impossible (by definition) to define difference, it functions as a negative force that is part of our perception of everything, denying positive knowledge and self-presence.

The similarity of Derridean *différance* and deconstruction to negative theology was noted early in his career. "Very early on I was accused of—rather than being congratulated for—resifting the procedures of negative theology" ("How to Speak" 74). In an early work, Derrida acknowledged that, "the detours, locution, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. . . . And yet those aspects of difference which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with

disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence. (*Margins of Philosophy* 6)

So Derrida, while noting basic similarities between deconstruction and negative theology, also points to a basic point of departure. Negative theology always seeks a God who exists-by-not-existing or hyper exists; the *différance* of deconstruction is not the God of negative theology. But Hart points out that Derrida is wrong to give this limited view (“restricted economy”) of negative theology and he places it instead in a “general economy.”

For Pseudo-Dionysius, negative theology is both within metaphysics, as a restricted economy, and outside it as a general economy. That is, negative theology plays a role within the phenomenon of positive theology but it also shows that positive theology is situated with regards to a radical negative theology which precedes it. In short, negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology. (*Trespass* 202-203)

Without adopting Hart’s theological stance of faith, Derrida seems to move toward this way of thinking in later essays. He still sees negative theology as a mode of thought that “privileges not only the indestructible unity of the word but the authority of the name,” and it still “seems to reserve beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, being beyond Being, some hyperessentiality (“How to Speak” 77). But he continues, in the same essay, to show the non-theological side of negative theology, saying that it increasingly has “come to designate a certain typical attitude toward language, and within it, in the act of definition or attribution, an attitude toward semantic or conceptual

determinism” (“How to Speak” 78). For Derrida, deconstruction is still not negative theology, but clearly the two have enough in common to reward efforts at comparison.

As theologians turned increasingly to Derrida to open new questions and ways of interpretation, Derrida has turned more to religious and theological themes, giving interpretations of the Bible, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, and other religious texts. Derrida’s later “religious” works have been seen, on the one hand, to demonstrate his “religious passion for the impossible” (Caputo, *Tears*), or, on the other hand, as a “desperate,” “idiosyncratic messianism” with “strange theological overtones” (Lilla 189). However one sees these works, there is no disputing their influence in theological circles (at the same time that his influence in literary studies has apparently declined).⁹

After years of dodging questions about the relationship of his thought to negative theology, in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, Derrida produced a series of works that spoke to this issue, although in true Derridean (and negative theological) style they do not directly address the questions. In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida both addresses the relationship of deconstruction to negative theology and performs an act of negative theology. The first part of the essay is “a massive act of not-speaking, of evading the topic, *la chose même*, in which Derrida avoids speaking of Jews and Arabs and, in so doing, of himself” (Caputo, *Tears* 27). The essay is performative throughout; as usual Derrida doesn’t just tell us something, but shows us as well. Even as he develops what seems to be a logical and structured argument—as he points convincingly to what

⁹ At the 2002 American Academy of Religion Conference there were eight panels devoted exclusively to Derrida, in addition to a featured event where Derrida was interviewed by John Caputo and Kevin Hart, and six panels presented by the Group for Theology and Continental Philosophy where his works were always

theological thinkers may have left out—he tells us what *he* is leaving out. “What of Jewish and Islamic thought in this regard?” (100), he asks, and then “to say *nothing*, once again, of the mysticisms or theologies in the Jewish, Islamic, or other traditions” (124).

What Derrida *does* do in the second part of this essay is to discuss different forms of negative theology: the negative theology of Plato, of Christian mystic theologians (primarily Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart), and of Heidegger. In Plato, Derrida locates “two movements or two tropics of negativity” (101). The first is toward the idea of the Good, the place, as Plato says, that is beyond being and essence. The *epekeina tes ousias*, or beyond being, is taken from Plato’s *Republic*. As Derrida sees it, although it “transcends presence or essence” (101), it is ultimately “not a non-being” (100). In other words, despite its negative appearance it is, in the end, affirmative.

The second and more radical movement of negativity Derrida finds in Plato’s idea of the *Khora*. *Khora*, or *Chora* (χώρα), is a concept of negative space taken from Plato’s *Timaeus*. The *Khora* is, in Derrida’s reading, “something that is neither a being nor a nothingness” (105). In *Khora*, Derrida finds a concept that does not even speak of the Good or of God—something that “beyond all given philosophemes, has nevertheless left its trace in language” (107). The *Khora* is “radically non-human and atheological” (106). Plato’s negative theology informs Derrida’s reading of Christian apophaticism where he focuses on the Christian negative theology that follows Plato’s dominant form and on the dangerous line where a deeper repressed negativity brings it closer to *Khora*.

In the third phase, Derrida looks at Heidegger and his placing Being under erasure by crossing it out as soon as he said it, a theme that Derrida first developed in *Of*

mentioned and often central. By contrast, the 2002 Modern Language Association conference had no panels with Derrida or deconstruction in the title.

Grammatology. Derrida also points out that Heidegger, like Plato, separates himself from faith (130). In expanding negative theology beyond just its Christian or even religious associations, Derrida opens it up into a more general and secular way of thinking. Derrida's negative theology becomes a way of reading texts and looking at language that realizes and uses the power of a theological vocabulary and framework for critical efforts.

Looking at Derrida's reading of Pseudo-Dionysius and negative theology can help to locate the role of negative theology in postmodern or deconstructive thought and move us toward using this in a construction of a theory of reading modernist texts. What Derrida calls attention to, and what is in common between his and Pseudo-Dionysius's writings, is the apophatic moment that follows and subverts the first, cataphatic (or positive) moment. They are both there from the start, always already existing, but only in concert with each other. To call something "God" is to lose God; to claim Being is lose Being. And, as always, this is not just a reversal. The apophatic moment is instantly and already accompanied by the cataphatic.

Derrida begins his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius with two steps (de Vries 87). He first acknowledges (admits, claims) a parallel between negative theology and deconstruction. Secondly he interprets the movement in negative theology toward (and away from) the "hyper" of hyperessentialism or hypertheology (*ὑπερούσιος* or *hyperousios* is Pseudo-Dionysius's word). This, by now familiar, movement toward and away from an impossible moment of onto-theological "Being" is the same as that expressed by the *à dieu* and *adieu*. As de Vries says, this movement revolves "around the letter *à* of the *à dieu* at least as much as around the *a* of *différance*" (91). The double

movement, another common theme of Derrida, is a widely interpreted aspect of his “religious” writings and concerns. While commentators disagree on the significance of this double movement in Derrida’s later writings,¹⁰ it takes on new importance when applied to reading and artistic perception. From the point of view of literary theory, this contradictory movement addresses both a relationship to the text and any possibility of reading it; can one read anything other than the abyss between reader and text?¹¹

Elsewhere, Derrida, credits negative theology as language that “casts suspicion on the very essence or possibility of language” (*On the Name* 48). For Caputo, “deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology—for the impossible” (*Tears* 3). De Vries offers an equally sympathetic but less theological interpretation of the relationship: “The relative indeterminacy of the ‘object’ and ‘objective’ makes the writings called deconstructive on the one hand, and the tradition of negative theology on the other, silent companions in the attempt to *establish new discursive forms and practices of philosophical and cultural analysis*” (38, emphasis mine). Each of these writers, coming out of different contexts,

¹⁰ In Chapter One of *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Hent de Vries contrasts Mikel Dufrenne and Jean-Luc Marion’s reading of theological aspects of Derrida’s later works, including this double movement within negative theology (44-64).

¹¹ In additional recent essays and books (“On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” “Faith and Knowledge,” *The Gift of Death*, *Circumfessions*, *On the Name*)) Derrida has addressed other religious themes: forgiveness, the gift, the secret, and confessions, and most significantly, the messianic, all of which address, always indirectly, issues of possibility and impossibility, of knowledge and perception, and the role of religious ideas within texts.

In recent years, works such as Taylor’s *About Religion*, John Caputo’s *The Tears and Prayers of Jacques Derrida*, Hent de Vries’s *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, and Richard Kearney’s *The God who May Be*, have opened new ways of thinking which take into account Derrida’s later more “religious” works while continuing to draw on the thought of earlier 20th century philosophers and writers such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, and Edmond Jabès. The most often cited theological commentator on Derrida’s late work, John Caputo, proposes seeing late Derrida as developing the structures of Christianity (Yet as “more Jewish than Christian”) in non-religious ways into a new “religion without religion” (*Tears*).

affirms a connection between negative theology and deconstruction's approaches to language and interpretation.

Derrida's reading of negative theology in Plato sets up a paradigm or type of doubling to be found throughout theological discourse; God will always pull in contradictory directions. Derrida first sees in Plato's *epekeina tes ousias* the negativity that theology has always relied upon—one that can be seen to point towards an affirmative, a hyperessentiality. The *Khora*, on the other hand, is a negative theology that presents us with an abyss, a black hole hiding within all interpretation. This dangerous negativity is always lurking—unsaid, unacknowledged—within the Christian form of the *via negativa*. Taylor comments on the “absolute crypt” resonance within Christianity and Derrida's reading of *Khora*: “The empty tomb can, however, be understood in at least two ways: as a sign of the reality of resurrection or as a sign of the impossibility of resurrection” (“nO nOt nO” 189). The *Khora* remains a dangerous repressed negativity that hides within Christian negative theology, finds its way into Heidegger's pseudo-theological texts, and survives in postmodern interpretations of modernist texts.

God Writing

In Exodus, after Moses shatters the first tablets of the law in anger, he ascends again, speaks to God, rewrites the tablets, returns to the people, and builds a tabernacle to protect and honor the tablets, also covered by an ark, a veil, and a cloud conjured up by God. More than almost any scene in Western literature, this one seems to proclaim the closure and enclosure of a piece of writing. God has spoken; the text is literally etched in

stone, framed, and divinely protected; the meaning is fixed. This is a Book with a capital 'B,' not the wandering text of postmodernism.

But is it? If we read carefully, we see that "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord" (24:4). What words? We don't know. And what did he write them on? It doesn't say. We assume he wrote them on the stone tablets, but then the Lord says to Moses, "I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction" (24:12). Later we are told the tablets were the "work of God, and the writing was the writing of God" (32:16). Did Moses or God do the writing? What constitutes "writing" here? Does it refer to the ideas, the words, or the actual physical handwriting? After the first set is destroyed, the second set of tablets are planned when the Lord tells Moses, "cut two tablets of stone like the former ones and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets" (34:1). But after speaking the laws the Lord tells Moses, "Write these words." And Moses "wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (34:27). Reading closely, the reader cannot know who wrote what, what was spoken and not written, how many sets of tablets there were, if they were identical, and what was written on them.¹²

Like Stephen writing a version of Joyce's *Portrait* with God remaining "behind his creation" the relationship of author/God is conflated in the Book of Exodus. In all of the Pentateuch, the only two figures who "write" are God himself and, more commonly, Moses. Moses is divinely ordered to produce texts and given authorization by speaking to God "face to face" (Exodus 33:11) or even "mouth to mouth" (Numbers 12:8). Moses shattering the Ten Commandments, like Henry James's Maggie and her shattered golden

bowl, discovers that the trace always remains. Writing and speech, God and human, presence and trace, are bound up in a text that is yet written “with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18).

At the end of Exodus, Moses, after delivering the tablets, speaks privately to the chiefs of the tribe:

Moses called out to them and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. Then all the Israelites came near and he instructed them concerning all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. (34:31-32)

This moment in the story—a point which Kabbalists have interpreted as Moses giving a theory of writing that would reveal the esoteric knowledge required to read the Torah—is a place where the text begins to unwind even further. What did Moses say to Aaron and the chiefs of Israel? Why did he speak just to *them*? Why is what he said not written down? Who is the narrator that is withholding the knowledge, teasing us with this secret? As Hélène Domon writes, “In the absence of this speech, anyone who read was doomed to write The absent, missing, elided speech opened within the tabular book (yet at its outside) the irreducible endlessness of writing” (118-119). From the beginning of the Book, from the moment God proclaims himself (or refuses to), from the first moment of God’s writing, we begin the endless wandering, the book is *text*. We are always already between writing and speech, and between God and text.

The movement and relationship between God and texts is a main theme in the work of Mark Taylor. For Taylor, the postmodern God *is* writing. If, as Taylor puts it,

¹² Historical criticism, of course, can explain these inconsistencies as the poor redacting or editing of two contradictory ancient sources. However, while this explains gaps and inconsistencies, it doesn’t change

“writing inscribes the disappearance of the Transcendental Signified” (*Erring* 105), and if the “disappearance of the Transcendental Signified creates the possibility of writing” (*Erring* 108), then “God” *becomes* writing at the moment he ceases to be a determinate God. While we can’t definitively point to this moment, it can be traced to the scenes with Moses on Mt. Sinai. As the determinate God both rules over texts and then is dissolved by them, so God as writing both appears and disappears within texts. Taylor’s God of writing is not the God of writing in Exodus or the God of writing in Kabbalah.

To say that God *is* writing is more than just a tautological statement where one metaphor stands for another. Both God and writing problematize any sense of location or origin, for subject and object. Derrida and the Kabbalists both argue that *writing* (in a general sense) comes before speech, and since God’s first act of talking to himself is one that is always already written in Genesis, the relationship is there before the “beginning.” God, then, literally can be an act or object of reading and/or writing. God and writing are like Maurice Blanchot’s characterization of literature as “between possibility and impossibility” (*The Space of Literature* 14). To read God as writing is “to follow a text and at the same time to lose track of it” (*Space* 59). This writing that is both intended toward meaning and yet always escapes it, is both “inside and outside the traditional structure of signification” (*Erring* 105). We cannot begin to understand God without writing, or writing without God.

Yet, how do we experience this? Desiring God over time (a life, a civilization, the history of ideas) we leave a trace of desire expressed in/as writing. “Desire desires desire” (*Erring* 147). When we look back, this trace is writing and the writing is God.

what has been read and what has been historically, culturally, and theoretically influential.

Our desire for God is our desire to read what is written, but the trace is always disappearing, impossible to make out, like a dim star only visible to our peripheral vision.

* * * * *

When de Vries suggests that deconstruction and negative theology can be “silent companions in the attempt to establish new discursive forms and practices of philosophical and cultural analysis” (38), he presents a possibility and a challenge. But what does the relationship between old mystical theology and current thought have to do with how we, at the turn of the 21st century, read the various branches of modernism? Why should we continue to care about what de Vries called the “often uncanny alliances that thus emerge between the most radical interrogations of the history of Western thought and a certain religious inheritance” (129). Deconstruction has enabled us to see negative theology as something other than *via negativa*, other than just a path to some higher essence. Negative theology, in turn, has given deconstruction a side that does other than a “dance upon the tomb of god.” For Kevin Hart, for example, negative theology can be a deconstruction of theology, but a deconstruction that still allows for a Christian experience.

I wrote in my introductory chapter that “the movements of postmodern, negative, and mystical theology can help us to understand modernist imaginative creations and our theories of interpreting them.” But how do we begin to undertake and understand this process? Where do we look in searching for the relationship between postmodern theology and the reading of modernist texts? Do the slippery and vague terms modernist and postmodernist contain any meaning in this context?¹³ Although “modernism” as an

¹³ The terms “modernism” and “postmodernism” are, of course, notoriously vague, rendered almost meaningless by overuse, and are rendered much more accurately (if clumsily) by their plural forms.

artistic movement has been defined in a myriad of ways, for Apollinaire, modernism was characterized by the act of “dissociation and recombination.” To view a cubist painting, for example, involves a perceiving of its dissociated state and then a mental recombination of its disparate parts. This is an essentially modernist viewpoint. No matter how extreme the dissociation, modernists believe in the possibility of recombination. More importantly, in that recombination, it is the process and the difficulty of making the connections and putting the pieces together where something is gained, where further cognitive progress is made. While their doubt and their questioning of traditional forms lead them to experimentation, they still *believed* in the communicative possibility of the new forms. For this reason cubist painters thought they were capturing a deeper reality, not a distorted one. Arnold Schoenberg may have felt that traditional methods of teleological musical composition were now suspect, but his new *a*-tonality (never his terminology) was a move (in his view) *towards* coherence.

This tension between dissociation and recombination and the theories of fragments are modernized and secularized variations of Pseudo-Dionysius’ discussion of unity and differentiation, and are common points of discourse between art, literature, theory, and theology. For Catholic theologian David Tracy, the non-recombination of fragments is a way (for him, ultimately religious) of reconciling the modern and the

Although usually regarded as a conscious radical break with the 19th century as urged by Nietzsche among others, modernism, as we now use it, evolved as a term in the 1960’s. Edmund Wilson’s *Axel’s Castle*, for example, although it defines what we would consider a shift towards modernism uses instead the term “symbolism.” Modernism is also something that *was*, a way of thinking located near the beginning of the 20th century. Modernism is often seen (influenced by New Critics) as an “ordering principle of a quasi-religious type” (Eysteinsson’s 9).

Postmodernism, on the other hand is an even more criticized term. Although probably most famously defined in Lyotard’s words as a distrust of “grand narratives” it has become more complex than that. For Frederic Jameson it is “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically” (ix). Postmodernism “looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds. . . for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things” (ix).

postmodern (179). The breaking down, or the presenting of a subject into fragments can be seen as part of a loss of faith, but it is still contained within a theological system based on the belief of the possibility of a whole. Twentieth century theories of a/theology, negative theology, atheism, structuralism and deconstruction are all part of the modernist dissolution of elements, but represent different approaches to their recombination.

Tracy's theological solution, which can also be seen as an artistic or a literary one, is to find ways to avoid the recombination—a point of view not unusual in post-structuralist criticism, but a radical one for theology.

Tracy's ideas reflect much of the early work examining relationship between deconstruction and theology which questioned the urge to recombine and accommodate parts into a whole. This move targeted the totalizing properties of the traditional god-idea, the god of Derrida's "absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge" (*Grammatology* 98). Kevin Hart's incorporation of deconstruction into his theological view was aimed toward eliminating this totalizing God. Hart sees the God of *Grammatology* as a God that "does more than signify a divinity men and women may worship. It also serves to ground a range of philosophical systems . . . and marks the emerging end of any signifying chain" (*Trespass* 280). From this point of view, to be theological we don't need a god, only a totalizing force of some kind. If this "God" is essentially one that makes totalization possible, then any belief in the possibility of complete understanding is, in essence, theological. The turn to the postmodern in theology, however, points to the indeterminate God that prohibits complete understanding.

Since Hart and Taylor's books in the mid 1980's, a recent focus in books and conferences has often been on what remains of theology after deconstruction. The reverse question is also worth asking: after deconstructing theology, what remains of deconstruction? What can current developments in the field of deconstructive theology contribute by being returned to deconstruction's role in literary theory? If Hart's question, "Is it possible to read the deconstruction of theology as a theological process?" (*Trespass* 21) can be answered positively (as he does), then this answer can be enlarged into a much more encompassing statement about literary theory and, in turn, it can reinterpret ways in which deconstruction can be used. If theology is at the root of all of our thinking, including our urge to dissolve theological thinking, we can say that the theological process of the deconstruction of theology is contained in the writing, reading, and interpretation of all literature, and perhaps is most active in modernism. This point of view involves looking at modernism outside of history—not post-enlightenment and pre-postmodernism—but as part of the a/theological web. Although "God" and "theology" *do* often represent a force towards totalization, we see in reading Exodus, Pseudo-Dionysius, postmodern theology, and in the later works of Derrida, the idea that God is the one thing that *cannot* be totalized. If we identify God as Derrida, Blanchot, and Taylor have, then the God-idea as it is traditionally perceived lies in art even more than theology. Theology, it seems, can talk about everything *but* God, and literature can only talk about God.

The Space Between Two Gods

Throughout the interpretations of each of these texts—the Book of Exodus, *The Divine Names*, and “How to Avoid Speaking”—we find a similar double and contradictory movement in their idea of the divine. On a larger scale, what these theological and philosophical writings share is a grappling with two opposing perceptions of what they tend to call “God.” The first is the determinate God, the God of positivism and metaphysics, the God that for Pseudo-Dionysius makes “all unity possible.” For Nietzsche and Altizer this is the God who is dead. Although it is this God that has been dominant and privileged throughout most of Western history, for many of the thinkers we have been discussing, this God—a totalizing force that makes meaning and closure the goal of interpretation—is not the only way of imagining the divine. Hart maintains (obviously sympathetically) that “one may hold that there *is* a God but that there is no *concept* of God to which one can appeal that can ground one’s discourse about God or the world” (*Trespass* 28). Taylor, less theistically, writes that God is not the transcendental signified, but that the “disappearance of the transcendental signified creates the possibility of writing” (*Erring* 108) and that “to interpret God as word is to understand the divine as scripture or writing” (*Erring* 104). God therefore *is* writing.

This second God is the God beyond being, the God of the later Derrida, the God who neither is nor isn’t, and the God of the *Khora*. These two gods are revealed in the changing nature of Derrida’s identification of God. Although he denies a true shift in his depiction of God, others have located in Derrida’s early works a god of closure and in his later works a god that actually denies closure, one who encourages an opening up to the impossible/possible to come. His God of *Grammatology* is a logocentric God of the

“book” who guarantees absolute knowledge. Derrida’s God in later works such as *The Gift of Death*, *On the Name*, or *Circumfessions*, however, is a God of secrets, interruption and instability. It is a God who is not “transcendent,” but is the “name of a possibility” (*The Gift of Death* 108).

Neither God can be separated from the other, but work within shifting definitions and perceptions to both exist and not exist. To identify God as one or the other is always to invite the opposing God. To claim only one as the “real” God, is in the same gesture to erase him. As Hart and others remind us, to draw a line separating the metaphysical from the non-metaphysical is in itself a metaphysical gesture. Kearney’s “God-who-may-be” is an example of a theory that attempts to navigate a space between two Gods, but he is limited by the need for a religion or an ethics that offers at least a chance of comfort or hope; however postmodern his inquiry, like “Biblical” archeology, his answers are determined by his quest. Any interpretation is, of course, also limited by the questions it asks, and where it locates the God-idea is a dominant factor in determining these questions.

This God-idea, as it functions in texts, is analogous to Charles Winquist’s identification of theology’s primary impulse as a *desire* for God (*Desiring Theology*). In what he calls “secular theology”—a theology that does not depend on any sense of the existence of God, either past, now, or to come—what is more significant is the need and desire for some kind of divine. This desire is a desire to know an other in and of language and, if we transpose his ideas to the study of literature, we can see literature’s god-idea as a desire—a desire that indicates both an urge and a lack. Modernist literature, as our reading of Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist* shows, expresses a need for a

god because it presents the lack of one. By formulating God as we have been doing throughout this chapter, we can see that this desire becomes a contradictory urge towards negation *and* affirmation, towards coherence *and* instability. The desire, the god, if you will, is located in the tension, in the back and forth action between the two poles. This points to the divine, the religious, the sacred, and the artistic as essentially irrational (what for theology would be called mystical, and for philosophy would be called non-metaphysical). God *is* the line between metaphysical and non-metaphysical, the slash in a/theology and *à dieu/adieu*.

When modernism denies a God, it is the determinate God of humanistic atheism. The god that is desired, however, is neither one nor the other, determinate or indeterminate, but always both. Any interpretation of God (from Pseudo-Dionysius to Derrida) does not settle on one or the other, but exists in the space in between. Any interpretation of art or literature that looks in the margins for a repressed “God-idea” must be open to either one or both of these Gods. A god that makes knowledge both possible and impossible; a god that both is and isn’t.

Difficulty

“God contradicts himself already.”

Jacques Derrida (*Writing and Difference* 70)

These two gods are incompatible. Although the spectrum of ideas and interpretations extends from one god to the other, there is no way of reconciling the god of determinacy with the god of impossibility. In between are such practices as poetry, music, art, mysticism, and prayer. An analogous gap can be seen between God and man. Although man may have created God, he still cannot have a true cognitive experience of

him. For Levinas, a “you” is always inserted between the “I” and any “absolute He” (*Collected Papers* 73). Both of these gaps—between God and God and between man and God—cannot be transcended but can be appreciated only through *difficulty*. The difficulty of imagining God, or imagining no God; the difficulty of reading modernism; the difficulty of late 20th and 21st century theory. How is this significant? What does it mean not to understand?

Texts that constantly force us to face the need to understand touch the desire for God that characterizes Western thought and art. The conviction of absolute knowledge, as Hegel contends, can only occur in the presence of the Absolute. Conversely, any understanding of the Absolute can only be fragmentary, illusory, and incomplete (Pseudo-Dionysius, Kierkegaard). Again, we have a tension between the two God-ideas, for “contrary to Hegel’s claim that God is the Concept, Kierkegaard insists that God resists all conceptuality and escapes every categorization” (Taylor, *About* 37). The difficulty comes from space between these two places, between the two conceptions of God, the unstable space where both Pseudo-Dionysius and Derrida locate their writing. Since to face the absolute possibility or impossibility of knowing is theologically related, difficulty becomes the theological (or results from the theological) in the Western tradition of interpreting texts.

Difficulty, as an aesthetic concept, arose out of modernist art and literature. Although it was, of course, an issue in the criticism of earlier works (the poetry of John Donne, the philosophy of Hegel); it was in modernism where it was inextricably associated with what seemed to be a movement in the arts. Whether it was a poem by Eliot, a novel by Joyce, a painting by Picasso, or a jazz solo by Charlie Parker, difficulty

was (depending on your point of view) a fashion, a hoax, or the only way to construct meaning.¹⁴ Eliot famously defended difficult art in saying, “it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists as present, must be difficult” (qtd. in Diepeveen 110). The reaction to this difficulty recalls the philosophical and metaphysical ground of the theories of knowing. Is there an absolute meaning? Is there an absolute object to be understood?

The metaphors by which we refer to our perception of texts reveal the extent to which we imagine the text as a totalized, even three-dimensional, object. Many theorists of language and cognitive studies have pointed out how metaphors structure the way we think.¹⁵ The concept of understanding is explained by the metaphor of *seeing*, the metaphor of *grasping*, and the metaphor of *following*. “I *see* your point.” “I *grasp* your argument.” “I don’t *follow* what you are saying.” When these activities seem to be hindered, then a work of art or a philosophical concept is said to be *difficult*.

Difficulty, as influentially discussed by George Steiner, can be divided into four categories: Contingent (or needs to be “looked up”), Model (thematic), Tactical (syntactical or grammatical), and Ontological (questions our relationship to language and communication). While modernist, theological, and philosophical writing clearly inhabit all these areas, it is the fourth area that defines the relationship between modernism and theology. Steiner’s “ontological” difficulty ultimately reverses itself to question ontology itself, and in doing becomes the difficulty that exists between the determinate and indeterminate god, and on the border of the impossible/possible.

¹⁴ See *The Difficulties of Modernism* by Leonard Diepeveen for a book-length discussion of these issues.

¹⁵ See Lakoff, Ortony, and Donaldson.

Ian Almond develops these same themes, by reading an Islamic mystic through postmodern thought. In an essay relating the difficulty of Derrida to Ibn ‘Arabi, Almond sees Derrida and ‘Arabi moving away from traditional thought in their embracing difficulty as part of their mode of discourse: “both Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabi part with a philosophical and Koranic tradition that sees confusion synonymous with error, failure, untruth, and sin” (516). For ‘Arabi, bewilderment can even be seen as a “gift from God” (516). Derrida’s “God” is also one who encourages and induces bewilderment (521), and Derrida expresses “a delight in multiplicity at the expense of unity” (523). Almond clearly sees the productive aspect of Derrida and ‘Arabi’s difficulty as associated with an indeterminate idea of God and with postmodern theology.

The reading of difficulty as a plural and productive experience creates a bridge between the theologian the theorist and the work of art. Reading modernism is to explore the gap between the two gods of the *à dieu/adieu*: the determinate God of unity and closure and the indeterminate God of pluralism and radical writing. Difficult reading forces us to ask: “What is it possible to know? How is it possible to know?” Religious faith and disbelief ask the same questions. If knowledge is absolutely possible it can only be through God. Yet to absolutely know God is to deny the otherness and mystery necessary for God to exist. All interpretations, all readings become impossible and yet necessary. The theological question that Almond asks, “is God Perplexity itself or, rather, a Something that lies on the other side of all our bewilderment?” (526), asks us about our perception of difficult art as well. Just as any concrete concept of God erases itself as soon as it is established, so Gertrude Stein says, “I cannot afford to be clear

because if I was I would risk destroying my own thought. Most people destroy their thought before they create it” (qtd. in Diepeveen 94).

In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel Proust’s narrator says that “one hears nothing when one listens for the first time to a piece of music that is at all complicated” (I. 570). But after repeated listening and hard work,

There remains for our enjoyment some passage whose structure, too new and strange to offer anything but confusion to our mind, had made it indistinguishable and so preserved intact; and this, which we had passed every day without knowing it, which had held itself in reserve for us, which by the sheer power of its beauty had become invisible and remained unknown, this comes to us last of all. But we shall also relinquish it last. And we shall love it longer than the rest because we have taken longer to get to love it. (I. 571-572)

As Proust’s narrator will gradually learn, difficult texts, as they come to be understood, can be somehow *productive* in and through their difficulty. The reading of them, and the struggle for meaning, produces a performative effect that moves into areas that could not otherwise be reached. By analogy to the two poles of the God-idea that contradict themselves by making meaning both possible and impossible, the grappling with difficult modernist texts can be interpreted as a theological process. Our response to difficult texts is like our response to ideas of God: we want to make them *mean*.

Our restructuring of modernism and theory begins with locating the moments of unconscious theological thinking in the text. For Blanchot, “The poem names the sacred, and men hear the sacred, not the poem. And yet the poem names the sacred as

unnamable" (*Space* 242). Art, like God, is external to all categories and in this context we can see it as an escape from the rational. For Georges Bataille, this escape from the rational, whether through art, sex, or violence, is the key to approaching the Sacred. Religion has always occupied the rational *and* the transgressive, as has art and poetry.

In other words, the step beyond metaphysics can only be accomplished through literature and mysticism. Derrida has often turned to literature in his attempt to locate moments that are outside of the control of metaphysics: "certain texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable" (qtd. in Hart 41). These are the texts that Roland Barthes, writing of postmodernism before it was coined as such, called texts of "bliss," or texts where the "death of language is glimpsed" (*Pleasure* 6). These readings resemble a sort of mysticism, and Heidegger's "turn" in his later works included a privileging of poetry and mysticism, texts that move toward a non-representational experience of Being. Mysticism, as Gershom Scholem points out, although defined as an "immediate experience of God," also depends on a separation *from* the divine. It would make little sense, for example, to refer to Moses as a mystic (6-7). Likewise, any experience with a difficult text is one of immediacy *and* separation.

While Derrida's turn to literature includes Genet, Jabès, and Blanchot, it was earlier works of modernist literature, culminating in the difficulty of *Finnegans Wake* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, which first produced a literature—perhaps despite its intentions—whose signs exceeded any chance of totalizing its concepts. Despite critical schools—like the New Criticism—that attempted to explain or compartmentalize modernism, it has always refused containment. When traditional religious mystical language acknowledges an inability to express the divine yet at the same time posits a divine source for all

creation, it mirrors this aspect of modernism. This excess of meaning is what Hart is referring to in the title of his work, *The Trespass of the Sign*, and what Levinas means by the “excess of the Saying over the Said.” If we take away the center, dismiss the idea of a divine, overflow the signifying potential of the sign, the theological urge and structure remain in place. Understanding modernist literature and our attempts to interpret it are similar to mystical attempts to reach the divine. Literature, whether sacred or profane, is an attempt to both capture and transcend this atheological structure.

* * * * *

Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a novel which “celebrates a thoroughly modernist notion of textuality” (Dettmars 107), again provides an example for a theological interpretation.¹⁶ As we follow Stephen struggling to make sense of language, although on some levels the novel seems to invite us to judge Stephen, we also can not help but feel the novel is somehow being told through him. While this is sometimes viewed as an accomplishment of Joyce’s use of “free indirect discourse,” it is also often seen as weakness in the novel. Yet, at the same time, it doesn’t quite seem right, as Wayne Booth and others have written, that we have no ground to judge Stephen except his own (Dettmars 118-119). The novel’s ambiguous narrative center, which has been described as creating both modernist and postmodernist sensibilities, can be seen as operating in the tension and space between the two Gods. Stephen’s (and Joyce’s) focus on Gods, fathers, authors, and authority leaves the reader grasping for a textual origin that is constantly asserted and negated. Stephen’s famous “God of creation” speech is more or less plagiarizing Flaubert (is it Joyce or Stephen who is plagiarizing?), and opens ups

¹⁶ Although we need to keep in mind that Stephen, the “artist,” is firmly rooted in the Romantic tradition and is *not* the author of *Portrait*.

questions of author and authority. Who is the narrator? Who is the creator? Who is (whose) God?¹⁷

Joyce plays with these themes throughout the novel. Obviously the role of Stephen's father is central from the first page to the last, but "Father" is also God. (God is even referred to as the "papa" of Christ.) Yet, although the artist is a "young man," the proper role of the artist often seems to be more feminine than masculine; the artist must allow the work to "gestate" inside before bringing it into the world. Difficulties of reconciling author, subject, narrator, and hero lead to interpretive complexities in the novel that consistently touch on the theological. What is the relationship between Author, Father and God? Stephen's quest to understand is also the reader's and both are theological quests conducted in the absence of a determinate God.

Perhaps the central event in the novel, Stephen's rejection of the priesthood and the church, is another complex event in the interpretation of the novel's god-idea. Often read as paradigmatic of Stephen's rejection of Father, homeland, and religion, it is then a necessary move toward personal and artistic freedom. However, as Booth points out, it has also been interpreted as a move toward eternal damnation (327). Although Booth claims these two interpretations are mutually exclusive, that to read the novel as a story of *both* imprisonment and freedom is to "retreat into a babbling and incommunicable relativism" (328), if we read this essentially theological text through the two Gods, it can *only* be read by keeping both possibilities in mind.

¹⁷ A postmodern example of this play on creator and author is Paul Auster's *City of Glass* where the protagonist, named Quinn, writes mystery novels under the pen name of William Wilson featuring a detective (with whom Quinn closely identifies) named Max Work, investigates a real-life mystery shadowing a theologian who may or may not resemble himself using the name Paul Auster. As Quinn (Auster, Wilson) says about mystery novels, "the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end" (15).

As enacted in Joyce's *Portrait*, modernism's desire for a God-presence of stability results in a recreation of aspects of the Judeo-Christian God. But along with the positivistic aspects of God comes the negative—always accompanying the positive, supplementing it from the outset—a God of subversion, rupture and discontinuity. These aspects are hidden within the texts, manifested in metaphors, word play and paradoxes, both demythologized and deconstructed. These difficult and ambiguous spaces of writing where we can find the contradictory tensions of the two God-ideas can often be found inhabiting and sharing the same metaphors, symbols, scenes, and themes. Intentionally or not, modernist authors recreate a God-idea in their texts, but often one that fulfills both roles, determinate and indeterminate, Hegelian and Kierkegaardian. While these textual devices and moments are not overtly religious, there is often an air of the theological about them. As we see in Joyce's author, James' bowl, or Proust's music, these substitutes for god can be attempts at controlling or totalizing a text, therefore playing the role of a creator god; yet they often conceal negative God-like characteristics of undecidability in their resistance to being named or contained either inside or outside the context of the work.

Modernist literature, art, and music simultaneously reject, embrace, and re-imagine, the contradictory God(s) of Western History and Western Art. Like Orpheus in Blanchot's essay "Orpheus's Gaze," if we look directly at our object of desire (divine or artistic) it disappears. Yet this look, the "only moment when the work is absolutely lost" (*Space* 174), is also the "moment where writing begins" (176). As Joyce, Derrida, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Moses all understand, creation and destruction always work together, and neither God nor writing brings closure or consolation. Yet not to look, to

ignore the presence and absence of the God-idea in our art, is to ignore the experience of reading modernism. Reading modernism, like reading God, is to peer into a penumbra that our eyes cannot adjust to, wondering if we really see or are just imagining the black shifting shapes—to read the impossible—to read the only way we can—in the dark.

Chapter Three

The Golden Bowl, Atheology, and Nothing

In God there is neither being nor the act-of-being because nothing is formally present in both the cause and that of which it is the cause.

Meister Eckhart (Caputo, *Mystical* 107)

The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel. . . The jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.

Martin Heidegger (*Poetry* 168-169)

"Know at least something? Oh about him I can't think. He's beyond," said Fanny Assingham.

"Then do you yourself know?"

"How much--?"

"How much."

"How far--?"

"How far."

"I've told you before that I know absolutely nothing."

"Well--that's what I know," said the Princess

Henry James (*The Golden Bowl*)

The Golden Bowl

The novel as a form is deeply integrated into the Western theological traditions. Its roots can be located in its Christian predecessors such as *A Pilgrim's Progress* or Augustine's *Confessions*; the author's god-like control over the text has resulted in such theo-critical terms as providential plot or omniscient narrator; and more than any previous literary form the novel represented an example of a directed teleology progressing to a promised end. As modernist artists and thinkers questioned the traditional sources of this God-presence, authors such as Joyce constructed novels that questioned these building blocks, ultimately resulting in anti-novels like *Finnegans Wake*. The late works of Henry James are often regarded as a link between 19th century

Victorian literature and modernism. They occupy a space in between, achieving a high point in the development of the novel and also planting the seeds of doubt that would be part of its dissolution.

In James's *The Golden Bowl*, we can look at contradictory theological forces from several angles, all of which are related: the difficulty of totalizing a text that yet suggests a totality; the idea of the impossibility of knowledge and the knowledge of impossibility; the metaphorical system within the novel, specifically the metaphor of the bowl itself; and the theme of the word "nothing" and the concept of nothingness. These forces gain meaning and resonance in their relationship to ideas of difficulty and knowledge; the constant tension between reader and character's quest for knowledge and the denial of it are central to the novel's theological connections. By tracing these themes through metaphors, word play, symbols, and scenes in *The Golden Bowl*, we see that the interplay of competing and contradictory God-ideas is part of the experience of the novel. These forces, both within the novel and my interpretation, flow around, in, and through the figure of the golden bowl itself, creating a vortex of meaning through negation. The bowl—as an object, as a title, and as a metaphor—suggests the god-idea in its moves towards completion, destruction, manifestation and contradiction. Physically, metaphorically, and symbolically it works as a container and an empty void. It is a symbol of absolute grounding and the destroyer of knowledge, a test of faith and evidence of doubt.

Theology and Ambiguity in Late James

The famous late style of James, with its ambiguities and difficulties, and the perception of it by 20th century critics, points to the relationship of modernism to difficulty, epistemology, and theology. James's late work challenges assumptions about literature, the reader, and knowledge in ways that are directly related to cultural shifts away from traditional belief systems, and subsequent interpretations of his work present similar challenges.

Often critics have pointed to James's style as an early example of the loss of faith in words that typifies modernism. For George Steiner, in the late 19th century there arose a "crisis of poetic means" that could be linked to an "awareness of the gap between new senses of psychological reality and old modes of rhetorical and poetic statement" (*Language and Silence* 12). James's late work exemplifies the doubt that occupied this gap, and it is possible to find in this "crisis of poetic means" a link to new ways of writing the religious, the theological, and the atheistic.

Theology and Religion

For R.P. Blackmur, James is an example of "what happens to a religious man when institutionalized religion is taken away" (qtd. in Banta 65), and this quote points to several questions I will address in this chapter. If James is indeed religious without the institutions, then in what ways does this religiousness manifest itself in his work? Secondly, what interpretations does this suggest for James's common references to the symbols and practices of institutional religious? Finally, what is in the space from which institutionalized religion has been "taken away?"

James is commonly known for writing about the conflict between the old traditions and the new, between the American and the European, but he also writes of and in the tensions between older artistic forms rooted in religious belief and newer experimental styles reflecting epistemological doubt. It is possible to see a connection between a decline of institutional religion and a decline in established artistic forms. This decline both comes out of and leads to a questioning of modes of communicating and understanding. As we saw in the last chapter, the questioning of language and the possibility of absolute knowledge is a theological process.

Some critics have dealt directly with religious and theological issues in *The Golden Bowl*. In *The Catholic Side of Henry James*, Edwin Fussell writes “James habitually and with consummate stylistic felicity referred to ordinary, diurnal, worldly, secular objects, events, emotions, behaviors, and so forth, in the language of religious belief and practice. His religious language is almost always Christian and more often than not specifically Catholic” (37). Using Fussell’s work, Marcia Ian reads the character of Maggie (Fussell: “James’s most magnificent Catholic”) as using her art in a Catholic way to work a magic of severing continuities between her husband and Charlotte and between her Father and herself. Ian makes her connection by citing Fussell, by following James’s religiously suggestive language (the “communion” between characters), and by defining religion as the “theory and practice of community, offering believers various ways to conceive of themselves as connected to, ultimately and eschatologically continuous with, some inclusive higher, larger, better entity or power” (Ian 241). Ian’s definition, a fairly standard one, resembles Eliade’s influential definition of religion as maintaining a sacred cosmic order against chaos. But, as I have tried to show throughout

this work, religion also works in discontinuities, as a force that renders continuity impossible or unthinkable, and this force is equally present in James's novel.

The Golden Bowl also invites religious or theological interpretations from a more literal and traditional textual level: the father is named Adam and wears the robes of a saint, Maggie is compared to the Virgin, Amerigo and Charlotte speak of the "sacred," characters seek "salvation" and "communion," and the ultimate action of the book is a "sacrifice."¹ The bowl itself echoes the Bible,² the Holy Grail, and the rituals of mass and communion. The use of religious language is a common device in late James,³ and while often interpreted as primarily an aesthetic or thematic device, it can also be seen as a way of introducing irreducible and contradictory elements into central thematic issues.

James's novels typically revolve around issues of secrets and the secret. These secrets exist as hidden knowledge, deceptions, misunderstandings, and unanswerable questions, both for characters and for readers. In *The Wings of the Dove* the central issue of knowledge is whether Milly knows of the plot between Kate and Merton. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the central unknown is of the reality of the ghosts. In *The Golden Bowl* we are never sure how much the characters actually know, or what they have revealed; we are not even sure what they have really done. James's late works constructs cycles of knowing and not knowing that question our ability and even the possibility of constructing and communicating meaning. These cycles will be replayed over again throughout the difficulties of modernist style—a style that suggests a truth, but also

¹ The idea of the "sacrifice" is one of the constant themes throughout the novel. The references range from innocent "little" sacrifices early in the novel (203), to Maggie imagining her husband saying to her "Sacrifice me, my own love; do sacrifice me, do sacrifice me!" . . . like some precious spotless intelligent lamb" (382).

² "Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever" (Rev. 15:7).

suggests that the path to truth will be a rocky and perhaps insurmountable one. To acknowledge the impossibility of truth and to explore the theological aspects of textual interpretation are common to continental postmodern philosophy, deconstructive theology, and, to a lesser extent, modernism. To find God, to desire God, to deny God, and to appropriate God, are all parts of the same impossible quest for knowledge. It is on either side of this quest that we find the two sides of God: a determinate God who makes the quest possible and straight and an indeterminate God who renders the quest impossible and endless.

These difficult and ambiguous spaces of writing where we find the contradictory tensions of the two God-ideas can often be found inhabiting the same metaphors, symbols, scenes, and ideas in the world of modernist texts. While these textual devices and moments are not generally overtly religious, there is an air of the theological about them. They can allude, either explicitly or implicitly, to theological figures and ideas. They can be attempts at controlling or totalizing a text, therefore playing the role of a creator God; or they can be God-like in their undecidability, their resistance to being named or contained both within and without the context of the work.

Ambiguity

The novel itself is structured with contrasting sections of long dialogues and sections of complex narration of characters' mental states. This organization results in several kinds of difficulty and ambiguity. The scenes of dialogue are scenes of verbal play as characters try to explain themselves to other characters without revealing too

³ *The Spoils of Poynton*, for example, gives central position to a Maltese Cross, and also has many religious allusions from the Garden of Eden to the Buddha's tree.

much of their inner motivations; one is always caught in a language game. The narrative sections, camouflaged in James's famous dense prose style, follow the subjective wanderings of the various characters' thoughts, and are much harder to summarize or to excerpt. Not quite stream-of-consciousness, they nevertheless present challenging problems of reference and narrative. In the 1930's Stephen Spender insightfully pointed to how James reverses the traditional novel by using the scenes of dialogue and action, not to advance the plot, but as only a "means of aligning the characters." In the later James novels it is the narrative sections, not the dialogue, which are used to "reveal the growth of passionate feelings, of love, of hatred" (192).⁴ This reversal of narrative strategy contributes to the difficulty and ambiguity of James's novels in two ways. First, readers are accustomed to focusing their close readings on scenes of action and dialogue. We like to point to key moments in a text where what is done or said provides an entrance to a textual interpretation. Since it is in the scenes of narrative where James is at his most "unreadable," as Spender and other critics have labeled sections of his later works, these passages resist providing us with a key specific location.

Critics have focused on the ways the late works develop difficulty, ambiguity, and uncertainty at a variety of levels.⁵ On the level of plot it is easy to point to examples of

⁴ Chapter three, book four, is an example of how narrative moves the plot and dialogue is secondary. The chapter follows the dilemma of Maggie and her father who must decide whether they will follow through on a tentatively voiced plan to go away and "do something lovely" together (357). There is one discussion of the issue. The chapter locates its consciousness in Maggie, so we don't see (nor does she know) what he thinks of the issue. Maggie wonders about various questions, none of course worded as such: had they really made plans? Is so, had their situation changed enough to change their plans? She decides she will remain silent, to see if he broaches the topic. After six pages of following her thoughts and minimal actions her Father finally says, "I guess we won't go down there after all, will we, Mag?—just when it's getting so pleasant here" (362). The "action" of this section is the working of Maggie's mind, there is no discussion, no talking about the domestic situation.

⁵ Some examples are Edmund Wilson's "The Ambiguity of Henry James" (1934), Jean Frantz Blackall's *Jamesian Ambiguity and the Sacred Fount* (1965), Charles Thomas Samuels's *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (1971), and Ralf Norrman's *Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James: With Special*

Jamesian ambiguity. Often critical scenes happen “off-stage” or in between chapters; important events are narrated through subjective points of view or in impressionistic and complicated prose. What do Milly Theale and Merton Densher say to each other in their final meeting before her death? What exactly *are* the Spoils of Poynton? Is the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* hallucinating or are the ghosts real? An example from *The Golden Bowl* demonstrates ambiguity also on the level of the sentence and the word.

Maggie thoughtfully shook her head. . . . “I can bear anything.”

“Oh, ‘bear’! Mrs. Assingham fluted.

“For love,” said the Princess.

Fanny hesitated. “Of your father?”

“For love,” Maggie repeated.

It kept her friend watching. “Of your husband?”

“For love,” Maggie said again. (404-405)

In this passage, a central scene where Maggie has claimed to Mrs. Assingham that she can “make them do what I like,” and in which she has hinted that she is aware of an affair between her husband and her father’s wife, the two characters verbally spar, neither asking nor revealing what they really know, think, or want to find out. This example locates ambiguity in the consciousness of the characters. Maggie is either withholding meaning from Mrs. Assingham, she is really uncertain herself, or she is purposely ambiguous in order to convey a secret meaning beyond her listener’s ability to comprehend.

Reference to In the Cage and the Turn of the Screw (1977), and The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction.

This passage is also an example of ambiguity at the level of the word. The meaning of the whole passage hinges first on what Maggie means by “bear” and finally what she means by “love.” The opening dialogue in the first chapter of *The Golden Bowl* makes clear the importance and ambiguity of single words. As Prince Amerigo remembers an early conversation with Maggie about her father, the dialogue centers around the words “form,” “even” and the binary meaning of “in/out.”

“Why his ‘form,’” he had returned, “might have made one doubt.”

“Father’s form?” She hadn’t seen it. “It strikes me has hasn’t got any.”

“He hasn’t got mine—he hasn’t even got yours.”

“Thank you for ‘even’!” the girl had laughed at him.

“Oh yours, my dear, is tremendous. But your father has his own. I’ve made that out. So don’t doubt it. It’s where it has brought him out—that’s the point.”

“It’s his goodness that has brought him out,” our young woman had, at this, objected.

“Ah darling, goodness, I think, never brought any one out. Goodness, when it’s real, precisely, rather keeps people in.” (45-46).

The characters themselves seem determined to flesh out all possible meanings from every spoken word. What this conversation contributes to the plot is less important than its establishing from the beginning an awareness of verbal ambiguity.

How we choose to address these ambiguities determines our approach to James’s work and the relationship we can find between it and 20th century theological issues. What the critics seem to agree on is that, whether approached New Critically or

deconstructively, the late James style contains an important element of undecidability. For Ralf Norrman “in the James universe there is always and forever *something else*. . . . James’s writing comes to resemble the process of nuclear fission in a breeder reactor—the process produces more fuel than it consumes” (1-2).

The openings to interpretation that ambiguities provide us are an important part of this process of producing “fuel” or meaning. As James famously said, a scene cannot be described, it must be “rendered.” Although his use of the word “rendered” offers ambiguity in itself, what he does seem to be saying is that there is never truth in directly describing or relating something; the wording must be such that it produces action in the process of perception. We could also describe this “action” as performative as opposed to constative language. Even within the novel ambiguity is implicitly praised for opening up previously unthought possibilities:

Maggie at all events was seeing for herself—it was another matter.
 “The thing was that he made her think it would be so possible.”
 Fanny again hesitated. “The Prince made her think—?”
 Maggie stared—she had meant her father. *But her vision seemed to spread.* “They both made her think. She wouldn’t have thought without them.” (444, my emphasis)

This scene builds on two typical James devices: the use of pronominal ambiguity, and the metaphoric equivalence of seeing and understanding. Maggie now *sees* more because of an alternate reading of the pronoun “he.” It seems clear that both characters and novelist distrust the assumption that language can make a clear statement, and realize that ambiguity can produce meaning.

Ambiguity and Negative Theology

Critic John Auchard focuses on ambiguities in James's work by pointing to moments of silence, an approach that takes him into the area of theology. Studying the silence of omitted scenes, unspoken sentiments, and unread letters, he looks at issues of James's "pervasive sense of negation—of ubiquitous absence," and of silences "both metaphoric and persistently literal" (2). He especially focuses on James's late style with its "passive renunciation, its flashes of enlightenment, its flood of unutterable perception" (98). He reads *The Wings of the Dove* and its "increasingly evacuated centers" (86), as an example of the *Via Negativa* or the path of traditional negative theology. For Auchard, the novel and Milly's "artistically patterned spiritual awakening" (101), result in "an adaptation of the religious aesthetic to the entirely secular consciousness" (96).

He splits with other James critics in seeing the negation as "closer to the arena of orthodox spirituality than to that of the occult" (87).⁶ Although he connects the novel to a late 19th century interest in mysticism (95), he primarily sees it as a secular incorporation of theological thought. In other words, Milly Theale is a secular mystic, and Henry James is a secular negative theologian. Her path through the novel, culminating in her final gesture of "turning her face to the wall," occupies most of Auchard's attention.

Auchard sees this negative path to spiritual fulfillment as an example of the Jamesian abyss that, for Peter Brooks, "may be taken to stand for all the evacuated centers of meaning in his fiction that nonetheless animate lives, determine quests for meaning, and which confer on life, particularly on consciousness, the urgency and dramatics of melodrama" (qtd. in Auchard 102). For Auchard, Brooks's interpretation

approaches mysticism. Auchard ultimately relates Milly's "spiritual path" or "Negative path" and "experience of the abyss" to the experience and writings of the mystic John of the Cross. But Auchard, despite making these associations convincing, gives theology a limited role. He sees it only in the spiritual journey of a single character and only as it relates to narrative occurrences.

Although Auchard identifies a specific negative theology in *The Wings of the Dove*, it is possible to see a more general negative theology in all late James. Auchard sees in Milly and the novel a negativity that is spiritual but not religious or theological. I see in all the late James—but especially in *The Golden Bowl*—a negativity that is theological but not spiritual; a religious sensibility that is not connected to the character's search, or to "orthodox spirituality," but instead to the reader's experience and also to the books' epistemology and language that borrows from and is influenced by theological issues. Auchard sees *The Golden Bowl* as opposing the idea of negative theology; at the same time he interprets the novel as making a "retreat from the word." His analysis points to how "by working with words, Henry James asserts the ability of man to communicate, to reach tense, imperfect understanding, to work human will to some extent with language. But he doubts . . . that language . . . can adequately handle these tasks" (151). So while Auchard denies the role of negative theology, he points to precisely the doubt about language that can lead us *into* a more general negative theology. While the *via negativa* of John of the Cross is a spiritual journey, negative theology, especially as it has been resurrected in contemporary philosophy, is more of an epistemological or ontological position. Although it may, as Auchard claims, lack the

⁶ For another point of view, see Martha Banta's *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension*.

“negated spiritual sense” (3) of *The Wings of the Dove*,⁷ *The Golden Bowl* is still engaged in a hermeneutics of negative theology. Its religious location expresses a modern world between belief and atheism and between a determinate and indeterminate God.

The Story and the Bowl: Difficulty and Negativity

Bowl as Plot

The Golden Bowl is a novel about knowledge and a novel that refuses to be known. Critics have placed the novel at the “very limits of novel form” (Bradbury 124), and any traditional interpretation will necessarily overstate its coherence. James himself, for example, characterizes it by saying, “[t]he Prince, in the first half of the book, virtually sees and knows and makes out . . . everything that concerns us . . . the function of the Princess, in the remainder, matches exactly with his” (20-21). All traditional interpretations are, in a sense, theological, for as we see in Levi-Strauss and Derrida, to be theological we do not need a God, only a totalizing force of some kind. A God, in this context, need only be the “element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge” (*Grammatology* 98). Following this way of thinking, the impulse to restore order—to find a pattern beneath the chaos—is a theological one. This impulse is a major theme in James’s late novels and in the criticism of them.

But the novel is not this neatly contained. The experience of reading involves questions, confusions, and frustrated expectations, as we, to put it in the language of the novel, constantly try to locate just “where” we are. Critics have continually tried to

⁷ “*The Golden Bowl* develops none of the concerns with spirituality that *Wings* does. . . [The] negated quasi-mystical force here becomes positive psychological pressure” (Auchard 150).

describe the way it slips out from under them: "Its insanity is beautifully rational. Like an intricate mathematical proof correct in every detail except for the assumption upon which it is based" (Sears 181).

Like Sears, critics often use scientific or mathematical language to suggest a symmetrical or logical structure that remains just this side of comprehension. Stephen Spender organizes the novel as an equation in which Maggie=A, Mr. Verver=B, Amerigo=C, and Charlotte=D. He then gives us the following chart of the novel's structure:

AB	CD
The Golden Bowl	
AC	BD
AB	CD
The Golden Bowl	
AC	BD

His point is that in this system "the symmetry symbolizes the social order" and the "Golden Bowl with its flaw represents, of course, the flaw in the order of their lives" (87-88). This has become the standard interpretation of the metaphor and symbolism of the bowl, but more interesting than the conclusions of approaches like Spender's, is that the novel compels critics to explain it through charts and mathematical or scientific analogies, such as proofs or nuclear fission.

These charts and scientific analogies are another form of the theological urge to contain meaning that reflects the culture of a determinate god and a religion of the book. Reflecting a God-idea of unity and a religion of sacred texts, this critical urge attempts to

give a solid and grounded structure that explains the work. Although this god-like control of text can clearly be seen as theological, we can find the negative side of the novel's theology by allowing the work's paradoxes, contradictions, and silences to remain open. Although the first camp is more obviously god-like, the second approach is equally theological. It allows the negative side of religion and the indeterminate God to comment on the ambiguous themes and metaphors of *The Golden Bowl*. By turning to the indeterminate God, the non-totalizing force, of mysticism, postmodernism, and continental philosophy, we can look to theology to resist or balance this critical impulse for order.

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The basic plot of *The Golden Bowl* consists of a relationship between four main characters. Maggie and her widowed father Adam are rich cultured Americans living in Europe. Maggie has recently met the impoverished Prince Amerigo, whom she plans to marry. Charlotte Stant, a charming American girl who comes to visit, is a childhood friend of Maggie's, and, unknown to Maggie, has had a consummated love affair with the Prince. Maggie and the Prince marry and have a son, but Maggie remains closer to her father than the Prince, and she and her husband grow increasingly apart as the Prince and Charlotte again become lovers. Maggie decides her father needs to marry and leads him to choose Charlotte. Eventually Maggie discovers the truth about the Prince and Charlotte and takes control of events. Charlotte and Adam are essentially banished to America so that Maggie and the Prince can be alone with their marriage.

Despite its "somewhat over-obvious" symbolism, as Gore Vidal puts it in his introduction to the Penguin edition (13), the second and more interesting plot remains

that of the golden bowl itself. Charlotte and the Prince first see the bowl when they are shopping for a wedding present for Charlotte to give to Maggie. Although it is not gold at all, but gilded crystal, Charlotte initially loves it. The Prince, on the other hand, can immediately see a flaw in the cup. They decide not to purchase it. Much later in the novel, Maggie buys the same cup for her father's birthday. Unaware of its flaw, she "believed in it," as she later says (459). The dealer comes to her house feeling obligated to tell her of the flaw. He sees pictures of the Prince and Charlotte, tells Maggie that they were in his shop together, and suddenly she knows all. The bowl is destroyed and Maggie forces the action that leads to the novel's conclusion.

Early in the novel, we find the bowl's "creation myth." This short scene, filled with levels of reference and contradictory tensions, word play and metaphoric activity, sets up the tensions and themes for the whole novel. Shopping for a wedding gift for Maggie, the Prince and Charlotte, who has just arrived from America, enter a little shop. They speak in Italian about their past relationship and about how their little adventure should never be mentioned to Maggie; the event and the conversation should be as if they never happened. In trying to make the sale, the shop keeper claims that the bowl is formed by a "lost art." Apparently, this art either hides the flaw or produces a perfect cup, suggesting a sort of religious golden age, but one between perfection and flaw, unity and gap, truth and lie. Although Charlotte suspects a flaw, the dealer reassures her with a phrase that resonates through the novel: "if it's something you can't find out, isn't it as good as if it were *nothing*" (120, my emphasis). To give a gift with a flaw in it, he says, requires only "good faith." As they decide not to buy the bowl, Charlotte claims, ambiguously, "If that won't do there's nothing" (124).

What does Charlotte mean by “that?” The bowl? The marriage? The possibility of a relationship with the Prince? The two uses of the word “nothing” begin to open up the theme of negation and nothingness. “Nothing,” as the dealer uses it, means a hidden flaw, the appearance of perfection, or actual perfection itself. For Charlotte, “nothing” means, on the surface, that there is no gift suitable for Maggie? But why? Or is she referring to an emptiness somewhere in the situation?

Bowl as Object

This scene sets spinning into motion the complex, excessive, and Protean meanings of the bowl. More than a perfect geometric shape, the bowl forms a hermeneutic circle that denies closure. Each relationship that forms a symbolic part of the bowl is questioned, and the metaphorical force of the bowl will challenge each level of meaning, including the form of the novel and the idea of metaphor itself. The bowl symbolizes all and contains only emptiness. These elements of subversion and destruction give it a deeper theological significance: a theological presence that is formed by negativity and a central nothingness. This negativity and nothingness is seen in the way that each character appears to talk around and about what it is that is holding the book, the plot, and the characters together. Yet they are unable to voice anything, unable to name or describe what they are actually discussing. Often this topic of conversation is left unspoken or at most labeled “it,” and finally “nothing.”

Although, after this initial appearance, the bowl disappears for most of the novel, its presence persists through suggestion and symbolism. There are repeated metaphorical references to the nothingness of empty cups and vessels, and there is an erotic tea

drinking scene between Amerigo and Charlotte. The metaphorical universe of the bowl will expand into other metaphorical vessels of containing: floating boats, picture frames, and cages.

After Maggie's discovery of the affair, Fanny Assingham destroys the cup in a ritualistic manner, raising it high above her head and dashing it to the ground. "Whatever you meant by it," she says to Maggie, "has ceased to exist" (448). But despite its destruction, the bowl's trace still remains, and its meaning has always been determined by more than just Maggie's will. As Levi-Strauss would say, you can destroy the objects and the stories, but the structures of myth endure. And significantly the bowl does not shatter, but the "split determined by the latent crack was so sharp and so neat that if there had been anything to hold them the bowl might still quite beautifully have passed for uninjured"(451). The fault in the bowl is directly responsible for the fact that it is not destroyed.

For Maggie, the breaking of the bowl has only affected "its artistic value. Its other value is just the same—I mean that of its having given me so much of the truth" (455). Yet "truth" in this novel, and in much philosophy and theology, once claimed to be possessed, slips away; it always becomes "nothing." Indeed, for Maggie, the bowl will soon be only "formless fragments" (488). And although, as Jonathan Freedman writes, "James, like his character, seeks to gather the shattered fragments of life and remake them into significant and symmetrical order" (241), the novel and the bowl also stand for the impossibility of this effort. As Georges Bataille puts it, once we have captured the Grail, "what is left in our hands is only a cooking pot" (*Inner* 130). There are no structures, facts, or metaphors in the novel that don't have a negative side; the

ideas “nothing is all,” and “all is nothing,” revolve in an endless circle, becoming interchangeable.

Even within the novel the characters must read negative and ambiguous signs for their rich content and meaning. A telegraph from Amerigo to Charlotte provides an example. After being asked by Adam to marry, Charlotte asks for a response from Maggie and Amerigo before making her choice. Maggie wires her father, “we start to-night to bring you all our love and joy and sympathy.” Prince Amerigo then wires Charlotte who reads the telegram and then offers to show it to Adam who declines to read it. Charlotte then places it in her pocket and it is left unread by the reader until 35 pages later when we find that Charlotte has kept it secret, and still occasionally takes it out to read: “*A la guerre comme à la guerre then. We must lead our lives as we see them; but I am charmed with your courage and almost surprised at my own*” (244-45). The ambiguity of the message is acknowledged—“she had read it in more lights than one”—as is her awareness of the importance of both its ambiguity and of it having never been read by her husband. The characters’ awareness of the negative knowledge of a message unread, and the ability to hold multiple interpretations in mind will remain important. Characters called upon to interpret texts must show an awareness of negation in order to begin to understand. Readers of the novel can learn from the characters to concentrate their attention on moments and tropes of negation; to concentrate on the bowl that is actual, imaginary, symbolic, metaphorical and always profoundly cracked.

This image of structure as creative and effacing, as constructed by tenuous connections between characters, is one in which the structural relationship exists between the parts and not in the thing itself: in fact there is no thing itself. The “entity” of/in *The*

Golden Bowl is approached phenomenologically—in other words as it appears to consciousness. There is no objective description.⁸ This essential negative, of course, invites connections to the ideas of philosophers from Hegel to Derrida. As the novel's governing metaphor encloses readers and characters, so do reader and character search for something beyond negation and emptiness?

Any search for a “structure” assumes the stable existence of the center that postmodern philosophers such as Derrida negate. The quest in the novel for “truth,” for the Jamesian “it,” for “knowledge,” all suggest a linguistic center or presence that Derridean thought and the bowl deny. Each quest for meaning, whether by reader or fictional character, takes a path through the bowl as a metaphor or as a symbol, and then is denied both by the emptiness of the bowl and the flaw in the bowl. Like the relationship between theology and literature, the bowl is both container and contained; we create what we are encased in. The bowl, like the novel, splits into two, and because it also separates from the base it stands on, one cannot hold it together; it remains broken without a “structure” to stand on. Yet much of the structure remains: “It was only the golden bowl as Maggie herself knew it that had been broken” (491). The bowl in one sense is always broken, and in another, can never be destroyed. Maggie herself realizes that if she could but hold the bowl together on the stand it would resume its original appearance. But she is limited; she only has two hands and cannot hold all three parts together at the same time.

⁸ Although a description of the bowl finally comes late in the novel, for most of the text the bowl suggests a metaphorical structure that resembles the structures of deconstruction. As Gayatri Spivak says in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, the “unity of the structure is defined not so much by the substantive nature of the elements as by their relationship” (lv).

What we are talking about is not *the* golden bowl, but always a substitute for it. Whether we see this substitute in Platonic or Derridean terms, once in motion, the bowl cannot be destroyed or defined because the process of metaphor increases the level of substitution, keeping the bowl always shifting, both central and marginal. Maggie refers to the word “this,” which refers to the bowl, as being a “little word” that “seemed to express and include for her the whole of her situation” (439). But, of course, it cannot include the whole, as is indicated by the distancing effect of Maggie’s words “this,” “little,” and “seemed.” The characters and novel are holding together the substitute as well as being contained by it. Maggie is desperate for something to include the “whole of her situation,” and like a good critic searches for it in a symbol or a word. But no particle can contain the whole. This is an essentially theological situation that encompasses reading and characters. What is desired is a way to enclose or hold an interpretation, and yet the very attempts to do this continue to open up textual possibilities.

To put into theological terms: humans cannot kill God because they are still contained by the God-structure that they continually create around themselves. But humans also cannot hold together the pieces of God as a unity. Ultimately the metaphor of the bowl, like the metaphor of God, is always both surrounding and created by the text. Like Derrida's idea of the signature, the bowl is both outside of and enclosed (“entombed” or “encrypted”) in the text. Furthermore, this metaphor is created both by an author and the characters who occupy spaces inside and outside of another flawed metaphorical frame: the book.

Bowl as Title

The idea of the book as a framed and autonomous entity is a Judeo-Christian notion stemming from the "Book," and, for many contemporary thinkers the book is an idea that is ending. For Mark Taylor, "since the book is a part of the theological network that is now unraveling, its closure is being rewritten repeatedly" (*Erring* 76). Taylor connects this impossibility of a book to modernist experimentation in other arts: "many of the most thoughtful writers insist that it is no more possible to write a book than it is to paint a portrait or to compose a tonic melody" (77). For Derrida the idea of framing a work also needs to be questioned. Writing of Kant's notion of the *parergon*, he notes that "with respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then, gradually, into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background" (*The Truth in Painting* 61). The relationship of the novel—*The Golden Bowl*—and the golden bowl continually put the concept of framing, of the inside and outside of art, into question.

Before anything else *The Golden Bowl* is the title of this book. The ideal title of a book, according to Kenneth Burke, will "sum up" all the particulars of the book. This title, or "Title of Titles," then, implies all the particulars, and yet it is the particulars that possess the material reality. This movement, Burke says, is a kind of "emptying" or a "*via negativa*" (25). Burke's analysis is especially applicable to *The Golden Bowl* for several reasons. The bowl itself as the central metaphor implies a sort of literal emptying or emptiness. Also the theological implications of the "Title of Titles" and *via negativa* are appropriate to the nature of the novel. By following the path of the bowl throughout

the novel—its *via negativa*—we find the excesses of meaning that it comes to produce through its negation.

If the frame cannot contain, if the flaw always gives way, then we are left with, as Maggie says, fragments. Yet the cracked bowl, the broken bowl, even a fragment of the bowl, all suggest the impression and possibility of a totality. A totality that was or one that will be—either a Garden of Eden or a messianic paradise. Here we have a direct confrontation of the contradictory ideas of a determinate God and an indeterminate God—or, more familiarly, between modernist and postmodernist sensibilities of art. While the modernist impulse, as Apollinaire said, is the action of “recombination,” the fragment can also offer the possibility of resisting this tendency: to not always see a fragment as a lesser part of a whole. Theology has returned in contemporary thought is in part *because* it can function as a non-totalizable element of modernity. If to totalize is *essentially* a theological move, then the bowl as a metaphor for a frame is an essentially theological metaphor. The cracked bowl or a bowl with a flaw can then be seen as a metaphor for a non-totalizing theology, an interpretation that opens without seeking ultimate closure.

Metaphors of Bowls and Spaces

Current theories of language see metaphors as being essential and characteristic to the creativity of language, rather than being secondary and poetic but inferior alternatives to “normal” communication. These theories offer a way of viewing knowledge and language in which there is no verifiable reality and where “language, perception, and knowledge are inextricably intertwined” (Ortony 2). The metaphor is not peripheral but

central to how we understand the world. According to these views something *new* is created when a metaphor is understood; a metaphor is not opposed to literal meaning and itself has no meaning *other* than the literal. In other words, there is no sharp distinction between literal and metaphorical; there is no core concept on either side of the metaphor. We are not comparing something “true” to something “poetic,” but we are using language to create a meaning. Understanding a metaphor becomes as much of a creative process as creating one (Davidson 245). Furthermore, a metaphor's meaning exists only in its metaphorical form and contains what Stanley Cavell calls “limitless paraphrasability.” The golden bowl is an example of this limitless paraphrasability in action. The bowl is not just a symbol or a tool helping us to understand some privileged literal idea. The golden bowl as a metaphor does not just somehow “stand in” for a “real” bowl, or “represent” a fictional situation, but it *is* what the novel is about as much as adultery is. The metaphor *is* the idea. The cognitive “action” surrounding the infinite movement of meanings around the bowl is the action of the novel.

As metaphor, the bowl seems to stand for the whole work, for knowledge, for the lack of knowledge, for Amerigo himself, and for the relationship of the four main characters in all its manifestations. The bowl is continually and internally recreated as a metaphor by the characters, who see it as, among other things: “A day that we can claim together;” “an occasion that is also cracked” (292); “[The knowledge] that she has ceased not to know;” ““Terrors and shames and ruins”” like the “formless fragments of the golden bowl she was trying so hard to pick up” (488); “her happiness as it should have been” (475); and the “dire deformity of her attitude” (491). It holds a different meaning for each character. For Maggie, the bowl represents the knowledge of the relationship

between Amerigo and Charlotte: “What in heaven’s name is there between them?” she asks. The answer and the negation in this suggestively theological question is the bowl itself. The bowl contains all, but contains nothing. Maggie sees the bowl as both literal and metaphorical, standing for the knowledge, and standing for her visualization of an idealistic relationship as well: “The golden bowl—as it was to have been. The bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack” (474). The bowl thus exists as a perfect Platonic idea as well as an imperfect and damaged idea.

Although the bowl is the governing or controlling metaphor of the novel, the characters’ metaphorical world expands throughout the novel as characters create metaphors of vessels, containment, emptiness, and of structures or spaces of unpossessed knowledge. These metaphors work both within the novel and within the minds of characters in the novel, who use metaphors to help them to understand their situations and to make leaps of cognition.⁹ Although we, as reader, hear characters talk and think, it is often in the working out of a metaphor where they make decisions or change directions. The novel’s distrust of the very language that produces it results in characters not only being unable to express direct ideas to each other, but, more importantly, even to themselves. Mr. Assingham, thinking to himself, says, “statements were too much like theories, in which one lost one’s way” (240). Imagining themselves in boats, on trains, in cages, or on “mystic lakes” helps characters to answer the constantly asked Jamesian question, “just where am I?” Fanny’s statement, “So you see where that puts me,” is described as the blue light at the end of a “darksome tunnel” (93), and when Maggie

⁹ The metaphors are also created by the authorial voice, even occasionally the self-conscious “I” of the author: “Might I so multiply my metaphors, I should compare her to the frightened but clinging young mother of an unlawful child” (330).

imagines Charlotte as breaking out of her cage (490), it is her attempt to understand the shifts in their relationship.

If characters create metaphors to understand their position, and their relationship to others, they also create metaphors to pierce the nothingness, to imagine the abyss. The Prince creates his own metaphor of negativity when he compares the state of mind of his new friends to a “great white curtain,” producing a “darkness intended and ominous.” As Maggie tries to understand and control her situation in the second half of the novel, she too will create metaphors of darkness and light.

The opening pages of Volume II, the shift, as it were, from the Prince’s consciousness to the Princess’s, find Maggie pondering her situation and the possibility of digging deeper or of taking action. The opening sentence of this section, “it wasn’t till many days had passed that the Princess began to accept the idea of having done, a little, something she was not always doing, or indeed that of having listened to any inward voice that spoke in a new tone,” announces a change in the tone of the book and in Maggie’s thinking. Both the novel and Maggie are now narrating themselves in a different manner and the metaphor of knowledge is part of this shift. James creates a striking and complex metaphor of an Asian pagoda that functions as an alternate metaphor for the bowl, standing for Maggie’s inability to act, the situation between the characters, the knowledge that Maggie has, the knowledge that she doesn’t have, the knowledge she is afraid of, and the path she will need to follow to obtain that knowledge. The “situation” Maggie is pondering had been

occupying for months and months the very centre of the garden of her life,
but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or

perhaps rather some wonderful beautiful but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned at the overhanging eaves with silver bells that tinkled ever so charmingly when stirred by chance airs. (327)

The difficulty of Maggie's quest is obvious. She imagines passages, "sometimes ample and sometimes narrow." Although she sees possible points of entry, none seem inviting or perhaps even possible. At the very least, she will have to change. "Though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish . . . apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level." From this point in the novel the ideas of structure will always resonate as containers of knowledge and as impediments to gaining this knowledge.

As Maggie walks around her metaphorical building and as we examine the metaphor, the religious and philosophical associations accumulate. As she begins to imagine moving towards the knowledge, as she moves nearer the edifice, she feels as a "heretic" approaching a "Mohometan mosque." Maggie is like Schopenhauer's pathetic philosopher who "goes round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance." Schopenhauer's conclusion is that "we can never arrive at the real nature of things from without" (25). Maggie will continue to create mental structure and strive to "arrive at the real nature of things from without," but, although she will find ways to penetrate, she will ultimately find more closed structures. It is only when she discovers the bowl, in all its metaphorical and symbolic manifestations, that she will feel she understands completely.

As we have said, if the golden bowl represents a totality then *The Golden Bowl* does as well; the title sums up the particulars within, and the book itself at least suggests

the idea of autonomy. Within the novel, characters continuously remind themselves of this way of thinking. They cling to the ideas of structures, vulnerable to destruction, but also to the potential of recombination. “When the blocks tumbled down they but acted after the nature of blocks; yet the hour would come for their rising so high that the structure would have to be noticed and admired” (396). As characters use metaphors of the bowl and of containers to describe their own situation, coming to understand that the four characters are “arranged” (356), and that they “hang essentially together” (281), they also create a theory of perceiving structures and art. Characters use the metaphors of the bowl the way many critics have—to organize meaning, to offer some sort of closure, to stop the free play of signification.

We see throughout the novel the idea that to understand a complicated situation is to contain it, often by comparing it to a work of art. For the Prince as for Adam Verver, the idea of art implies both a creator and an owner; to appreciate art means to possess it.

A glorious sunny day is

as if the whole place and time had been a great picture, from the hand of a genius, presented to him as a prime ornament for his collection and all varnished and framed to hang up—what marked it especially for the highest appreciation was his extraordinary unchallenged, his absolutely appointed and enhanced possession of it. (286)

The metaphor of “hanging a picture” to stand for the full expression and containment of an idea, thought, or situation is common throughout the middle section of the novel.

Maggie, as she starts to work her plot in the second half of the book, tries to see how her husband will respond to her request to take her father on a trip. “She made the picture,

forced it upon him, hung it before him" (366). Moments in her past hang "like a framed picture in a museum," (384) or like a "great picture hung on the wall of her daily life" (332). This sensibility is sometimes connected to negative imagery, as when Maggie's "coming out of a dark tunnel" gives her a "perpetual throb of this sense of possession" (469). But, perhaps despite his own efforts, James often demonstrates not the art of a situation but the impossibility of "framing" a moment as art. The tension in the reading of the novel is in the aporias that deny what characters and novel try to affirm: that the very possibility of framing or structure itself parallels the possibility of knowledge. Both can be created and destroyed, imagined and altered.

In Shoshana Felman's well-known essay on *The Turn of the Screw*, she complicates the issue of knowledge by placing the reader within the action of the text. "What is perceived as the most scandalous thing about this scandalous story is that *we are forced to participate in the scandal*" (97, Felman's emphasis). She places reader, critic, and the critical argument within the same playing field, "the critical debates in its intentions and contention, itself, partakes of the textual *action*" (114).

Felman asks "not '*what* does the story mean?' but rather '*how* does the story mean?'" (119). Her question, "what if the reading (outside the text) were none other than the story's content (inside the text)?" (124), places us both inside and outside of the atheological golden bowl. We are always already contained in a theological process by the act of reading, by the act of recognizing the presence of a "book" or a "work." Felman effectively dissolves the borders between work and reading, between narrator, character, and critic. This disintegration of boundaries, characteristic of postmodern readings of modernist texts, allows us to move both directions in our theological

exploration: we both use religion and theology to interpret a work, and we use the work as a space from which to comment on theology.

Nothing and Knowledge

Negative and Mystical Knowledge

What do we do with this hole in the center of the novel? The sacred lack of knowledge and the impossible pursuit of both absolute knowledge and transcendence through imperfect language form a bond between religious mystics and modern thinkers. Reading *The Golden Bowl* constantly pushes us up against an absence of knowing and ultimately the absence of the presence of an absence that Maurice Blanchot says allows us to look at art. For Blanchot, “there is an ‘I don’t know’ that is at the limit of knowledge. We always pronounce it too early, still knowing all—or too late, when I no longer know that I do not know.” The novel portrays what Blanchot calls the “impossibility” of literature, and what for Georges Bataille was the pleasure of “not knowing” (*le non-savoir*).

In the novel a lack of knowledge is often connected to the idea of the sacred. Maggie’s “sacred purpose,” as Fanny calls it, is to keep her father unaware of the situation. Can we reconcile these worlds? The connection perhaps lays in the transcendent pursuit of unattainable knowledge represented by imperfect language—in other words, a form of mysticism. The paradox of listening to characters assure us (or each other) of knowing the truth and then questioning or reversing it, recalls Augustine’s *Confessions*, or other mystical works, where the author claims that everything comes

from God and is therefore unquestionable, and then admits his doubts and the possibility that he could be self-deceived.

This paradox of reading Augustine's *Confessions* is analogous to the difficulty of *The Golden Bowl*, in that as we, on one hand, accept the structuring principles of the narrative, we must also accept a questioning of these principles. At the outset and throughout his *Confessions*, Augustine assures his readers that all he confesses will be truthful because he has gotten it directly from God. Yet in book ten, when discussing sins related to smell, he states that he is not a victim to them, although he "may be deceiving" himself (241). There are several other similar examples where he admits to doubting his own perceptions. So what has he gotten from God, and what is still open to questioning? As Robert Dodaro points out, "when read in light of these lapses, [we] must begin to raise doubts about the stability of Augustine's self-knowledge" (85). The *Confessions*, often seen as paradigm setting in the development of the novel, introduces the doubting of an unreliable narrator (character/author/God) and its relationship to theology from the beginning.

For medieval theologian Meister Eckhart, although there is no doubt that God is the One, the difficulty comes in our representation of him in language. The only path of language to the One, the "Godhead," is a "negation of a negation." This idea of pure negation is related to later ideas of knowledge and understanding in Hegel and Sartre, for whom to know anything is to negate. But for Eckhart, knowledge cannot ever reach God, and therefore cannot be knowledge; hence his famous "I ask God that he may rid me of my God" (*Meister Eckhart* 231). Since all names and ideas about God belong to the realm of the humanly created, they must be negated. Throughout his sermons Eckhart

sounds a bit like Fanny Assingham when he tells us that God is not love but knowledge (German Sermon 72), and then that God is not knowledge but love (German Sermon 77). Eckhart seemingly embraced these contradictions and paradoxes as a necessary way of writing about a God who cannot be contained in a text or described in words. Ultimately Eckhart, like many mystics, concludes that we must think of God as “nothing.” This all important word returns us to the strange mysticism throughout *The Golden Bowl*.

Nothing

Midway through the novel, as suspicions about the conduct of Amerigo and Charlotte begin to develop, Fanny assures her husband that there is “nothing between the Prince and Charlotte,” and that in fact “nothing” is her “whole” idea even though there is “nothing they are not capable of” (301,302, 304). Throughout the novel the word *nothing* is used by all characters for various purposes, but primarily to avoid putting something into words. Even in what has been seen as a redemptive ending, Maggie announces ambiguously to Amerigo that, “I see nothing but you” (580), both giving and taking away from her husband and the reader. A complete analysis of the word “nothing” in the novel would take up a whole book, and we have already seen many significant instances, but we can look at a few more examples: In each case the word nothing stands for the central object of the statement—the emptiness around which the rest of the words revolve.

“You mean it makes you feel that you have nothing?” . . . The man’s in a position in which he has nothing in life to do.” (235)

She wished him for the present to “make up” to her for nothing. (422)

“Nothing—in spite of everything—*will* happen. Nothing *has* happened. Nothing *is* happening.”

He looked a trifle disappointed. “I see. For *us*.”

“For us. For whom else?” And he was to feel indeed how she wished him to understand it. “We know nothing on earth—!” It was an undertaking he must sign.

So he wrote, as it were, his name. “We know nothing on earth” (320-321).

“Yet I don't understand how, if you've done nothing—“

An impatience from Maggie had checked her. “I've not done absolutely ‘nothing’” (406).

Like the metaphor of the bowl, the word nothing represents a variety of objects, emotions, and relationships seen from a variety of different perspectives. In the above examples we see the word nothing stands for, respectively, existential lack, closure to an argument, the suggestion of cosmological knowledge, and the representation of action. The repetition of the word nothing is significant in *The Golden Bowl* especially because it is an idea that revolves around knowledge, both revealed and concealed, and also ontological issues of presence and absence. By putting nothing in the place of knowledge (“She knows, of course, nothing”) and by often giving it presence rather than absence (“*Nothing* has passed between them—that's what has happened. It explains.” [473]), James touches on concepts and questions that have fascinated and frustrated Western philosophy and theology since their beginnings.

What is “nothing”? A philosophically charged word that we can trace from Greek philosophy through medieval mystics through Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida, what nothing does *not* have to be is simply a *denial of what is*. The Greek philosopher Parmenides in the 5th century BCE grappled with the questions “is it possible to think what is not?” and “can non-existence or Nothing *be*?” Parmenides proposed that it was impossible to speak of Nothing. In doing so, of course, he violated his own rule, and therefore Nothing must *be*, or, as he deduced it, *all* is Nothing. Plato took an opposing view, and, except for the notion of *Khora*, essentially eliminated the idea of nothing and nothingness. For Plato, anything capable of being thought *is* (Heath).

By the time of Hegel, nothing or negation are completely intertwined with the positive. Being and non-being must both exist as complementary notions, dialectically producing and relying on each other. For Hegel, “pure Being and pure Nothing are then the same,” and for Heidegger too, Nothing is the same as Being: “in the Being of beings, the negation of the Nothing comes to pass” (qtd. in Caputo, *Mystical* 20-21). In this tradition, Eckhart’s medieval theology of God as Nothing seems ahead of its time. What these later philosophers have done is to make nothing not opposite but *other* than *being*. Heidegger reads Leibniz’s familiar philosophical axiom “nothing is without ground” to say not that everything has a ground, but to say that nothing *is* without ground. In other words, nothing exists, it *is*, but within groundlessness, outside of being.

The Golden Bowl becomes an exploration of the word and concept nothing in its richest sense, using it metaphorically, philosophically, and artistically. “Nothing” becomes a part of all of the main themes in the novel, part of the horizon by which we interpret the text. Three scenes from the novel will show how the concept of “nothing” is

directly related to the novel's development of the themes of metaphor and of knowledge, and how it is ultimately a theological issue.

Nothing on a Mystic Lake

The first scene is a conversation on “nothing” and knowledge between Mr. And Mrs. Assingham that takes place on a metaphorical “mystic lake”. Mr. Assingham waits for a report from Fanny, committing himself to “nothing,” he nevertheless makes himself available. Aware of her consciousness of the “deep waters” of the situation, he waits for her on the “shore of the mystic”

Before he had plunged, however—that is before he had uttered questions—he saw, not without relief, that she was making for land. He watched her steadily paddle, always a little nearer, and at last he felt her boat bump. The bump was distinct, and in fact she stepped ashore. “We were all wrong. There’s nothing.” (297)

Throughout this long conversation between Mrs. and Mr. Assingham, which occupies the physical center of the novel, they are significantly in the dark, in a “dusky drawing room.” The only light in the room comes through a “dim window,” which lets in only “vague light” (305), a vagueness that is part of their every utterance, and that suggests the metaphor of “seeing” as understanding. The conversation puts forth several paradoxical statements which echo through the interpretation of the novel: “Seeing” is associated with “sightlessly staring” and “good faith” is declared to be the same thing as a “false position” (308, 304).

The word nothing is more present in this scene than in perhaps any other scene in the novel. Fanny initiates the conversation by announcing there is “nothing” between Charlotte Verver and the Prince (298-99). When Mr. Assingham asks Fanny if her whole idea is that “Maggie thinks nothing,” Fanny responds with “it isn’t my ‘whole’ idea. Nothing’s my ‘whole’ idea” (301-02). The phrase “nothing is my whole idea” can be read multiple ways, depending on our emphasis, each appropriate to the philosophical concerns with nothing. Fanny basically seems to be telling her husband that “it’s just not that simple.” But she is also saying that her whole idea is nothing—that it is entirely made up of nothing. Yet, another reading states that the “whole idea” is bigger than can be comprehended, that it is always beyond being contained, that no one thing is the whole. In the case of Charlotte and the Prince, however, “there’s nothing they’re not now capable of” (304). Fanny’s final “deep injunction” to her husband begins “Nothing—in spite of everything—*will* happen. Nothing *has* happened. Nothing *is* happening” (320).

The conversation which ensues, where Fanny describes this “nothing,” in which Fanny is essentially the author and her husband the reader, is a humorous parody of Jamesian ambiguity that resembles the Abbot and Costello routine “Who’s on First.” The “nothing” that has happened is the topic of conversation, putting the issues of knowledge, language, and ambiguity in the foreground. Put into dialogue form, a section of this discussion shows off James at his most humorous and also reveals the themes of the impossibility of knowledge that will play out James at his most serious.

Fanny: They’re wonderful.

Bob: Indeed. I really think they are.

Fanny: You'd think it still more if you knew. But you don't know—because you don't see. Their situation is too extraordinary.

Bob: Too?

Fanny: Too extraordinary to be believed, I mean, if one didn't see. But just that, in a way, is what saves them. They take it seriously.

Bob: Their situation?

Fanny: The incredible side of it. They make it credible.

Bob: Credible then—you do say—to you?

Fanny: They believe in it themselves. They take it for what it is. And that saves them.

Bob: But if what it 'is' is just their chance—?

.....

Fanny: They're beautiful.

Bob: The Prince and Charlotte?

Fanny: The Prince and Charlotte. That's how they're so remarkable. And the beauty is that they're afraid for them. Afraid I mean for the others.

Bob: For Mr. Verver and Maggie? Afraid of what?

Fanny: Afraid of themselves.

Bob: Of themselves? Of Mr. Verver's and Maggie's selves?

Fanny: Yes—of such blindness too. But most of all of their danger.

Bob: That danger being the blindness—?

Fanny: That danger being their position. . . .The blindness is primarily her husband's.

Bob: Whose husband's?

Fanny: The blindness is most of all his. . . .But it's also his wife's

Bob: Whose wife's? (298-300)

This conversation, later called the “momentous midnight discussion” (409), sets up a pattern of the Assinghams analyzing the developing situation at the same time that they break down the language they are using in their very descriptions. For Fanny (an early deconstructionist) opposing statements are often taken to mean the same thing. In a later discussion Fanny, under questioning, will explain that, for her, to “lie *for* her” is the same as to “lie *to* her” and that to “help her *with* him” means the same as to “help her *against* him.” Bob and Fanny Assingham’s deconstruction of their own language is instructive to our reading experience, especially when we view Fanny as, at least in some ways, the author of the situation. Fanny’s role is to offer her interpretation of what is happening and propose a solution. The situation, as she sees it, was essentially masterminded by her, and it is her responsibility to understand and fix it. The complex issues here of creation and language create an ambiguity of author/authority/God in the novel much like James Joyce’s *Portrait*. The structure of authors within authors and the questions of the totality and ontology of the text reflect the complexity of the God-like creative role implied in the novel.

The world of *The Golden Bowl* is a world where words mean what Fanny (or Maggie or Henry James) wants them to. A word, be it “too,” “credible,” “husband” or “love” or “is” cannot be, as Maggie or Amerigo might put it, “hung on the wall like a picture.” Each word opens more possibilities than it closes.

Dangerous Knowledge

The conversation between the Assinghams synthesizes each of the themes we have been discussing: nothing, knowledge, secrets, negation, totalization, ambiguity, authority, and contradictory God concepts in ways that stress the reading and interpretation process. The scene blurs distinctions between reader, creator, and actor, much as Shoshana Felman suggests occurs in *The Turn of the Screw*. For Felman, "It is precisely out of *lack of knowledge* that the reading-process springs, the very act of reading implies at the same time the assumption that knowledge *is*, exists, but is *located in the Other*" (157). The reading process she describes is one that resembles a relationship to God or an Absolute Other who can be confirmed or created only out of absence. A relationship that disappears when the experience of the divine becomes actual, literal, or sensual. To know the other, to fully understand, is, according to Felman's interpretation of the tale, ultimately suffocating.

Felman points out that this theme in *The Turn of the Screw*, the very "murderous effect of meaning," is one in which the reader comes to "understand how a child can be killed by the very act of understanding" (161). As the figure of a *knowledge which cannot know itself*, which cannot reflect upon nor name itself, the child in the story incarnates, as we have seen, unconscious knowledge. To "grasp" the child, therefore, as both the governess and Edmund Wilson do, to press him to the point of suffocating him, killing or of stifling the silence within him, is to do nothing other than to submit, once more, the silent speech of the unconscious to the very gesture of its *repression*.

The Assinghams, in playing the role of author, reader, and Greek Chorus, simultaneously reveal and repress knowledge; it is never clear whether Fanny is

controlling, interpreting, or commenting on events. Like the reader, her relationship to the text is both inside and out. Maggie, who moves into the role of creator and interpreter, eventually will recognize Fanny as the “clear negation of everything” (470), and, indeed, Fanny’s existence and her idea of nothing become ontological questions. From where does she create or view the actions? Is she creating or imagining the ground on which she conceives her nothing?

Like philosophers seeking an “absolute foundation” for knowledge, it is the idea of “nothing” that calls this ground into question. As each character seems to know and admit nothing, or indeed labels this knowledge *as* nothing: do we see the nothingness as being what it is? Is its essence (no)thing? Or is it being hidden--therefore becoming a secret? Maggie, Fanny says, will “know everything . . . but she’ll never tell” (491).

The “secret of secrecy,” for Derrida, is that it is “not a matter of knowing and that it is there for no-one” (*The Gift of Death* 92), and he even associates the secret with a definition of God: “God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior” (*Gift* 108). If the bowl exists, if the novel exists, if there is truth, if there is God, they can only exist as a secret. They are unwritable, untraceable; they must be nothing.

The Return of the Bowl

The bowl and the knowledge that it brings finally return to the novel in Book Four chapter nine. As Fanny goes to visit Maggie in her room, religious imagery dominates the scene. “Maggie looked as if she had been carried there all attired and decorated, like some holy image in a procession.” Fanny feels “as the truly pious priest might feel when

confronted, behind the altar, before the fiesta, with his miraculous Madonna” (430). We are prepared for a scene of religious ritual.

Maggie has, seemingly by coincidence, bought the very same bowl that Amerigo and Charlotte looked at 4 or 5 years (and 300-some pages) before. The bowl is described as “a capacious bowl, of old-looking, rather strikingly yellow gold, mounted by a short stem on an ample foot” (434). This is the first real description we are given of the bowl. For a moment, at least at this point in the novel, the idea and the knowledge come together as an object coalescing into a description. The bowl’s meaning for Maggie is now clear. Her husband and Charlotte are on “intimate” terms. The revelation brought about by what she calls the “miracle” of the bowl, is that the Prince and Charlotte were “so much more intimate: than she had previously “any reason to suppose” (462).

“He knew her before—before I had ever seen him.” The bowl is her “proof.” The bowl, which Maggie does not now name or even look at, is referred to, almost reverently, only as “this.” The bowl contains, as Fanny and Maggie talk, an “outbreak of the definite,” and it temporarily seems to be *all* Maggie knows, the only definite or absolute knowledge in her universe.

After the bowl has been destroyed and its fragments placed on the mantle, Maggie finally confronts the Prince, who has just witnessed the moment of destruction. After pages of silence, in which she slowly and deliberately places the three piece of the broken bowl back on the mantle—“She could but carry two of the pieces at once” (451)—she addresses the Prince. She tells him that she now knows, and has ceased, finally, “not to know.” What “acts” upon the Prince is Maggie’s “repeated distinct ‘know, know’” (463). This “know, know” sets up an echo not only in the Prince’s mind, but in the reader’s.

The word play of “know” and “no” represent the action and possession of knowledge and finds its location in the golden bowl, which becomes a symbol of knowledge and of not knowing. The novel has built up in our minds the connection between the two words and also their relationship to private construction of metaphor. The “real knowledge” that Maggie finally possesses is represented by a negation. What is most important to Maggie is not that *she* “knows,” but that the prince knows that she has “ceased *not* to know,” (404).

After this even Maggie will see herself as the author and interpreter of the bowl. Her situation and the people around her are like a

stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene she might people, by the press of her spring, either with serenities and dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins, *things as ugly as those formless fragments of her golden bowl she was trying so hard to pick up.* (488, emphasis mine)

In putting the bowl back together, she plays the role of the author or playwright; as interpreter of the bowl she sees that “the breakage stood not for any wrought discomposure among the triumphant three—it stood merely for the dire deformity of her attitude toward them” (491). She sees that reading her metaphor is a subjective experience, and that the bowl is different for each reader, “the full significance—which, as was now brought home to Maggie, could be no more after all than a matter of interpretation, differing always for a different interpreter” (493).

Myth and Anti-Myth

If the bowl is always cracked, then the novel is as well, and one such crack or fault lies in a seemingly innocent thought of Maggie's that aligns her with classical mythology. This moment occurs right before an important conversation that Maggie has with Charlotte. In this scene, Maggie, on the pretence of bringing Charlotte a book, nervously walks out to talk to her. Maggie's actions can be read symbolically, as another act showing her agency in ordering the narrative, as the force of an author(ity).

I . . . couldn't bear to think you should find yourself here without the beginning of the book. *This* is the beginning; you've got the wrong volume and I've brought you out the right (540).

Charlotte is reading the wrong book, she is living the "wrong volume." Maggie speaks gently, smoothing over the rift, gilding over the fault, but at the same time she insures that the final split *will* happen.

But before her scene with Charlotte, the text questions the ordering power Maggie and the novel seem to assume. As Maggie ponders how she can approach and talk to her, "there came to her confusedly some echo of an ancient fable" (537). Maggie imagines figures of classical Greek mythology: "some vision of Io goaded by the gadfly or of Ariadne roaming the lone sea strand. It brought with it all the sense of her own intention and desire; she too might have been for the hour some far-off harassed heroine" (537). Although James seemingly sets up these mythical figures to create a loose parallel to Maggie's situation, even Maggie imagines them as only approximating her position; she has "some" vision, not "a" vision, it is Io "or" Ariadne. Still, by following a chain of

association that the figures of Io and Ariadne set into motion, we can see the text escaping itself, moving outside of its own imagination.

Io was a mortal woman loved by Zeus. When Zeus's wife, Hera, becomes suspicious, Zeus changes her into a cow, but Hera sends the gadfly to bother Io. Pursued by the gadfly, Io swims across the sea. To apply this to the characters of *The Golden Bowl*, Zeus would seem to clearly represent Adam Verver, but as Patricia Crick points out in the notes to the Penguin edition, by the end of the novel it seems that "Io has more in common with Charlotte than with Maggie" (590). Of course if we see Charlotte as Io fleeing across the sea, then Maggie becomes the gadfly. The myth, conjured up by Maggie, unconsciously reflects the ambiguity between her and Charlotte's position, erotically, morally, and literally.

Ariadne, on the other hand, betrays her father, the King of Crete, to help her lover Theseus through the labyrinth of the royal palace, by giving him a ball of thread. Theseus will later leave Ariadne for her sister, Phaedra. Phaedra will in turn later fall in love with Theseus's son by a former marriage. In the notes Crick merely says, "the parallels are not perfect, but they are close enough" (590).

But if we look closely, it is where the tales don't match where things get interesting. Roughly, we can align Adam with the King, Maggie with Ariadne, Charlotte with Phaedra, and Amerigo with Theseus. For the parallels (in erotic attraction, anyway) to coincide perfectly, Charlotte would have had to fall for the son of Amerigo, not the father of Maggie. The father figure in the myth, of course, is Phaedra's father, which suggests the incestuous nature of the Maggie/Adam relationship. Phaedra's falling for Theseus's son is an act which insures that all of the characters end unhappy in love, and

the novel's connection to the myth points to less of a closed happy ending than some have seen in *The Golden Bowl*.

While it is hard to find an example of Maggie leading Amerigo through a labyrinth of her father's making, she does cast herself in this very role in the long silence following her husband witnessing the breaking of the bowl. "Hadn't she fairly got into his labyrinth with him?—wasn't she indeed in the very act of placing herself there for him at its centre and core?" (454). The Labyrinth of the myth suggests the impossible structures of unattainable knowledge that characters mentally construct throughout the novel: the "tortuous corridors" (129), of Adam, the "sometimes ample and sometimes narrow" spaces of Maggie's imagined pagoda. If it is the connection between the characters that create the flawed metaphorical golden bowl, the labyrinthine connections between the myth and the novel create even more fissures in the integrity of the novel.

If we overlay the Io myth on the novel, characters and relationships blur indistinguishably; the myth adds not resonance but questions. In citing two classical heroines, Maggie casts doubt on all the "knowledge" that has lead her to take the action she is about to take. On the eve of her final movements she plants in the text both a labyrinth of allusion and a gadfly that unravel all she thinks she knows. Myth becomes anti-myth, refusing closure, questioning knowledge, affirming nothing. This seemingly incidental reference to myth, buried in the middle of an important chapter, functions as the flaw in the bowl. A crack, not visible to all, but a point in the novel (*The Bowl*) where it both breaks down *and* allows for a deeper truth to be revealed.

Final Scenes

The final chapter of the novel relates the day of Charlotte and Adam's departure to America. It opens with a scene of Maggie and the Prince waiting for "the others" to arrive. As Maggie muses over some of the events that have led them to this point, the topic of knowledge comes up between her and her husband. The Prince wants Charlotte to know the extent of his knowledge of the affair. "I shall tell her I lied to her," he says, and then, "I shall tell her you did." When Maggie rejects this idea he asks, "and how then is she to know?" "She isn't." "She's only still to thing *you* don't—?" "She may think," says Maggie, "what she likes" (570). This ambiguity, then, is to always lie at the vortex of the four characters.

After Charlotte and her husband arrive to say their good-byes, there is one final attempt by a character to present a metaphor of closure, completion, or understanding. Adam stands by himself, looking at a painting, "an early Florentine sacred subject," that he had given Maggie. The painting is another metaphor for framing and also presents a contrast to the other infamous cracked gift. Yet Maggie interprets this object as representing fissure as well. In leaving the painting behind, her father is "leaving her a part of his palpable self" (573).

Maggie's plan is complete. In the final scene of the novel she and the Prince are alone together, finally. As they embrace, her "face before him," he says "I see nothing but you." Although Leon Edel's statement that "*The Golden Bowl* is a work unique among all his novels: it is James's only novel in which things come out right for his characters," is perhaps the prevalent reading of this scene, the Prince's use of the always troublesome "nothing" is far from clear. The nothing echoes back to a beginning, a scene

that the bowl, and therefore Maggie, Amerigo, and readers will never let go of. Even as they embrace at the end, the trace exists of a scene in a small shop years before, an encounter that revealed a crack that can perhaps never be mended.

***Khora* and Atheology**

The more we look into the emptiness and negativity of the metaphor of the bowl the more it reveals an abyss in the novel. The concept of *Khora*, Plato's negative space that preceded creation, is suggestive in this context. For Derrida, writing of the negative metaphor of *Khora*, the analysis of negative discourse in texts that resemble negative theology can "perhaps lead us to consider the becoming-theological of all discourse" where every negative sentence would already be haunted by God" ("How to Speak" 76). Like the *Khora*, the negativity of the bowl calls into question even the concept of metaphor on which most interpretations of it are based. If metaphors "borrow figures from the sensible forms inscribed in the *Khora*, without the pertinence for distinguishing the *Khora* itself, they are no longer metaphors" ("How to Speak" 106). In other words, if metaphors of containment and emptiness, are also metaphors taken from receptacles of creation, they borrow their rationale for being from a non-object that denies existence; they lose their referent. *Khora* exists outside of logic; one cannot say that it is "*neither this nor that* or that it is *both this and that*" (*On the Name* 89). *Khora* has no referent; "it oscillates between two types of oscillation: the double exclusion (*neither/nor*) and the participation (*both this and that*)" (*On the Name* 91).

Like *Khora*, the bowl's very existence (which is *not* existence, but negative or pre-existence) makes us question everything around and in it, and all it produces and

contains. This subversive questioning especially includes the idea of a metaphor or of “nothing.” *Khora*, the bowl, the book; each is a metaphor, a creator, a nothing. Each is created by the very ones who make up and occupy and owe their very existence to it. Each is making knowledge and even existence possible and yet proving any knowledge unattainable, their negativity haunted by God, God haunted by their negativity.

When Mark Taylor points to 20th century philosophy's failure to come to terms with the “radical implications of the death of God,” he presents a similar challenge to literary theory. For Taylor, “the news of the death of God cannot reach our ears until its reverberations are traced in the notion of self, history, and the book” (*Erring* 7). For a literary critic writing today, a novel like *The Golden Bowl* invites an approach that engages these concepts. A negative theology or atheology provides a space both inside and outside the frame from which to interact with a novel that questions the idea of a book. The “knowledge,” the “nothing,” the “bowl,” the “crack,” are neither “it” nor “not it,” neither present nor absent. The experience of the novel exists between the two horizons of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, never settling anywhere. We have to both “believe in it” and deny it. This is not only a way of reading *The Golden Bowl*, but a way of thinking about thinking.¹⁰ If we accept the presence of a level of Christian unconsciousness “in” our language, our literature, and our criticism, and we see the negative as a necessary part of our theological make up, then exploring the negative aspect of theology in our literature is a partial opening into (or out of) that unconsciousness. This path of thinking is a negative theology of hermeneutics offering a

¹⁰ One of Derrida’s projects has been to “find moments in the history of Western thought when metaphysics is marked and exceeded by something it cannot fully control” (Hart, *Trespass* 41). In doing this he often looks to literary texts that “make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as

way of looking at literature or texts that acknowledges the “master narrative” of theology at the center of our literary consciousness, and yet also attempts to transcend it.

To whatever extent language creates the “real world,” it certainly creates a real world for fictional characters. Language can also be said to create the God around whom a language is then constructed in an attempt to describe. According to Burke, the “linguistic analog” of God is to be found in the nature of any title, for example the title of a book. If *The Golden Bowl* is an analog for God, then the bowl as a container of nothing, yet both containing and made up of the whole reality of the book's world is an example of a form of negative theology: a theology that regards negative statements as the only way to speak of God. For Meister Eckhart, God was the One who was always present and absent, and “to add anything to God is to conceal him.” For Eckhart, even to give something a name is to make it into something it isn't, a concept James surely understands in *The Golden Bowl*. Starting with the idea that God is unimaginable and incomprehensible, such theology leads to questions as to whether God is within “being” at all. Negative theology, expressed in language but questioning it, aims toward an absolute that it cannot claim. As Kevin Hart says, it is both a ground and groundlessness. Or, as James says of Maggie, she is both “beyond everything,” and “beyond nothing” (173). Yet both James and negative theologians grapple with the inability of language to grasp something that is created by language. If, as some suggest, a negative theology always implies the quest for and existence of some “hyper-essentialism,” to escape this quest and still to keep a non-metaphysical theological orientation, perhaps a more useful term is Bataille and Taylor's “a/theology,” where the simultaneous belief in absence and

divisible and questionable.” As Derrida says, these texts offer a “free space from which to interrogate” philosophy and theology from a fresh perspective (qtd. in Hart 41).

presence is maintained, and where ideas are “never fixed but are always in transition” (*Erring* 13).

Trapped in our own bowl, can we see outside of a literary theory with a buried Christian unconsciousness to examine works created with that same unconsciousness written in forms and in a language that came out of Christianity? The idea of negativity or an a/theology outside of “being” is one that has been found sacred by medieval mystics, both Christian and Jewish, by Hindus and Buddhists, and by postmodern theologians. Such an a/theology is not a method and not a thing, but what it can do is to help us to let go of concepts, including that of itself. What is beyond being and knowledge is both central and negative, and we need to allow a back and forth action that is interpretation or criticism. Writing of his relationship to theology, Derrida says, “this, which is called X ‘is’ neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither inside nor outside” (“How to Avoid” 74). This quote is from Derrida’s essay “How to Avoid Speaking,” which could be a sub-title for James’s novel. James (like Derrida) uses the syntax characteristic of negative theology: a thing is “neither this nor that,” one object is “not unconnected” to another.

What emerges in the discussion of *The Golden Bowl* and theology is an *essential* imperfection in theological ideas; an imperfection, like the crack in the bowl, allows theological ideas to continue to exist and remain relevant. The supplementary God-ideas show a lack within the ideas themselves, a negative always already supplementing the positive. For Slavoj Žižek this imperfection is a trait of Judeo-Christian religion, and is revealed by Christianity to be a fundamental imperfection in God (*On Belief* 146). It is this kind of imperfection that an a/theology finds in the Golden Bowl and in the golden

bowl. The bowl lies on the slash in a/theology, and the slash is also the fault in the bowl. The fault is then an opening or an imperfection that allows destruction but that also provides an entrance to knowledge.

Postscript

When they first enter the shop, the Prince offers to give Charlotte a small “recordo” or souvenir, of “this.” Charlotte asks him “where’s the logic?” claiming that the gift would be “nothing” because it would “*have no reference*.” With Charlotte’s question, “where’s the logic?” and her definition of nothing as lacking reference, she introduces the theme of a non-metaphysical and negative theological world that runs through the scene and the novel (116). If we re-read her as saying nothing *is* without reference, Charlotte echoes Heidegger’s reading of nothing as beyond being. “This,” as the Prince calls the event, is the conversation that creates the meaning of the bowl they are about to see. “This” is an event where they speak of “nothing,” an event never to be spoken of again, yet one that creates the whole situation and the metaphor that will stand for it. But the conversation (event) doesn’t disappear, and is given material form represented by the bowl, and by the shopkeeper who unknown to them understands their Italian. Their word is made flesh; they leave a trace—a trace that is the flaw in the metaphorical bowl they are creating and are created by. The bowl and book can be a metaphor for our postmodern a/theological world, a clue to where we are, where we are going, and how to interpret where we have been. An existence and an experience that both is and isn’t, that both contains and is empty, that is ultimately theological and nothing.

Chapter Four

À La Recherche and Proust's Unstable Metaphors of Divinity

Part I: Christian Art: Stained Glass, Hawthorns, and Stalactites

The waters of religion recede and leave behind morasses and shallow pools . . . Every joy is brief, and every ray of sunlight is pale that creeps down to us on our white mountain. Music sounds, an old man turns a barrel-organ, the dancers revolve--the wanderer is deeply moved when he sees it: all is so wild, so taciturn, so colorless, so hopeless, and now there sounds within it a note of joy, of sheer, unreflecting joy! But already the mists of early evening are creeping in, the note dies away, the wanderer's step grates on the ground; for as far as he can still see, he sees nothing but the cruel and desolate face of nature

Friedrich Nietzsche ("Schopenhauer" 148)

When a belief vanishes there survives it a fetishistic attachment to the old things which it did once animate, as if it was in them and not in ourselves that the divine spark resided, and as if our present incredulity had a contingent cause—the death of the gods.

Marcel Proust (I. 460)

Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal.

Wallace Stevens (*Opus* 195)

Art and Religion

In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel Proust employs the ancient metaphor of God as artist that was resurrected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For Nietzsche, the creative artist "merges with the primal architect of the cosmos" (*Birth of Tragedy* 9); for Wallace Stevens, "God and the imagination are one" (*Opus Posthumous* 178). Each author makes a move in which, as Mark Taylor puts it, "divine creativity is displaced onto human creativity" (*About Religion* 208), and this move is also central in the work of Proust. Throughout *À la recherche* God is rarely mentioned by name, but metaphorically the presence and absence of the Western God is felt in each carefully structured theme, character, and phrase. The creative powers of the painter Elstir, for example, are

compared to the divine creation of the world. Proust's novel, however, is more about the act of creation than the divine. The god-metaphor and the idea of art as religion are secondary to a never-ending process of creating and perceiving art. In Proust, neither pole of the metaphoric equation is as important as the cognitive efforts involved in reading the metaphor. Proust's God, echoing thinkers from the medieval Kabbalah to Heidegger and Levinas, is a process, more verb than noun.

Nietzsche and the late 19th century had raised epistemological questions about the nature of God and art that needed to be grappled with, and authors like Marcel Proust began to struggle with these issues through their use of metaphors of artistic creation and perception. That God functions as a metaphor in literature is accepted across disciplines and centuries. What God is a metaphor *for* is an unanswerable but necessary interpretive question at the heart of modern theology, philosophy, and literary critical theory. In this work, God has been a metaphor for totality, completeness, mystery, the inexpressible, and nothing, none of which are mutually exclusive.

Even a brief pass through a few pages of *À la recherche* will reveal the extensive use of a religious vocabulary and images to describe secular objects and situations. Proust's narrator uses religious language and symbols throughout the work to refer to various subjects of artistic, sensual, or erotic nature, such as landscape paintings, chamber music, hawthorns, the cries of street vendors, his mother's kiss, and even his lover's tongue ("slipped between his teeth like a communion wafer."). Although many of these examples are presented in the work with a least partial irony, the range of reference from the earthy to the profound to the purely sexual demonstrates the importance of religion and religious language as a source of meaning in the novel.

The very first paragraph of *À la recherche* establishes religion and art as interlaced themes. The famous opening, “for a long time I used to go to bed early,” leads to the narrator describing his disorientation upon waking, after falling asleep reading. His semi-conscious thoughts juxtapose an item of religion with one of art: “it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet” (I. 3). What further unites and complicates the two objects is that they each can be a work of art in themselves or a container for art. A church is a historical and political institution, an architectural structure, and a receptacle for art; a string quartet is a genre, a performing ensemble, and a piece of music. The triple movement of a container in its potential to surround, to take in, or to be an empty vacuum, is contained in the metaphorical play of both religious and artistic images.

In many ways the rest of Proust’s novel will be an unpacking of these opening sentences. Of course, the narrator *is* the subject of the book, and in that primordial dream world of semi-sleep where both artistic creations and religious sensibilities are born, a church and a string quartet are formed, imagined, and created; they come from the same place: the subjective mind of the dreamer. The phenomenological movement from subject to object, from the perceiver to the perceived, is a frequent theme of the novel, especially in the reception of art and religion.

In addition to language and imagery, the over-arching movements and themes of the work can also be seen in a religious or even theological light. Although their conclusions have varied, critics have agreed on the importance of Christianity and especially Christian symbols and art as a frame of reference or as a structuring device in Proust’s work. As early as 1928, critic Robert Ernst Curtius was commenting on Proust’s

religious manner of looking at the world. Other critics wrote of Proust's Christian orientation or, conversely, of his Godless novel.¹ In the context of postmodern critical and theological thought, I return to the question: What is Proust's God?

In the middle part of the 20th century, Barbara Bucknall, René Girard, and Georges Poulet each developed influential arguments about Proust's relationship to religion. For Girard, although Proust's personal belief is not to be taken literally, Christianity shapes the whole work, giving it the "structure of a gospel," from birth to death to resurrection (11). Girard finds, in the scene of the madeleine at the beginning of the novel, an "Annunciation," and then, citing Proust's comment that the novel is a "cathedral," Girard locates the conclusion of the novel as the "choir toward which all architectural lines converge and from which they all originate." Girard concludes his structural argument by stating that

Although Proust was an agnostic, his masterpiece espouses the Christian structure of redemption more perfectly than the carefully planned efforts of many conscientious Christian artists. Though the Christian significance of *Remembrance of Things Past* remained metaphorical for him, he viewed this metaphor as his supreme aesthetic achievement. After the naive biblical symbolism of *Combray*, after the infernal imagery of *Cities of the Plain*, comes a third dominant religious symbolism of spiritual metamorphosis. *The Past Recaptured* is a second birth and a last judgment. (11)

¹ Georges Cattaui and Elliot Coleman saw the work's Christian aspects while, François Mauriac saw it as "Godless."

Also recognizing religion in the text as a metaphorical and structuring device, Poulet turns from structure to the narrator's means to his redemptive ending. Unlike literal minded Christians such as François Mauriac, who point to the "absence of Grace" (47) in Proust's novel, Poulet finds in Proust's "involuntary memory" a form of divine grace; a power from above that follows an inexplicable descent to reward an unexpected subject (72-73).²

Bucknall, in a full-length work on Proust's "religion of art," cites both Girard and Poulet, but identifies Proust's primary concern as "a religious problem—that of spiritual integration" (17). For her, Proust presents the struggle between spirit and matter and "arrays his religion of art in the trappings of traditional Christianity, thereby giving it the prestige of accepted religion" (19). The main function of Proust's "religion," she suggests, is that it is used to elevate the artistic experiences in the novel into religious experience.

Although claiming the importance of Christian themes and images in *la recherche* is a common critical move, critics often back away from making too strong of a connection and return to ways in which Proust embodies modernism's agnosticism or atheism. Proust biographer Jean-Yves Tadié points out that the young "Marcel's credo was formed from the age of thirteen . . . poetry stood 'above life and its wretchedness'—but it no longer leads to God" (59). And although Bucknall acknowledges that Proust's use of religious language and imagery *suggests* traditional Christianity, she agrees with Mauriac who finds God "terribly absent" in Proust (46).³ Bucknall points to the

² In a more recent work, Julia Kristeva, as well, finds a form of Christian grace in the Proustian experience of art (*Time* 319).

³ Mauriac, a believing Christian, supports his claim by showing that in Proust no characters struggle against original sin nor do they receive or seek divine assistance.

relatively few allusions to “God,” separate from an artistic longing, and characterizes Proust as “an agnostic who mixes a respect and longing for religious things with a tendency to make fun of the devout and to parody scripture” (148). The questions we need to ask are: does the “terribly absent” God mean there is no God-idea in Proust’s text? What are we to make of all of Proust’s religious references⁴ created in this godless text? If Proust’s art is really his religion, what function do the images of Christian art and Biblical stories have?

With nods to certain obvious exceptions like Eliot’s later works, critics routinely identify modernism with a reductive “death of God” mentality, and their criticism of Proust often falls into this category. But his novel has a more complex relationship to religion than many of these positions depict. Like Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* Proust’s novel rarely uses the name of God, like the James novel the work is filled with religious allusions and symbols, and like James there is a metaphorical ordering principle (the bowl for James, music for Proust) that can be a God-idea—a concept that “makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self knowledge” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 98). Furthermore, the complex role(s) of the Proustian narrator invite theological questioning. Like James Joyce’s Stephen, Proust’s narrator plays a creator role—denying God and his God-role but fulfilling it nonetheless.

Like all themes in Proust, “religion” is subject to the spiraling and swirling development of the novel’s narrative; no character, place, or theme ever remains stable, but are subject to the fluidity of the narrator’s subjective imagination and the realization of his complex text. While religious phrases and patterns are made secular, secular aspects are made religious through a borrowing of a theological sensibility. This is

⁴ According to Victor Graham, there are 305 religious references in all of *À la recherche* (105).

especially true in the intersection of art and religion. Throughout the work, Proust tends to treat art and the artist as if they had access to a divine world. Certainly it is through art that the narrator finds a sense of purpose and his concept of salvation; art gives the novel its genesis, and its existence, its structure, and its teleology. Furthermore, behind the religiousness of the secular art, Proust places, at key moments in the narrative, a variety of works of Christian art, from sculptured porches of churches of the apostles and stained glass depictions of Old Testament scenes, to devotional paintings by Giotto, and Wagner's Christian opera *Parsifal*.

Although within *À la recherche* the Bible itself functions mostly as a source of stories and phrases, elsewhere Proust writes "whatever your beliefs may be, the Bible is something real, of the present, and we have to find in it something else besides the flavor of its archaism and the entertainment of our curiosity" (*Reading Ruskin* 20). The significance of this passage is its emphasis on bringing the past to "life." This is the traditional role of religious art and is the burden that Proust places on secular art: to break down the constraints of Time, or, as Samuel Beckett says, "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation" (*Proust* 1). At the end of Proust's novel, as the narrator begins to pull together all the pieces of his epiphany, the narrator remarks that "the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other." This temporal shift places the "being within him" in the "one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time" (III. 904). The ideal art then must take us both outside time and penetrate to the "essence of things," both goals of a religious orientation: the transcending of the temporal and the finding of the truth behind appearances.

Proust and his narrator's search for a *real presence* behind artistic experience borrows directly from Catholic and Christian aesthetics and drew Proust to writers like John Ruskin and the art of cathedrals and stained glass. For Julia Kristeva, Proust's "studies in Christian art were expanded and transformed within the very body of *Search*" (*Time and Sense* 100), and the stained glass window "is a mere point of departure for the splendors that will radiate in *À la recherche*" (169). In her work *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*, Kristeva mirrors the movements of the novel by often blending together the language of art and of religion. Not only does the narrator himself refer to large-scale novels as cathedrals, but Proust sees cathedrals as spaces of art. They are "museums of the religions of the Middle Ages," as well as "living museums" that contain art that "could not without [aesthetic] sacrilege be placed anywhere else (*Reading Ruskin* 15). Throughout these examples, it is the manner in which religious structures *contain* art, and in which religious art contains narrative that attracts Proust's attention.

Yet "contain" is not really the right word, for in this containment boundaries are split open and transgressed. Proust's Christian art spills over into his godless world, testing limits and questioning perception. His metaphorical images—churches, flowers, paintings, women—will work for but also against the art/religion of the novel. The experience of the novel will split open the reader and narrator's processes of perception to reveal darkness where we look for light and only flesh when we crave for the word.

In Paul de Man's reading of Proust's metaphors he points to this complexity and double movement within their perception. He especially looks at the metaphors of inside/outside and dark/light, which, he says, are "so frequent that they could be said to make up the entire novel" (60).

These initially static polarities are put into circulation by means of a more or less hidden system of relays which allows the properties to enter into substitutions, exchanges, and crossings that appear to reconcile the incompatibilities of the inner with the outer world. (60)

These metaphors, as de Man reads them, although they appear to be part of a “totalizing world” (68), actually deconstruct themselves. Yet, as he suggests, “by thus allowing the text to deconstruct its own metaphors one recaptures the actual movement of the novel and comes closer to the negative epistemology that would reveal its hidden meaning” (72). By tracing Proust’s meaning, which is always “in flight” (78), de Man returns to Proust’s metaphors of “reading.” In turning to the theological in Proust’s metaphors I will locate the idea of God in both the “totalizing” properties and the continuous flight from meaning. My metaphor, though, rather than reading, which implies a “hidden meaning,” will be instead “writing,” which focuses more on the flight and loss of the meaning. To write the flight of meaning is to pursue the impossible, to create the uncreatable, to trace the name of God.

My thesis is that Proust’s text, despite its final epiphanic moment, which is beautifully constructed and is often interpreted as making sense of all the disparate parts, can also be read as a postmodern, decentered and atheological text. On the surface, the work positions the presence and idea of Christianity and Christian art in ways that suggest patterns by which the text can be grounded. But although it then appears to rely on this ground in its aesthetic and sensual path to a secular salvation, religion, as I continue to show throughout this work, does not have to be grounded or provide an absolute ground to still be, in a sense, religious or theological. As Kevin Hart says, “one

may hold that there is a God but that there is no concept of God to which one can appeal that can ground one's discourse about God or the world" (*Trespass* 28). Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, finds in the Christian religion, not connections, but the "gap itself" between God and Man (*Tarrying* 51). Both Hart and Žižek find in their formulation of religion or God a force away from stability or a directed metaphysical structure. Proust's novel can, in this context, be read to suggest that it is the negative and subversive legacy of Christianity and Christian art that provides a model for the redeeming experience of secular art—always already exerting a subversive effect in its theology and its art. So in addition to showing how Proust borrows the moves of Christian art to give his work a shape and structure mimicking the Christian teleological arch towards resurrection, we can use his borrowing of Christian themes and art in ways that reveal their negative theology and restore the wandering and subversive deconstruction of the text. As the ending suggests a totality and a unity, it also embodies an impossibility, therefore recreating *both* sides of the paradoxical Western God-idea; within the same images are contained both the possibility and impossibility of a transcendent unity.

Just as it takes the narrator a full year to come to a true recognition of the death of his grandmother, the narrator, Proust, and perhaps the whole 20th century did not fully realize Nietzsche's death of God. The narrator only feels the absence of his Grandmother in a moment of involuntary memory as he bends over to unbutton his boots—a type of the atheological absence of God embedded in the difficult web of Proust's text.

Mystical and Atheological Webs

Proust builds his world of art upon 19th century ideas of art *as* religion, but his complex association of art, time, perception, and religion takes it beyond a one-to-one relationship where art replaces religion. Proust's novel anticipates more than it recalls; rather than being Arnoldian, it more closely resembles Georges Bataille's theory that art is religion not because it becomes a sacred object to be worshipped, but because it creates the sacred through a disturbing and violent sublime. The emphasis is placed on affect, perception, and process, rather than on the essence of subject or object. It is in the *process* of depicting the "religious" role of art and the artistic role of religion that we can see the novel's more radical and postmodern side. This process of both defining and negating a quest for meaning is embedded in and intertwined with the work's construction. Theological themes and traces within the novel's form and style continually reveal ways in which the Proustian structure and the Proustian sentence always resist a settling on any finite meaning at the same time the Proustian "Search" seems to demand such meaning. By exploring these associations, we find an unstable and uncharacterizable *À la recherche* that creates a religious sensibility more successfully drawn out through comparison to a postmodern theology than through literary methods.

In attempting to theorize Proust's position in regard to religion, many literary critics rely on narrow accepted definitions of "religion" or on modernist concepts of agnosticism to arrive at absolute positions that don't allow for the indeterminate nature of either Proust's novel or the Western God. For example, Bucknall and others also point to Proust's viewing objects as a mystic would; in other words the narrator's quest resembles

mysticism in the manner in which he focuses on a natural object to arrive at a divine state or to commune with the divine (Bucknall 150; Curtius 94-95). Yet for Bucknall, Proust is ultimately not a mystic “since his technique of contemplative observations is, above all, an aesthetic method” (151). But while the narrator and Proust’s search may not perfectly match a traditional definition of mysticism, it should not be so easily dismissed. Proust’s linking of the artistic experience to the religious provides a connection to the mystical experience that includes and relies upon the aesthetic. His “godless” text seen through the lens of Bataille or Taylor’s “atheology” where God’s presence is “no longer in any way distinct from an absence” (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 5), offers other readings.

Using less determinate definitions of God, we can see Proust’s very concepts of essence or presence as theological, as partaking in a belief in God, and as, in some senses, mystical. Despite seeming to search for an essence beneath the surface, the narrator is not as consistently neo-platonic as this position might indicate. The essence of things that art can reveal, according to the narrator late in the novel, is often not *in* the object but in the memory of it; it is not in the woman but in a dress of hers that one remembers; it is not in the words of the book, but in the memory of its cover (III. 923). What does this more Kantian perspective do to the search for essence and for Truth? How does it affect the narrator’s claim to capture, through memory and art, a true autonomous presence?

This contradictory search for essence and presence in the perception of objects can bring us back to Proust’s “mysticism.” From the point of view of recent theorists working on mysticism, it is perhaps more usefully seen as an imaginative way of processing experiences beyond comprehension, and of artistically representing

experiences that are beyond the artist's ability to portray. Although in Proust's time serious literary and philosophical thinkers tended to degrade mysticism as the "other" of rational critical or philosophical thought, later thinkers gave it a less diminished role. For Bataille "it is the measure of the unknown which lends to the experience of God—or of the poetic—their great authority" (*Inner* 5). Shira Wilosky sees mysticism as a place where "inexpressibility raises meaning to a state beyond limit and formulation, into the infinite." This "inexpressible is a literary device that carries with it a whole history of metaphysics" and, while it may be unconscious or "fundamentally theological," will "continue to shape our imagination and understanding" (1). It is in this context that we can see Proust's text as mystical and his search as a form of *Via Negativa*.

Proust and *À la recherche* occupy positions of marginality and "in-betweenness" that complicate and resist any study or statement that attempts to categorize or describe them. Although Proust himself appears to be a late 19th century artist, occupied with a world of *fin de siècle* dandies and socialites, he produced a work more daring in its depiction of structure, time, and narrative than did most experimental modernists. "Stifled between two eras, two religions, and a multitude of sexual preferences and ironic twists" (Kristeva, *Time* 169), Proust was a symbolist-leaning personality who wrote a modernist text with postmodern implications that reach outside literature. Read one way, *À la recherche* and the path its narrator travels embody the early modernist, enlightenment ideas of progressive linear development, modernist secularism, and a universal idea of a single autonomous "self" that can be "translated" into a unified and complete "book." Read another way, it can be seen to challenge all of these ideas.

The more postmodern-minded critics focus on Proust's textual positions of instability and his tendency to establish dialectical binaries and then hover outside of them, reverse them, and then render them meaningless. When thinking about his novel's relationship to religion and theology, we should keep in mind the Proustian movement of doing and undoing. As early as Walter Benjamin, Proust's construction was referred to as "Penelopework," weaving and unweaving, remembering and forgetting. The narrator himself uses this imagery to try to understand the various seemingly unrelated events of his life: "I perceived that life all this while had been weaving round person or thing a tissue of diverse threads which ended by covering them with the beautiful and inimitable velvety patina of the years" (III. 1020). Unlike reading the *Odyssey*, however, we are caught up in the loom; Proust never stops weaving and we are never privileged to an outside viewpoint.

* * * * *

While it is useful to look at examples where Proust uses religious language and images to develop his narrative, his religious references and associations are most revealing when they shape the text beyond the literal level. The god-idea in his text can take many different and more subversive forms, creating and altering the very material with which Proust creates both his search and his ultimate (seemingly secular) epiphany. Part of what is underlyingly theological in Proust's text are the ways in which it expresses a belief in the "book," a longing for essence and presence, a god-like use of controlling metaphors, a teleological progression to redemption, a need to penetrate and possess knowledge, and the transforming power of the word. If, as postmodern theologians suggest, the negative aspects of theology have always accompanied the

positive,⁵ then the text of *À la recherche* reflects this concept through its weaving and unraveling of religious themes, Christian images, and theological concepts. Behind each answer lies a question, behind every faith lies doubt, behind each statement a negation, behind each long dizzying sentence flows another in retrograde motion taking us the other direction.

The work's complex and multi-layered narration and narrator resonate from the paradoxical and modernist Western gods of both presence and absence—determinate and indeterminate. The narrator's view of the world is a look that needs to possess, "a gaze eager to reach, touch, capture, bear off in triumph the body at which it is aimed, and the soul with the body" (I. 154). Yet while Proust's book develops a world desperately desiring the totalizing presence of the divine, it also demonstrates the futility of this desire. Love, jealousy, and affection are all subject to the physical laws of nature. Like the porch of the Combray church, they will wear away from constant use, exposing holes and dark spaces. As the work develops its relationship to each of these ultimately theological issues we can see it relying upon western theological thinking and imagery; at the same time, however, it tears the images apart and pulls the epistemological ground out from under traditional thought. Proust's religion exists in the gaps, holes, and dark spaces; it exists in ways that are not atheistic as much as negative, not secular as much as atheological.

The Proustian style itself raises theological questions. If reading *À la recherche*, according to the novel's conclusion, is supposed to bring about an artistic incarnation of sorts, then there is sense in which the novel's Search is for true presence and artistic transubstantiation. Yet "while the writing of *À la recherche* endeavors to capture the

⁵ See, for example, Kevin Hart, Thomas Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Graham Ward.

‘truth’ of the ‘idea,’ the novel also ‘wastes time hammering these ideas and these truths into kinetoscopic characters and elusive sentences” (Kristeva, *Time* 318). The style is both mimetic of the Search and inhibits and contradicts the solution. This work of art, despite the “grace” of involuntary memory, denies the necessary essence. “Proust’s sentences are a stream, they flow out, they promise, they gently murmur the flowing of time proceeding towards death” (Bataille, *On Nietzsche* 206). The Proustian experience remains one of flux, one of searching but never finding, one of fixing and then revising.

The Proustian characters, despite the narrator’s attempt to fix them by speaking their name, and ultimately by capturing them in writing, are perhaps the best examples of this fluidity. Indeed for the narrator, characters are “no more than images, not something deposited within me by this particular person, not something still in any way linked to him” (III. 1018). The “characters” in the novel, like the themes of art and religion, float between perceiver and perceived, between existence and ephemerality. Even the names of the characters are in flux, as for example, M. Biche in the early pages will become Elstir, and Odette will first be “the lady in pink,” then “the lady in white,” then Mme de Cr  cy, then Mme Swann, and finally Mme de Forcheville, each different name carrying with it a different personality and different perceptions.

The idea that the sign can create or alter the signified obsesses the narrator and relates philosophically and theological to the speaking or writing of the name of God. Although the name of God is rarely found in the novel, the power of naming and the name is a repeated theme throughout. The narrator, in true religious fashion, believes that by *speaking* a name, one gains control over it—has insight into its presence. In pronouncing a name the narrator feels that he secures “a sort of power over it, by the

mere act of drawing it up out of my day-dreams and giving it an objective existence in the world of spoken things" (I. 138). The name of Gilberte, for example is "bestowed" on the narrator "like a talisman which might, perhaps, enable me some day to rediscover her whom its syllables had just endowed with an identity." The name is an active force, both masculine and illuminating, "impregnating and irradiating the zone of pure air through which it had passed" (I. 154-155).

Like the Russian Christian in *The Way of a Pilgrim* who continually repeats the "Jesus Prayer," Proust's narrator will obsessively repeat the name of a character out loud to himself in an attempt to possess some element of that person. By referring to Gilberte's name as a "talisman" the narrator reveals the connection he feels between sacred objects and words. The narrator's action repeats an act of devout believers and devotees of religious art: he searches in the object itself and not within himself for the transcendental. His response to the experience of the tea-soaked madeleine is to take another taste; despite its lessened effect he tries again, searching *in the flavor* for the essence of the experience. In the same way a Christian gazes at a crucifix or fingers rosary beads, he takes the symbol for the essence. Later in the novel the narrator seems to realize both the falseness and the roots of this way of thinking.

When a belief vanishes there survives it—more and more vigorously so as to cloak the absence of the power, now lost to us, of imparting reality to new things—a fetishistic attachment to the old things which it did once animate, as if it was in them and not in ourselves that the divine spark resided, and as if our present incredulity had a contingent cause—the death of the gods. (I. 460).

This can be taken to be a comment on all of *À la recherche*—a search for a solution or an absolute that may no longer exist, or that may have been destroyed by the process of the search itself.

Combray and Venice: Alpha and Omega

After the opening “Overture,” which contains the single memory of the narrator waiting for his mother’s kiss and the famous madeleine section that provides the magical and sensuous opening of the curtain onto the narrator’s past, the section entitled Combray begins with a central Christian symbol and a Christian holiday. “Combray at a distance, from a twenty-mile radius, as we used to see it from the railway when we arrived there in the week before Easter, was no more than a church epitomizing a town” (I. 52). One is especially never allowed to forget the steeple throughout this section. “It was the steeple of Saint-Hilaire that shaped and crowned and consecrated every occupation, every hour of the day, every view of the town” (I. 69). It orients the narrator on his various walks and it metaphorically orients the reader. The Christian action of looking inward and upward becomes the point from which paths and themes of the novel diverge and return.

This section, which describes the narrator’s earliest memories, functions as a more developed introduction to themes and characters mentioned in the “Overture.” Told from both the point of view of a naïve young narrator, and of a more mature adult analyzing his own past,⁶ the novel explores ideas of beauty and art, primarily through the church, through nature, and through the two “ways” or paths: walks that literally start from a different door of the narrator’s home and cover different routes, and also seem to

stand for dramatically opposed attractions—one a path of aristocracy and social status and the other of art and beauty. These two paths form a paradigm and a dilemma that runs throughout the work. It is only many pages later that the narrator, now a middle aged man, will realize that the two paths were actually more parallel than opposite, that they did not go in opposite directions and that they could even lead to the same locations. Roger Shattuck sees these two paths as *the* central metaphor for the whole novel, “a division of the environs of Combray and of the universe into two parts later reconciled and recognized as one” (123). But for the young narrator the only commonality of the two paths is the sight of the church steeple of the Combray church.

Early in the Combray section the narrator accompanies his parents to mass at the church. He embraces the memory warmly: “how I loved our church and how clearly I can see it still” (I. 63). But while the sentimental tone of the description may encourage the reader to picture a quaint rural stone church, the first detail that the narrator gives is one of subtle violence.

The old porch by which we entered, black, and full of holes as a colander, was worn out of shape and deeply furrowed at the sides (as also was the front to which it led us) just as if the gentle friction of the cloaks of peasant-women coming into church, and of their fingers dipping into the holy water, had managed by age-long repetition to acquire a destructive force, to impress itself on the stone, to carve grooves in it like those made by cart-wheels upon stone gate-posts which they bump against every day.

(I. 63)

⁶ Identifying the point of view of the narrator in Proust is always slippery. Critics have located many multiple layers of narration focusing on the narrator as commenting upon actions from various points of

This image of grooves worn into stone develops multiple themes. It obviously is a comment on time, both on how time changes objects (the wearing away of solid rock), and on its unchangeability (the “age-long repetitions”). The repetition of one peasant woman after another, each dipping her fingers in holy water, exemplifies habit or “Habit,” as it is often characterized in the novel. Habit is a force, a “skilful but slow-moving arranger” (I. 8) that rules both individuals and cultures. Although the narrator will later measure historical time by the persistence of churches (III. 978), even they are worn down by Habit. We can read this scene both literally and metaphorically; both the stone porch of the church and religion as a practice are deadened and destroyed by Habit.

We can see the contradictory movement of creating and destroying described in the narrator’s comments on the forces of Habit, at times in Proust an even more powerful force than memory and time. “It weakens, but it stabilizes, it leads to disintegration but it makes the scattered elements last indefinitely” (I. 692). The porch that is “full of holes” and “out of shape” functions as a symbol of a religion of the past, kept alive by habit, and both subject to and containing a “destructive force,” a phrasing that is shockingly dropped into a seemingly gentle description.

The narrator then describes in detail the memorial stones, the stained glass windows, and the tapestries. The narrator’s descriptions of the scenes depicted in the glass and tapestries combine Biblical tales such as the coronation of Esther with the narrator’s musings on royal figures and local aristocrats and neighbors. (The fact that they are all women is important to the connections drawn between art, religion, and the erotic imagination that we will examine in more detail later.) The descriptions of the stained glass in particular seem a type of the quasi-religious, yet shifting, subjective, and

knowledge acquired after the action occurs and as he writes or narrates.

dangerous world of art in the novel. Coming through the glass, the rays of sunlight illuminate colors and images that dazzle the narrator but also play tricks on his eyes. The light is both beautiful and ominous; it takes on the “shimmering brilliance of a peacock’s tail,” but also streams “from the groin of the dark and strong vault down the moist walks, as though it were along the bed of some grotto glowing with sinuous stalactites” (I. 65). Just as the narrator will filter and organize the moments in his life into art, the glass as a symbol of the world of art, takes the drab world of visible reality—“if it was dull outside you could be sure it was fine inside the church” (I. 64)—filters it through an artistic recreation of the history of a stale religion, and produces an enticing, confusing, and dangerous world that resembles both a colorful dream and an erotic nightmare.

The glass becomes a thin membrane of art placed between the harsh light of the outside world and the darkness of the church. The glass provides a symbolic visual image of the Proustian metaphors of interior/exterior that recur throughout the work. The narrator continually compares inner experience to outer, the impact of real places to imagined ones, a reproduction to an original, and a memory to the present. These binaries are part of a constant play of perception that points to the permeability of borders that is suggested by the stained glass. The glass becomes both a permeable membrane and an absolute border between inside/outside, art/nature, fact/fiction, and past/present, separating both sides of the binaries and yet allowing them to pass back and forth. Elements of both are on opposite sides and in the window as well. The figure of Esther blurs in the narrator’s mind into his fantasy of the Duchesse de Guermantes, whom he will later see in the church.

There seems to be religious value somewhere in this scene. But where to locate it? In the church? The hawthorns on the altar? The stained glass window? The light flowing through the window? As the narrator views the stained glass, time blurs. He describes scenes from an ancient past with resonance in the near past that can only become visible with light in the present. The presence of the Old Testament figure of Esther offers a direction. For Mieke Bal,

The presence of the Book of Esther in *La recherche* is almost obsessional, and with good reason. It can be explained principally by the emphasis placed on writing in it. In the Hebrew Bible, Esther manages to prevent the catastrophe that threatens her people by first concealing her identity, then by revealing it at the right moment, and finally by making the most of the delay implied by writing in order to 'countersign' the death sentence.

(*The Mottled Screen* 75)

Writing, as we have seen, is a Biblical and postmodern trope that stands for the shifting sands of *différance*. Writing, *À la recherche* demonstrates persuasively, never closes meaning.

While Proust's search for essence and meaning tends to suggest Christian ideas of grace, presence, and incarnation, we can also look at his method of interpreting as characteristically Jewish. Emmanuel Levinas, philosopher and Talmudic scholar, sees the essence of Jewish interpretation and Talmudic reading as an attempt to search from every angle, to explore every possibility. Its authority comes not from its conclusions but from its spirit of enquiry. Furthermore, Levinas acknowledges that his mode of interpreting sacred texts relies on their connection to disbelief and atheism in much the

same way that Proust's interpretation of Christian art will suggest. For Levinas, monotheism must include atheism (*Difficult Freedom* 16), and his "God" by definition remains outside of ontology, therefore his phrase "*À Dieu*" which suggests not an object but a moment of perception always including negation.

From the outset, Proust's metaphors built on religious art are marked by negation. Although the narrator will use the metaphor of light through stained glass several times throughout the novel to describe scenes of transcendent beauty, yet, as seen in the Combray church passage, it is possible for both sides of the glass to be dark and unappealing. What way is the light traveling? Does the membrane of art make dull light into beauty or does it transport sunlight into a dark dangerous grotto? Both interpretations are suggested by the same passage.

Of all the intense and sensual experiences the narrator describes in this section, the ones that seem most closely to resemble a sacred touching of the divine are his encounters with hawthorn flowers. The first mention of hawthorns is dropped innocuously into the text, in the context of a walk to the church and an attending of mass. The narrator views the hawthorns on the altar in the church, where they are "inseparable from the mysteries in whose celebration they participated" (I. 121). The description of the flowers occupies only two pages, and it is framed and intertwined with the first references to the composer Vinteuil, who appears here as merely a local retired piano teacher who dotes on his "boyish" daughter. After admiring the flowers with Vinteuil and his daughter, the narrator leaves, but not before comparing their concealed bitter-sweet fragrance to "Mlle Vinteuil's cheeks beneath their freckles" (I. 123). Although a first-time reader does not know it yet, these pages again unite the images of the church

and the string quartet from the novel's opening page, as Vinteuil eventually will be revealed to be the great composer of the novel's most important music.

These religious and erotic associations linger, for when he again encounters hawthorns, this time outside for a walk, he can only find the words to describe them within the religious vocabulary. The hedge resembles a "series of chapels," the flowers are "heaped upon their altars," and the sunlight looks as if it "had just passed through a stained glass window" (I. 150). His associations rapidly run the familiar path through the artistic and the erotic, ending in his inability to maintain the aesthetic high. He associates his frustration with not being able to totally experience them to the perception of music—"like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secrets"—and with viewing a painting (I. 151-2). Finally he compares a flower to a young girl, "deliciously demure and Catholic" (I. 153). This reenacts the passage of thoughts and images that were juxtaposed in the church and will continue throughout the narrator's quest for meaning. This vortex of associations—woman, hawthorns, church—is a type of the more general pattern—erotic, aesthetic, religious—that accompanies all of the narrator's experiences. This pattern of associations will continue all the way to the work's conclusion when the narrator describes the project he is about to embark on. A book, for the narrator, is "made up of numerous impressions derived from many girls, many churches, many sonatas, and combined to form a single sonata, a single church, a single girl" (III. 1091).

The hawthorns serve the dual purpose of representing a possible synthesis between art and religion and also a stage on the process of perception from one to the other. We are always both inside and outside; we are always arriving at a solution and

yet moving through it. What at first appears to be an answer or to be fully internalized will always prove wrong; flowers die, melodies are forgotten, erotic attractions fade, and even stone churches wear away from time and use.

* * * * *

Where in *The Golden Bowl* we looked at how the novel traversed the line between possible and impossible knowledge, in Proust the central issue is more about how knowledge is created. Rather than deny and frustrate the characters' and reader's desire for knowledge, in Proust the difficulty arises from an always-expanding matrix of juxtaposed interpretations, shifting positions, repeated scenes, and stacked associations. Truth, for the narrator, will be attained only when he

takes two different objects, states the connexion between them. . .and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style; truth—and life too—can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, *within a metaphor*. (III. 925, my emphasis).

For Bal, "Proust's work offers, represents, and constitutes a theory of knowledge." On the other hand, "the novel does not present this knowledge in the form of a theory; rather it makes us suffer it, feel it, and experiment with it" (*Mottled* 239). For Proust's narrator, "a work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price tag on it" (III 916); each situation prompts a juxtaposition of hypotheses that invite deeper theorizing that forces the reader not to accept but to do battle with the ideas presented.

Bal sees the novel as a “theory of knowledge, and this theory is generated in part by the mechanism of jealousy Jealousy is a desire for knowledge, and the experience of the impossibility of this knowledge is both severe and fundamental” (239). By characterizing jealousy as a “generating mechanism” and as connecting to a “fundamental” impossibility of knowledge,” Bal brings us back to the theological tensions of the possibility of knowledge, the impossibility of knowledge, the existence of a ground or a fundamental, and the desire for all of these things. These theological tensions are made explicit in the novel. Desire, for the narrator, “engenders belief,” and a “love for a being who was now so remote was like a religion” (III. 522). But desire and jealousy by themselves are not the only motivating factors towards knowledge. “Desire desires desire,” as Mark Taylor says (*Erring* 147), and for Proust “one only loves that which is not possessed, one only loves that in which one pursues the inaccessible” (II. 761). In Proustian jealousy, as in the desire for God that theologian Charles Winquist sees as more significant than the actual presence or absence of the Divine, it is the *impossibility* of the quest that motivates the quest and ultimately motivates the construction of the other by the subject.

Proust constructs a narrator who constructs the world of the novel. Reading the novel, one never truly gets away from the sense that the narrator is playing some game of creation. What does it mean that the mother and the grandmother seem to be the same person? Or that we start to doubt that Albertine really exists?⁷ Like the narrator, who is horrified by the close-up look of her face when he leans in to kiss her, we don’t want to

⁷ As early as Samuel Beckett’s *Proust* (1931), critics were commenting on the “multiple Albertines” (34), and on the fact that there are moments in the novel where “his mother has become his grandmother” (25).

look too close for fear of seeing faults in her creation.⁸ Albertine is constructed by the narrator “in his own image,” and the mechanism of the novel itself suggests the desire for God—and the creation of him by the desiring subject. From the primordial and Wagnerian tones of the overture on, the reader gets the sense that the narrator is creating a world and not remembering one.⁹

James Joyce’s ideal author “like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (*Portrait* 233). Proust’s narrator, the almighty “I” of the novel, is both creator of the book and is created by the book. Neither fully inside nor outside the text, “both anthropomorphic and divine” (Kristeva, *Time* 321), he participates in what Kristeva calls the “Biblical and Evangelical” structure of the novel, as he introduces the religious key to our understanding of what he has created and is acting within. Kristeva imagines him as proclaiming

Read me, and you will be in the world without losing your awareness of it.

I am offering you the Divine Comedy of life, not of my own, but yours,

ours, that of Being—that of the Absolute. (Kristeva, *Time* 171)

À La recherche is a work that proclaims the belief in the connection between a complete book and a wholly integrated self at the same time that the experience of the reading of the book can suggest just the opposite. Any belief proclaimed persistently enough becomes a doubt, and the narrator come close to dissolving the borders that define self and book. The relationship between Proust’s narrator and the novel explores what Taylor

⁸ This perception is further increased by certain “faults” in the construction of the book. For example, both Dr. Cottard and the author Bergotte briefly appear in scenes after they are supposedly dead.

calls the “repeated rewritten closure of the book” (*Erring* 76). For Taylor, God, self, history, and the book are interrelated theological concepts that are open to postmodern questioning.

The divine role of the narrator is further suggested by his reluctance to name himself. Like the Hebrew God answering Moses with “I AM,” Proust’s narrator supplies his name by not answering. Although “by pronouncing a name one secures a sort of power over it” (I. 138), the narrator resists naming himself, often avoiding it by substituting “my Christian name.” The hint of his name is only given indirectly two times in the entire novel, as when the narrator says of Albertine, “then she would find her tongue and say: ‘My _____’ or ‘My darling _____’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be ‘My Marcel,’ or ‘My darling Marcel’” (III. 69).¹⁰

The narrator clings to the idea of his autonomy and of the connection of self and book: “the only true book, though in the ordinary sense of the word it does not have to be ‘invented’ by a great writer—for it exists already in each one of us—has to be translated by him” (III. 926). What does it mean to “translate?” Within the idea of translation is the assumption that a core meaning exists and that it can somehow be shifted to another medium. While the translation of the “self” is at the core of the narrator’s quest, his quest also points to the problems of both self and translation. For Derrida, this problem can also relate to difficulty in translating the name of God or any proper name, and a sacred

⁹ A comment that has been, in fact, directed at Wagner’s music as well. As Edward Said comments, “The thing that has always struck me as quite extraordinary about Wagner is the feeling that you can no longer rely on the world, but that you have to make your own world” (39).

¹⁰ The name Marcel is used one other time in the text, this time without apparent irony, in a letter from Albertine to the narrator.

text or any text. A proper name, writes Derrida, is “forever untranslatable” (*Acts of Religion* 109). He further analyzes what could be seen as the aporia of Proust’s text:

If there is indeed between the translated text and the translating text a relation of “original” to version, it could not be *representative* or *reproductive*. Translation is neither an image nor a copy. (115, Derrida’s emphasis)

The narrator at times seems to come to the edge of this realization when he says that to “recreate one’s own true life” is also to give up “one’s belief in the objectivity of what one had oneself elaborated” (III. 932-933).

In Derrida’s essay, this aporia is contained or symbolized by the Biblical name of Babel. As Derrida points out, Babel names both God the Father (*Ba* = father, *Bel* = god), and also confusion. The name of God, and by analogy the narrator’s name in Proust, is “the name he had proclaimed, given, and which should be translated as confusion to be understood, hence to let it be understood that it is difficult to translate and so to understand” (*Acts of Religion* 118). The narrator’s name, as well, hovers over the text, yet on the fringes of it, and despite his search to find a true and autonomous self, he also comments on man’s “fragmentary nature” and of the “continuous deaths” of one’s multiple selves (I. 722). The task of narrating, translating, or defining book or self seems impossible.

The salvation seemingly attained through the translation of the self—the impossible task of writing—occurs, along with the climax of the novel’s elevation of Christian art and structures, in the novel’s final scene. This scene, years later, brings the novel’s main characters together again, again over Easter, and back through memory to

Proust and the narrator's quintessential Christian city, Venice. In this scene, like Paul on the road to Damascus, the narrator experiences his final and climactic epiphany when he stumbles. The moment of involuntary memory, triggered by some broken pavement, takes place right outside the Hotel de Guermantes and forms mental connections to the sight of the steeple, the tea-soaked madeleine, and, most significantly, to Venice. The narrator's memory of Venice is more magical and glorious than the actual city was for him in the past. Appropriately Venice—the Christian City—is more powerful as an apparition than as a physical body; the power is maintained in the resurrected mental image, not the actual presence.

Although the “visitation” upon the narrator here has obvious religious overtones in its resemblance to conversion experiences, the broken stones and the imperfection of the narrator's misstep which provide the opening to his “resurrection” also remind us again of Žižek's characterization of Christianity's essence being in its divine and “fundamental imperfection” (*On Belief* 146). This essence manifests itself when God, through the humanness of Christ, realized his own dark side and an “impenetrability of God to Himself.” It is at this moment that “God the Father Himself stumbles upon the limit of his own omnipotence” (*On Belief* 146), in other words his *inability to be a true author*. The tension Žižek describes here is Proustian: A point where an omniscient author comes up against his human representative, and the human (and therefore flawed) figure reveals the flaws in the author's omniscience. Kristeva also points to this weakness in the role of Proust's divine creation. “Although the writer allows himself to emulate infinite Being, he can profane it only by recreating it. In doing so, he strips it of its essence, appropriates it for himself, and, in a reciprocal gesture, reveals the artifice of

Being. . . . For this reason, Proust's much-criticized and annoying snobbery may simply reveal his awareness of this omnipresent artifice" (*Time* 225).

In the final scene Proust's narrator has placed himself, on the eve of his epiphany, recalling his Christian city, during the Easter holiday, at a performance of Wagner's Christian opera *Parsifal*, but it is only through accident, broken stones, and clumsiness that he is redeemed. The broken stones seem to imitate or parody both artistic transcendence and religious salvation. At this point in the novel and the narrator's Search, Christian art has become secular art which has become both God and salvation, but yet reveals the inconsistencies and gaps in each stage of the process.

Shortly after this visitation of "grace,"¹¹ the narrator sits in the Guermantes library awaiting the end of the musical selection so he can enter the party. Convinced now of his calling, he thinks through how his artistic salvation will manifest itself as a work of writing. Yet as he mentally thinks through each aspect of his artistic endeavor, and how it will be created out of the raw material of his life, many of his conclusions come dangerously close to subverting his core idea. How, for example, is his project going to proceed if "in all perception there exists a barrier as a result of which there is never absolute contact between reality and our intelligence" (III. 1023). Hasn't the experience of involuntary memory been the breaking down of such barriers? Again, we come back to the image of the stained glass, equally a transparent membrane, a filter, and a solid barrier.

11 The narrator constructs an image of modernist art replacing religion in a way that suggests a literal connection to the Christian concept of grace when he writes of aging dancers who have been "touched by art as once a noble lady might have been touched by grace. And as the seventeenth-century lady, when this happened, withdrew into a life of religion, so now her descendent lived in an apartment filled with cubist painting" (III. 983).

Yet although he realizes the destructive elements in his thoughts, with the conceit of a modernist artist he feels that “I had made the discovery of this destructive action of time at the very moment when I had conceived the ambition to make visible, to intellectualize in a work of art, realities that were outside Time” (III. 971). Through writing he will be able, he imagines, to step outside of time and to fix all that it contains.

Contradictory Paths

Roger Shattuck sees metaphor as a dominant force in all of *À la recherche*. His principal metaphor, the two paths in Combray, is to be understood through the “reconciliation of a duality or . . . of a multiplicity” (126). Where I differ is in seeing metaphor, as especially expressed in metaphors of God or religion, as reflections of Cavell’s “limitless paraphrasability” of a metaphor. In other words, the essence of metaphor implies the *impossibility* of any status of reconciliation. Shattuck’s own quest for a metaphor of closure reflects the influence of an idea of a determinate God—a transcendental signified that fixes meaning. Although Shattuck claims that Proust believed in Truth, it is in the rendering of a traditional religion that established the Western ground of Truth, that Proust allows this idea to slip away. Shattuck’s gaze, perceptive as it is, participates in the desire for totalization that the narrator experiences when “with the naïveté of the old theologians,” he seeks an afterlife that will provide “the comfort and the optimism of a dénouement which simplifies, which settles everything” (III. 522). Reading Proust’s text in all its complexities and contradictions makes any interpretation which “settles everything” seem theologically naïve.

The question and definitions of God, as we have been discussing them, depend on the *idea* of unity, but both in its possibility and impossibility. Gilles Deleuze begins his book, *Proust and Signs*, with this question of unity. For Deleuze, the unity of *À la recherche* is not found in memory or even in involuntary memory. As he points out, the Search is more about the future than the past, and the church steeples and Vinteuil's music are more important to the search than involuntary memory (2-5). Deleuze's main purpose is to see the novel as being aimed toward the perception of *signs*. This, in a general sense, orients the novel around the process of reading and writing, processes, which as we have seen in both this work and others, involve a movement *away* from unity and resemble the process of perceiving metaphor.

The four circles of signs that Deleuze proposes—world, love, sensual, and art—are blended together in the perception. Although Deleuze sees worldly signs as related to time wasted, love to time lost, sensual signs to the means to regain time, and art as time regained, each sign perceived necessarily includes the others (24). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Combray church scene where by association time lost and time regained supplement each other, passing back and forth like light through a stained glass window, much as negative and positive theology supplement each other from the beginning.

From the Combray church to the church at Balbec, the young narrator's understanding of art is shaped by his experiences with Christian art. The narrator is first introduced to Balbec through the descriptions of a family friend who excites the narrator with his stories of fisherman and sea storms. When the narrator mentions Balbec to M. Swann, Swann responds with praise for the church of Balbec, a "half Romanesque, half

Gothic” structure that is “so singular that one is tempted to describe it as Persian” (I. 418). The young narrator combines these two images and identifies the whole town with both sea storms and Gothic art, breathlessly awaiting his chance to visit, looking at reproductions of sculptures of the Apostles and the Virgin, based on art from the porch of the Balbec church. He romantically imagines a visit where he seeks shelter from a storm in the church surrounded by medieval Christian art.

When he finally gets to visit the town of Balbec, he is disappointed when he finds the church is not by the sea at all. Despite the fact that the church’s stained glass window combines his two imagined images with a depiction of a local legend of a fisherman discovering a miraculous Christ in the sea, he finds no excitement in the church’s art. Although he tries to tell himself that the real thing is something “greater” than what he had only imagined, it fails to excite him, the art of the porch appears dull, the church feels “defiled” by the surrounding village (I. 710).

On his first visit to the painter Elstir’s studio, Elstir reacts with surprise when the narrator tells him of his disappointment. Elstir explains, echoing the words of Ruskin, that the Church offers the “finest illustrated Bible” and includes “profound thoughts,” “exquisitely original ideas,” and “the most inspired expression of that endless poem of adoration and praise in which the Middle Ages extolled the glory of the Madonna.” It is, Elstir explains, “a whole gigantic poem full of theology and symbolism” (I. 899). It is only at this point that the narrator recognizes the glory and artistic brilliance of the church.

What is important about this three-step process, other than its repetition of the path of artistic perception throughout the novel, is that the full appreciation of the church

happens in Elstir's studio, an experience that represents the opening of the narrator's eyes (at least temporarily) to the depths of the experience of art. This paradigmatic epiphany, then, is associated with the understanding of Christian art, an experience that can only happen over time, through art, memory, and through the interpretation of others.

We also see in these scenes the narrator struggling within himself as he experiences Christian art. Descriptions of churches, cathedrals, and stained glass throughout the novel will focus on other people's descriptions and his own difficulties in perception, and they are often juxtaposed with seeing or meeting an attractive young woman.¹² The difficulty of the whole novel can be seen in this tightly wound web of desire: desires for erotic escape, desire for profound historical meaning, desire for teleology, desire for clarity, desire for transcendent beauty. These elements—each theologically charged—both attract and repel each other. They cannot be separated, but neither are they sympathetic. There is no scene in Proust that is not related to his trying to feel or understand a work of Christian art. Yet, despite these difficulties, to describe an object of nature as “like a cathedral” remains among the highest aesthetic praise the narrator gives.

Paradoxically, later in his life the narrator will defend the destruction of churches during the war because they were German observation posts: “Cathedrals are to be adored until the day when, to preserve them, it would be necessary to deny the truths which they teach” (III. 822). With this statement, essentially saying that sometimes one must destroy a religion to save it, the narrator adds his voice to unpopular opinions expressed through history, from Jesus to the apostle Paul, from Nietzsche to the death-of-God theologians.

The Christian art in Proust's novel—Giotto paintings, churches and their steeples, porches, and stained glass windows—offers a stronger subversive presence than the subjects or mediums would seem to indicate. The described styles—rooted in medieval, Renaissance, and 19th century art—function with a self-reflexive disturbing manner more postmodern in their effects. The art, as I have shown, is part of a pattern of associations and resonance that denies the grounding that they seem to be a part of.

This pattern and process can be seen as a closed circle which contains the entire novel. Art creates the path that takes the role of traditional religion by giving spiritual meaning to life. Therefore art must replace religion to make possible the true essence of a life. However, the experience of art as initially represented through exposure to church art is an experience of frustration, and it is only through the living of life that one can learn to truly understand art's essential meaning. Yet life and art often seem to create barriers to this process. In other words, art must give meaning to life, but life inhibits this from happening, and life must give meaning to art, but art inhibits this transcendent experience from taking place. Therefore, although traditional religion and religious art create the paradigm for both art and life, and for this contradictory process, art—bringing us around to where we began—creates the path that takes the role of traditional religion by giving meaning to life.

Framing Jesus

Although the name and figure of Jesus are significantly absent from the novel, the character of Charlus is often connected to Christ and the apostles through ironic comparisons and pet names (Graham 170). Charlus is one of only two devoutly religious

¹² The scene in Elstir's studio, for example, directly precedes Elstir introducing him to Albertine.

characters in the novel, and is also the most viciously anti-Semitic (as well as functioning as a complex alter-ego for the narrator). As the narrator watches Charlus in the brothel, “chained to a bed like Prometheus to his rock” being whipped bloody by young men in a scene reminiscent of watching Mlle. Vinteuil and her lesbian lover through a window, the cycle of associations moves from art to Christ to Catholicism to erotic to transcendence. If art—as Bataille proposes—becomes sacred in its transgressiveness, or if—as postmodern theologians assert—God can only exist in the impossibility of his description, then for the narrator, this scene is both art and religion. Framed by the window and the text, the scene of Charlus’s sadomasochistic experience becomes an image of art and religion, an autonomous work. Read this way, the scene and the novel both suggest certain works of postmodern art as well as a long-standing tradition of Christian visual art.

Hans Holbein’s *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* is work of art from the early 16th century that points with disturbing emphasis towards a gap between man and God, or as Kristeva interprets the painting, Father and son. This painting and Kristeva’s reading of it are suggestive of how the less specific Christian art functions in *À la recherche*. In looking at the painting we may think, as Prince Myshkin does in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, that “some people may lose their faith by looking at that Picture” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 107). We not only feel the gap between man and the divine that the painting suggests, but also the paradigmatic fear of death, represented in Christ, that Proust’s narrator discovers is embedded in the creative act itself.

Like Proust’s novel, Holbein’s painting uses and reacts against a long tradition of Christian art. In looking at the painting we see no peaceful acceptance of death, no

worshipping onlookers, no Virgin Mary, no bright reds or blues, no blood, even. There is no suggestion of the living Christ. While paintings of the crucifixion were often intended to offer objects of meditation, to meditate on this painting is to challenge the ideas of Christian transcendence. Kristeva's analysis—in her book *Black Sun*, a work on depression and melancholia—points to ways in which the painting also resonates with theories of Christ's death symbolizing the end of the sacred (*Black* 131). The painting does not present a glorious precursor to the resurrection, but instead “provides the subject with an echo of its unbearable moments when meaning was lost, when the meaning of life was lost (*Black* 133).” Holbein's painting “leads us . . . to the ultimate edge of belief, to the threshold of nonmeaning.” It is only through the art of the representation, through the “execution of the work,” that anything like salvation can be suggested (*Black* 135).

This reading of a Christian painting by Kristeva follows the way Christian art works in Proust's novel. The narrator's desire for a religious experience comes up against his disbelief, only producing nonmeaning, until he discovers salvation through art. Like Proust, Kristeva must take religion through the abysmal darkness of death and disbelief before replacing it with art.

Painting as a substitute for prayer? Contemplating the painting might perhaps replace prayer at the critical place of its appearance—where the nonmeaning becomes significant. (*Black* 138)

For Kristeva, “seeing the death of Christ is thus a way to give it meaning, to bring him back to life” (137). We also see this move in postmodern works of art. In the same way that the death-of-God theologians repeated Holbein and the Apostle Paul's gesture of killing God in order to rejuvenate a religion, a controversial work like “Piss Christ” by

Andres Serrano reenacts this gesture. Paul's genius, it is often said, was in his making the death of Jesus into the central event of what would become Christianity.

Constantine's similar move was in making the cross itself the central image of Christianity. Only by making what could have been the end of a religious movement—the death of its leader—into a shocking scene of a bleeding, sweating, shitting, and pissing Christ on the cross did Christianity find a strong enough imaginative image to move beyond being a marginal Jewish sect into a powerful religion.

A work like "Piss Christ" takes the pain and shock at the core of the imagined crucified Jesus and reinvents it for a contemporary and postmodern audience. "It is as if the artist's eye crept inside the wound in the crucified Christ's side and discovered that inside that monad, the entire universe was exposed" (Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio* 56). From Christ to one's own urine, from a cathedral to the tea-soaked madeleine, the artist's viewpoint is always both macro and micro cosmic, always shocking, always personal, and necessarily religious.

Serrano's piece, a large photograph of a crucifix suspended in a glowing yellow substance, is strangely beautiful, resembling a form of stained glass, and is rendered shocking only by its title. The words, not the image, begin the sequence of associations and play on intertextuality. The cross is the site of the essential contradiction upon which Christianity is based. (Logic dictates that either Jesus was man and he suffered, or he was God and he didn't.) Centuries of theologians have debated and celebrated the dual nature of Christ, which is strikingly represented in Renaissance and Baroque paintings and sculptures of the crucifixion. The American politicians who condemned Serrano's work as blasphemous did not realize is that it is the shocking nature of the Christian

crucifixion, as centralized by early Christianity and kept alive through art, that has kept the Christian way of thinking relevant. Of course it's blasphemous. So was Proust. So was the apostle Paul. So was Jesus Christ.

Although it may seem a difficult leap from the narrator weeping over the beauty of the hawthorns to Serrano's "Piss Christ," it is a short chain of association in *À la recherche* that takes us from the narrator strolling from the hawthorns to peeking through the window at Venteuil's daughter and her lesbian lover, to watching M. Charlus being whipped to a point of bloody ecstasy. (It might be worth remembering here that Proust, the biographical author, got sexual satisfaction out of watching rats being stuck with pins.) The narrative logic of *À la recherche* is based and built upon associations and thematic development that follows just this sort of pattern.

These associations are again close to Bataille's concept of the sacred. Bataille was also fascinated with Christian art and the crucifixion: "the killing of Christ injures the being of God," yet the "wound is intended and desired by God" (*On Nietzsche* 18). Kristeva sees an understanding of the novel's essential "inconsistency of being," as central and understood only through an exploration of what Bataille called Proust's "amorality." By eluding the idea of unity, Proust's rendering of Christian art and themes illuminates his narrator's relationship to secular art. "The unity of the Proustian experience—as sensual, artificial, and blasphemous as it is—eludes us to this day" (Kristeva 226).

"Piss Christ," in addition to the metaphor of the stained glass, offers a lens through which Proust's use of Christian art can be viewed and interpreted. The light through the stained glass in the Combray church, we remember, streamed through into

the “groin of the dark,” revealing moist “sinuous stalactites” (I. 65). Proustian divine light reveals only the darkness of the abyss. Like Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” religion and art come together through the limits of the omnipresent artist and by the work’s essential disunity. “Piss Christ” acknowledges the inescapable nature of the religious and the personal that permeates *À la recherche*. Waste products or not, Christ and our own urine are inside us, and the bloody Charlus is as much of a part of Proust’s art religion as the “little phrase” of chamber music.

The metaphor of the stained glass represents a vortex in and through which *À la recherche* combines, develops, and questions concepts of God, religion, and art. The stained glass in the Combray church and the window through which the narrator views Charlus being whipped can be seen as an alternate “frame” for the novel—a frame that questions the concept of the possibility of a frame.

The questioning of the conceptual form for a work that bases its “structure” (a word we must now also see as a metaphor), on ideas of self, art, and book, is a radical move that also calls into question the role of time and space. Since Kant, philosophers have seen these concepts not as objective *in* the world, but as subjective and internal concepts necessary for perception. It is, for the narrator by the end of the novel, an “erroneous form of perception which places everything in the object, when really everything is in the mind” (III. 932-33). Proust’s novel shifts the aesthetic/religious experience through a sliding time and space in order to maintain fluidity in the sites of experience—the steeple in Combray, the little phrase of music, the bleeding body in a brothel, the writing of a book.

The art of the 20th century gradually moved towards a redefining of space and time in ways that are atheological. Paintings without frames, melodies without tonal centers, and sculptures without pedestals reflect the death of a determinate or transcendent God. For the narrator, “what we call reality is a certain connexion between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them (III. 924). In other words, time, space, and objectivity become unrecognizable and unlocatable. The complexities and difficulties of the various forces of time and space become intertwined in ways that demonstrate Derrida’s *differance* and Bataille’s atheology. Proust’s book remains a book, but just barely, straining in all directions against its bindings, testing the limits of reading and writing.

Part II: Theology in Musical Aesthetics

Tones, which through rhythm and harmony are combined into melody and into the musical work of art, are not immediately natural sounds but are produced through mechanical art; not merely in order to subordinate them externally to the will of the striving spirit that rules them, but also to purify them of all special, finite meaning that, as alien content, would disturb and cloud the absolutely spiritual content with which they are to be imbued.

Christian Weisse (qtd. in Dahlhaus 101)

And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbor, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me. . .and of which the last works of Vinteuil had seemed to me to combine the quintessential character.

Marcel Proust (III. 899)

Music is the catalytic element in the work of Proust. It asserts to his unbelief in the permanence of personality and the reality of art.

Samuel Beckett (*Proust* 71)

Music/God

If for Proust, art is religion, then music is God. Music, as has often been pointed out, is the central artistic medium for the narrator of the novel. Music appears in the novel as the greatest of all the arts, and it provides the model on which the narrator seems to base his final epiphany. The music of Vinteuil and the famous “little phrase” resurface at important points throughout the work to both represent and initiate change in the narrator. Yet, like James’s bowl, Sartre’s portraits, Plato’s *Khora*, and Derrida’s *differance*, Proust’s music, and in particular the “little phrase,” creates a paradoxical god-idea that both suggests a unity and denies its possibility. Music’s role in the novel strongly relates to and is created from the ideas surrounding both the determinate and the indeterminate God.

We can first establish a superficial connection between the manner in which Proust portrays music and the traditional concept of a determinate Judeo-Christian god. As a metaphor, music represents, for the narrator, the artistic model by which he bases his path to a form of salvation. Although the moment of salvation—the moment in which he is touched by “grace”—happens through involuntary memory, it is clear that he feels music has prepared him for this moment. If we step back for a panoramic view of the world of the novel, music can be seen as the structuring device that holds the pieces together. The narrator clearly sees music as a model for organizing the pieces of his life—his loves, his friends, the places he has been—into a coherent whole. Like the god-idea of totalization, the idea of music can create order out of chaos. How does this process happen? Is it convincing? Where is the darker side, the negativity that I have been claiming is part of Proust’s (or any) god-idea? It is necessary to trace the path of music throughout the novel to begin to answer these questions.

* * * * *

An early scene, the narrator’s first attempt at creating art to save a transcendent and religious moment, shows him struggling to achieve what he will later learn to do through music. As he is riding in a coach, Proust’s young narrator is suddenly struck by the beauty and mystery of three distant church steeples. Beginning the connection between the life of art and its connection to the symbols and aesthetics of Christianity, the narrator first puts pen to paper to create a work of art. In an attempt to “penetrate to the core” of the church steeple’s “impression,” which “seem at once to contain and to conceal,” he produces a “little fragment” of writing (I. 196). Getting carried away with his imagery, he describes the steeples moving and vanishing from his sight, comparing

them to “three golden pivots,” to flowers, and finally to “three maidens in a legend” (I.198). When finished, he feels that he has “entirely relieved [his] mind of its obsession with the steeples and the mystery which lay behind them” (I.198).

This short passage, about 200 pages into the work, richly suggests the theological and artistic themes that will permeate the rest of the novel. In Proust, art is experienced religiously and religions are experienced artistically. By putting the steeples in a frame where they switch positions, move, and shift, and by putting himself, the observer, in a moving position, the narrator participates in a characteristically modernist artistic experience.¹³ But by sensing church steeples as pointers to a mysterious transcendence, the narrator is also taking part in a traditional Christian interpretation of steeples. The passage holds in it several realizations that will haunt the novel and hover over the whole work. Like all religious symbols and metaphors, the steeples both “contain and conceal.” Like any art that attempts to capture religious or transcendent experiences, the narrator’s piece is only a “fragment.” As we shall see, these are indeed characteristics of Proust’s whole project that can perhaps subvert even his final realization and synthesis of art and religion. But more immediately, this scene of writing and religion is the first example in the novel of a pattern that will continue to be developed for the next 3000 pages.

When the narrator changes the steeples into three maidens we see the first example of a pattern that will continue throughout the novel: his insistence on eroticizing art into objects of desire. Each time he interacts with a work of art it will become inextricably intertwined in his memory with elements of his erotic desires, impeding his

¹³ As art critic Robert Hughes puts it, “the view from the train was not the view from the horse. It compressed more motifs into the same time. Conversely, it left less time in which to dwell on any one thing” (12).

search for the essence of art. This is most significantly seen in his interaction with music and the composer Vinteuil.

As we follow these swirling but tightly organized themes of art and music through a complex systematic pattern of repetition and development, we can see how the narrator's changing perceptions of art mirror his developing view of the relationship between art and life, preparing him for his ultimate epiphany. His interactions with art repeatedly follow a similar process, a process that is in itself a microcosm of the narrator's life-long Search. When the narrator is exposed to a work of art, literature, or a piece of music, he will initially express confusion and a lack of comprehension. Following this confusion is a search for an explanation of the work, leading to partial or temporary truths. Finally, through memory, the essence of the work is seemingly penetrated.

This process is reenacted with every painting or piece of music in the novel, and it can be seen as a microcosm of the whole work. On the first page of the novel, the narrator is in bed half asleep, not understanding his surrounding world. The rest of the novel depicts the search for meaning, the partial truths, and the false paths that are recreated in his perception of art. Finally, at the end, the same process of memory leads him to what seems a complete understanding of both his life and art. As readers, our experiences mirror those of the narrator. As he experiences a deeper understanding due to the repetition of events, so we more clearly understand the repeated themes of the novel. As he experiences forgetting and partially remembering events, melodies and paintings, so do we barely remember a scent of these very things read a thousand pages before. It is this experience with each work of art and especially with music that

mentally prepares both narrator and reader for the narrator's realizations in the last section of the novel.

While it is nothing new to point to these stages of perception,¹⁴ what I want to focus on are the moments when the music is associated with desire, and then show through a musicological analogy, how the narrator's perception of music is a theological and religious quest that recreates the god-idea through its contradictory interpretive directions. From the musicological perspective, we will see in the narrator's aesthetic development, issues of perception that have been at the center of musicological and theological debate since before Proust's time to the present. By looking at the relationships between Vinteuil, his music, the narrator, and the novel, and by examining them in the light of theories of musical perception, we can more fully understand the relationship between the narrator's mental journey, the musical structure of the novel, and underlying religious and theological themes. Despite Proust's efforts to offer art and especially music as transcendent experiences that replace religion, the novel often resists this movement; it still exists within the paradoxical experience and epistemology of Western theology. From the religious and theological perspective, these aesthetic and musicological issues, like the church steeples, like James's golden bowl, will also both "contain and conceal."

These aesthetic and musicological issues are rooted in 19th century debate and discussion about the religion of art or "art religion," and about instrumental versus vocal music. The term "art religion" that was prevalent throughout the 19th century is thought to have been coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher (Dahlhaus 88). In his *Lectures on Religion*, Schleiermacher urges a "religion of feelings" that can best be expressed by

music (Dahlhaus 86). This musical art/religion was a common way for writers to perceive music and the future of art and religion. For E.T.A. Hoffman, actual Christian art was on the decline while art religion, especially as practiced in music, was on the rise (Dahlhaus 91-92). The future of both seemed clear. As Christianity faded as a practical source of spiritual enlightenment, secular art and especially music would take its place.

Listening to Proust's Music

Biographers of Proust have devoted much space to locating the real life “models” and events in Proust’s life that he translated into Vinteuil, his music, and the famous “little phrase.” Drawing from the novel’s descriptions of the music, as well as Proust’s life and letters, George Painter mentions Wagner, Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Franck, Debussy, and Beethoven as models for Vinteuil and his music. Painter connects Proust’s description of the Vinteuil Septet (“continuous plane surfaces like those of the sea, amid a harsh silence, an infinite void” [III. 249]) as being “beyond doubt” the first movement of Debussy’s *La Mer* (246). The most direct source of Vinteuil and his septet, according to Painter, is César Franck. Painter cites as direct influences Franck’s String Quartet in D, his Violin Sonata, and his Piano Quintet in F Minor. He also demonstrates some parallel passages in the Quintet and the Sonata that suggest the scene where the narrator is impressed by the further developments of themes from the Vinteuil Sonata in the later Septet.

What is more important than issues of direct influence is that these composers, especially Franck, Debussy, and Wagner, were composers writing *cyclical* works. These are pieces where themes and motifs are repeated and echoed across movements or, in

¹⁴ See Nattiez’s *Proust as Musician*, 41-77, for a similar tracing of artistic perception in the novel.

Wagner's case, use a system of leitmotifs, where the essential musical structure of a work is composed of the appearance and reappearance of themes associated with a person or an idea.

These innovative musical styles can be seen as models for Vinteuil's music and, in a larger context, as models for Proust's whole work. Although aspects of sonata form and the symphony can be located in Proust's structure, Wagner's leitmotif method seems the most apt model for the whole work.¹⁵ The parallel is apparent in Proust's interweaving of many motifs that are prepared for, repeated, and transformed, but never completed; and in his use of this system to construct a work of epic proportion.

This structuring is not only musical but borrows from Biblical typology, where a theme from the Old Testament is perceived as being developed and ultimately completed in the New Testament. Each of the narrator's experiences with a place will be repeated both literally and in his memory. Each of the narrator's experiences with a woman, for example, follows and expands on the themes of the previous relationship; Odette becomes Gilberte who becomes Albertine. This is especially relevant when the path of music and its perception seems to lead teleologically to an ultimate completion that can only be understood from the point of view of this ending. This kind of cycle, by which the new completes the old, but where the new is never whole without the old, is characteristically Christian in its development, and cannot be fully appreciated outside of this context.

* * * * *

¹⁵ Although, as Eric Prieto correctly says, pointing to Wagner's leitmotif as a musical structure translated to literature is deceiving since it is essentially a literary device to begin with (16).

While Elstir and Vinteuil produce the most important works of art that the narrator encounters in his life, the significant difference is that while we really only “see” the work of Elstir once, the music of Vinteuil appears often. Presented with repeated opportunities to listen to the music of Vinteuil, the narrator must change how he “hears” before learning to hear the “truth” in the music. Only then is he able to seemingly understand the complex relationship between music and life, and to open his mind to his final redemptive vision.

The music of Vinteuil makes nine extended appearances during the whole of the work. Each of these scenes shows the same stages of development, shows the narrator (or in some cases his alter ego Charles Swann) struggling with the perception of the music, glimpsing some sort of possible truth or transcendence that the music can offer, and ultimately creating a feminized and erotic association that replaces the experience of the music and leaves him disappointed. Although music will ultimately claim a God-like power to reveal the absolute and to rule over the whole of the narrator’s Search, it appears in most scenes to offer only a flash or glimpse of a possibility of a transcendent religious experience. So while music will come to appear as a form of god, it is best understood theologically as glimpses of the possibility of Proustian *grace*, to use Poulet’s label.

The music is first heard by Swann, who, like the narrator, has trouble initially comprehending a work of art: “At first he had appreciated only the material quality of the sounds which [the] instruments secreted” (I. 227). Following exactly the perception and associative pattern of the narrator’s first writing experience, Swann first compares a phrase to “the fragrance of certain roses,” and finally to a “woman he has seen for a

moment passing by.” This early scene starts to develop the idea of the necessity of memory to aesthetic perception. Swann is moved by the music, but as he has no memory of it, its effect is fleeting:

But the notes themselves have vanished before these sensations have developed sufficiently to escape subversion under those which the succeeding or even simultaneous notes have already begun to awaken in us. And this impression would continue to envelop in its liquidity its ceaseless overlapping, the motifs which from time to time emerge, to plunge again and disappear. (I. 228)

What listening to the piece and especially the “little phrase” does for Swann, at least temporarily, is to give him the impression of a new hope for life: “It seemed, for a time, to open up before Swann the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation” (I. 229). Swann, trying to understand, “wished to acquire its secret” (I. 230), but he will never move past this temporary feeling of transcendence. What keeps him from understanding the music, the novel seems to suggest, is his obsessive association of the music, and especially the little phrase, with his desire, love, and jealousy for Odette. By giving the music human form, by making artistic desire erotic, he loses the access to pure experience.

Although the music appears several more times during Swann’s narrative, the most important development occurs after the music has been passed along to the narrator. The music and the little phrase are introduced to the narrator in a scene at Swann’s home where Odette is playing the piano. The narrator, like Swann, can hear nothing at first: “But often one hears nothing when one listens for the first time to a piece of music that is at all complicated” (I. 570). He moves beyond Swann’s perceptions when he begins to

understand that “probably what is wanting, the first time, is not comprehension but memory” (I. 570). This leads to a musing on the joys of difficult art, the examples of which are the late Beethoven string quartets. Difficulty, the narrator implies, and the longer it takes a listener or the public to come to understand a piece, is directly related to the work’s greatness and the composer’s genius.

But the narrator—again turning church steeples into maidens—is, like Swann, distracted by desire. “If I did not understand the sonata, I was enchanted to hear Mme. Swann play. Her touch appeared to me . . . like her wrapper, like the scent of her staircase, like her coats, like her chrysanthemums” (I 573). One is reminded here of the narrator’s description of his book as not “like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress.” *True* structure, this metaphor ironically suggests, is a container without the core. In each case we have a garment without a woman representing the essence of art itself. If we take, like Derrida, Taylor, and Kenneth Burke, the “book” to be a theological unit, this reflects by analogy, a religious structure without the God; Christianity represented by only an empty tomb.

The process of artistic recognition and erotic diversion will continue throughout the novel. The Sonata and its little phrase become associated as an emblem of desire as much for the narrator as they were for Swann. The narrator’s association will pass in time from Odette to Swann’s daughter, Gilberte, to his next love, Albertine, but it will continue to be his primary connection to music.

The next significant appearance of the music of Vinteuil is much later, when the narrator plays the Sonata in solitude. This is the only time in the novel that he plays the Sonata himself. Feeling, for the moment, at peace about his relationship with Albertine,

he is briefly able to separate the music from the feelings of jealousy and desire that it usually conjures up in him: “approaching the sonata from another point of view, regarding it in itself as the work of a great artist” (III. 155). Yet, he only hears the music “in itself” for a short time before he lets the music take him back to his childhood and his dreams of becoming an artist: “Could life console me for the loss of art? Was there in art a more profound reality, in which our true personality finds an expression that is not afforded it by the activities of life?” (III.155). As he plays the passage, the narrator’s thoughts turn to Wagner. He murmurs “Tristan,” and as he looks at the Wagner score he is

struck by how much reality there is in the work of Wagner as I contemplated once more those insistent, fleeting themes which visit an act, recede only to return again and again, and, sometimes distant, drowsy, almost detached, are at other moments, while remaining vague, so pressing and so close, so internal, so organic, so visceral, that they seem like the reprise not so much of a musical motif as of an attack of neuralgia. (III. 156)

We can read this passage as Proust describing his method of composition, relating it to the Wagnerian leitmotifs; we can read it as an account of our experience of reading Proust; we can read it as an existential Kierkegaardian expression of the quest for a true Christianity. But we can also see here the narrator making an advance by beginning to break with the Wagnerian method of association as well as with the way he has perceived music up to this point in the work. For the first time music is described formalistically, unattached to specific emotions or memories. Although it is not clear from the text *how*,

the narrator received a temporary revelation as the music helps him to “descend into [himself], to discover new things” (III. 156).

The longest and most significant scene of music listening occurs late in the novel as the narrator hears a performance at the same salon where Swann first heard the Vinteuil Sonata. Vinteuil’s final work is being performed: his Septet. In an extended passage, the narrator comes to the realization that art is more than a prolongation of life; it is “more real than life itself” (III.256). This realization seems to be triggered by his perception that the Septet contains many of the same themes as the Sonata, but that they have been transformed into a richer work. The “lily-white sonata” has become a “glowing” Septet, as it takes up “the same phrase again and again,” exploring “profound” similarities and differences. This scene takes place after a long gap in time, and as the narrator listens he is surrounded and distracted by all the people and memories that have inhabited his world—the whole material of the novel so far: the narrator’s “Sonata world,” so to speak. Like Vinteuil, the narrator will ultimately have to rework his material into a richer work of art. In the final scene he will again be surrounded by these same people; however, they will no longer be a distraction from art, but—reworked into a richer form—the very material of it—an artistic development the narrator learns from music, and that Proust learns from Christian art. Religious art, to produce a true response, cannot just represent the past, but must suggest and include the present.

The final appearance of Vinteuil’s music occurs, appropriately, with the psychologically sinking narrator now lying in bed while Albertine plays for him on the piano. As she plays, he realizes that music expresses something that is impossible to express any other way; that art is “something even more than the merely nerve-tingling

joy of a fine day,” and that if art did not “correspond to some definite spiritual reality . . . life would be meaningless” (III.381). It is in this scene that the narrator begins to understand that music can be “truer” to life than literature, not despite its abstract nature, but *because* of it:

Music seemed to me truer than all known books. At moments I thought that this was due to the fact that, what we feel about life not being felt in the form of ideas, its literary, that is to say intellectual expression describes it, explains it, analyzes it, but does not *recompose it as does music*, in which the sounds seem to follow the very movement of our being. (III. 381, emphasis mine)

Music again is truer *because* it is separate from life. However, desire and jealousy again pull him away from this realization:

Vinteuil’s phrases made me think of the “little phrase” and I told Albertine that it had been as it were the national anthem of the love of Swann and Odette, “the parents of Gilberte, whom I believe you know. You told me she was a bad girl. Didn’t she try to have relations with you? She spoke to me about you.” (III. 383)

Following the pattern we have been tracing, the narrator—again turning steeples into maidens—loses his trail to salvation just when he is on the edge of discovering it.

Although experiences with music have led the narrator to question his relationship to art and to life, it is literature, a reading of the “Goncourt Journals,” (Proust’s fictional rendering of the well-known brothers’s journals) that causes him to finally resign himself to a life without art, and to give up his life-long desire to write. He feels that he does not

“know how to look or listen” (III. 737). What he does not realize is that, like a religious mystic (or Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*) he has possessed the means to redemption within himself all along, given to him by art, and especially by the music of Vinteuil.

Reading the journals, the narrator senses, but does not at first see, that the “realism” of the journals lacks “truth” because, while full of detail, they ignore perception: the experience of the impression. This is a lesson he first learned not from music, but from painting. In Elstir’s studio he realizes while looking at his impressionist seascapes that there is more “truth” in Elstir’s paintings because he had “reproduce[d] things not as he knew them to be but according to the optical illusion of which our first sight of them is composed” (I. 897). Following the familiar pattern, however, this Ruskinian lesson is lost for the narrator when this visit provides his first view of Albertine (“Do you know that girl, Monsieur?”), with whom the works of Elstir will now be associated.

The Music of the Absolute

On the eve of his epiphany at the Guermantes party, the narrator tries to conjure up some feelings of happiness by recalling Venice. He feels nothing but boredom and disappointment at this mere mental and verbal “snapshot,” which lacks the “reality” he craves. It is at this very moment that his stumbling over a paving stone reminds him of the *essence* of Venice and the “sensation” of being at St. Marks. Although it is not music that triggers his realization, through music and the ideas of music he can finally understand the relationship between art, life, and memory.

And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbor, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me . . . *and of which the last works of Vinteuil had seemed to me to combine the quintessential character.* (III. 898-899, emphasis mine)

This experience of involuntary memory enables him to discover his “true life,” to discover

reality as we have felt it to be, which differs so greatly from what we think it is that when a chance happening brings us an authentic memory of it we are filled with an immense happiness. (III. 915)

So how does music do this? With intensely experienced moments of art, beauty, and emotion in the narrator’s life, what is it about the musical experience that makes it the primary art in the true “reality”? How is it that his experiences of listening to music, which have been intense since his youth, can suddenly combine with events of his life to offer an answer to his Search?

Some insight can be found in Proust’s traversing of a fundamental debate among composers, musicologists and aesthetic philosophers that arose in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This split, in what is an ongoing argument, is between what are often referred to as the absolutists and the referentialists. To absolutists the “meaning” of music lies exclusively in the musical process alone; the “language” of music can refer only to itself, not to anything outside of music. The leading proponent of this position in the nineteenth century was Eduard Hanslick: “Music can whisper, storm, roar—

tenderness and anger are carried only in our own hearts” (20). On the other side of this debate are the referentialists, for whom the meaning of music is associated with its communication of images, experiences, and emotional states. Arnold Schering's “hidden programs” in Beethoven's symphonies would be an example. In the middle we find someone like Schopenhauer, who, although he proclaimed the power of a textless “absolute” music, also saw it as the most powerful and precise language for art because it could directly represent human emotions (532).¹⁶

This debate began around 1800. Until then the prevailing idea of music—going back to Plato—was that it needed *logos*: language as an expression of human reason. Either music had to contain words or it needed to be supplied with a program. Around 1800, a whole new way of thinking about music developed. According to advocates of “absolute” music, words were “outside” of music, and purely instrumental music was no longer considered “beneath” language, but above it and, in fact, as containing the essence of musical experience. Gradually the idea of absolute music became the “aesthetic paradigm of 19th century musical culture” (Dahlhaus 8-9), and this continued through the 20th.¹⁷

Both sides of this debate were caught up in a web of theological assumptions, both conscious and intentional and subconscious and unintentional. While earlier musical forms had derived from religious practices and settings of sacred and religious texts, absolute music found justification in that it could be listened to and appreciated with “devotion” despite its lack of specific reference (Dahlhaus 78). Absolutists insisted

¹⁶The relationship of Schopenhauer to Proust has been noted as far back as Samuel Beckett's *Proust*, and is the subject of a whole chapter in Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *Proust as Musician*.

that this “wordless” music would be “elevated” above speech (80). This “pure” music then is justified on the ground that it is a *more* religious experience, *because* it is not connected to a sacred text. The issue centers around what kind of music leads one to the divine or the transcendent experience, leading to the ontological questions of defining just what it was they were aiming towards. Was the proper target of devotion the traditional Judeo-Christian personal figure that could be addressed or a more abstract “Absolute” that was an experience beyond words?

For many 19th century thinkers, “absolute” music was where the religious Absolute could truly manifest itself—a religious and spiritual idea that could only be realized through art. “What Hegel said of the ancient statue of a god—that the religious idea is not merely ‘symbolized’ but is immediately present in it—was transferred. . . to modern instrumental music” (Dahlhaus 102). On the other hand, for Kierkegaard the “indeterminate” nature of instrumental music is an “imperfection” (*Either/Or* 56). But ironically, Kierkegaard’s interpretation of a God that is unknowable proposes an essential nature that is indeterminate. So although Kierkegaard shows his disapproval of instrumental and absolute music, he has linked it with a religious spirit in much the same way other more Hegelian thinkers have.

Carl Dahlhaus contrasts Kierkegaard’s with Adorno’s view:

As opposed to language that means something, music is language of a completely different type. In that type lies its theological aspect. What it says is an appearance simultaneously determined and hidden. Its idea is the form of the name of God. It is . . . the human attempt, though futile as

¹⁷ Although this was initially a very German debate, by the late 19th century it had also entered French consciousness, and was influencing how they thought and wrote about music.

always, to speak the name itself, not to impart meanings. (qt. in Dahlhaus 115)

The Idea in music, the statement without words, becomes the name of God, yet it still remains outside of human contact.

Writing about Proust, Beckett said “music is the Idea itself, unaware of the world of phenomena, existing ideally outside the universe” (71). Early 20th century composers, like Schoenberg, agreed that musical structure was non-referential but insisted that it still had ideas that needed to correspond to the “laws of human logic” (*Style and Idea* 215), which echoes Proust’s narrator’s realization that music seems to “follow the very movement of our being” (III. 381). As Proust wrote in his preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, “music, unlike language, bears no trace of material things . . . never speaks to us of men, but imitates the movements of the soul” (*On Reading* 99).

Early in the novel we can see these very issues played out and debated in the mind of Swann as, affected by the “little phrase” of Vinteuil, Swann perceives musical motifs as “actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadow, unknown, impenetrable to the human mind, but none the less perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance” (I. 379-380). These thoughts are close to those of an absolutist and sound like something Schoenberg could have said, but on further analysis of his impressions of the phrase Swann realizes that he is basing this “conclusion not upon the phrase itself, but merely upon certain equivalents, substituted (for his mind’s convenience) for the mysterious entity of which he had become aware” (I. 380).

Swann here sets in dialogue the two sides of the issue, both trying to hear music as itself *and* as symbolic or representative of something else. This debate is very significant in our effort to understand the narrator and his search to make sense of life and art. As we have seen, he consistently associates music with his own emotions. Specific events and feelings of love, jealousy, desire, optimism, and hopelessness are all associated for him with the music of Vinteuil. Yet, as I have also tried to show, these same feelings seem to keep him from truly experiencing the music and from fully experiencing the transcendence that the music suggests to him. Because he attaches the music to specific emotion, and because specific emotions like love and jealousy—at least in Proust—will always fade, so will the music’s “meaning.” The theological side of this resides in the mystic argument—from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart—that to give any specific attribute to God is to lose some of what God essentially “is.”

There is always a question of just how absolute music can be, and it is clear that it must have *some* meaning for the narrator. For absolutists from Hanslick to Schoenberg, the problem has been to articulate what music can *mean* if it has no referential meaning. For Wagner, who first coined the term absolute music (*absoluten musik*), and who was greatly influenced by Schopenhauer, “music can only be understood in forms drawn from a relationship to life. . . forms that, originally foreign to music, only receive their deepest meaning through music” (qtd. in Dahlhaus 26). For Nietzsche, drama (i.e. Wagner) could only reproduce the appearance of things, while music could capture their true nature (Dahlhaus 31). Hanslick pushed the idea of absolute music even further towards the abstract.

In the 1950's, in his influential *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Leonard Meyer offered musicologists a new vocabulary for analyzing the effects and meaning of music. Recognizing the persuasive argument of the absolutists, Meyer also realized the problems inherent in their position: "[I]f the term 'meaning' is to have any significance at all as applied to music, then it must have the same signification as when applied to other kinds of experience." The challenge for Meyer, and for Proust's narrator, is to locate this meaning without falling victim to the "propensity to regard all meanings arising in human communication as designative, as involving symbolism of some sort" (33).

Meyer locates meaning in the listener, and more specifically in the way the music creates—and then fulfills, denies, or delays—expectations. A "musical event . . . has meaning because it points to and makes us expect another musical event. This is what music means from the viewpoint of the absolutist" (35). For the narrator, as well, the meaning is found in the perceiver: "It is only a clumsy and erroneous form of perception which places everything in the object, when really everything is in the mind" (III 950). For Schopenhauer, music perception must be a "selfless aesthetic contemplation," concentrating on the music, not distracted by the "coincidental stirrings of one's own spirit" (Dahlhaus 74). Listened to correctly then, music will "seem to reveal the innermost sense of the things and appear as its most correct and clearest commentary" (131).

Only when the narrator realizes that reality lies not in the feelings and emotions that music conjures up, but in the functioning of the pure music itself, is able to understand the transcendent force of music. In the abstraction of music, not distracted by

words or referential images, he feels a separate world created—a world that embodies a “purely mental character of reality” (III 953).

In music, a phrase of music can never be the same from one listening to another, even within a single listening of a piece. For example, a formal analysis of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* would describe it as a theme followed by variations on the harmonic progression followed by an exact repetition of the original theme. To a listener however, when the theme returns it is enriched and changed by the experience of having listened to the variations. One hears different moods, rhythms and harmonies internally because of what has just been listened to. There can never be an exact repetition in art or life, and when the narrator begins to see this in music he can also relate it to his social experiences:

How often had all these people re-appeared before me in the course of their lives, the diverse circumstances of which seemed to present the same individuals always, but in forms and for purposes that were shifted and varied! (III. 1019)

The listening experiences the narrator has responded to have included the anticipation, remembering, and forgetting which Meyer associates with the “meaning” of music. Proust’s narrator will also find that this applies to his impressions of events and people: “this forgetfulness which modifies for us our image of a human being” (III.1011). This forgetfulness, as much as memory, also applies to the reader's experience in the novel. Even the reading of the Proustian sentence is an experience in memory. Like a long melody by Bruckner, part of the perception process involves trying to remember where the line began. It is music, then, that is most important to the narrator’s realization that

nothing is stable. Like the supposedly unchanging melody that is constantly being heard differently “all that seemed to be forever fixed is constantly being re-fashioned” (III. 1072).

The “reality” of music lies in its nature of creating (with the perceiver) a past, a present, and a future, *of its own*, through memory and expectations. Music teaches the narrator to see himself and others, not as a “snapshot,” but as a succession of events and a succession of perceptions. Specific associations or referential memories can prohibit this experience from occurring. Ironically, only when music becomes separate from the outside material world does it acquire a reality more true than nature. Only when the narrator allows music to become absolute (and to become the Absolute), does it help him to see how he must live his life—and how he can merge his life *and* his art. Time is regained, not through static but fading memories and associations, but through the shifting, subjective reality for which the model is music.

Listening Again: The Absence of the Absolute

Having followed one specific path, at this point we seem to have come to a sort of closure. Our logical argument has lead us to an understanding of the role of music in Proust’s work and its relationship to his secular/religious aesthetic. But a path is never direct and never leads in only one direction. As we have seen in previous chapters, the tropes, themes, and metaphors around which we locate elements of the theological create fields of instability rather than stability. Relationships to the god-idea and its metaphors are always both determinate and indeterminate. Can this path lead us in another direction?

Barthes says that Proust's "good fortune" is that "from one reading to the next we never skip the same passages" (11). If we read and experience Proust's scenes of music yet again, using his method of circles, cycles, and folding back in upon himself, we can re-evaluate our conclusions and the idea of music as the determinate God of Proust's art religion.

Contemporary musicologists no longer engage in evaluative debates about absolute and referential or program music. Postmodern thought has questioned the assigning of inside and outside and the concept of "extra-musical" upon which theories of absolute music depend. The idea of absolute music is now seen as an impossible and idealized category. The latter part of the 20th century has seen a renewed interest in musical hermeneutics and in discussion of musical meaning, and all music and texts are interpreted within some type of context. This view is reflected in the title of Berthold Hoeckner's book *Programming the Absolute*, where he writes "today . . . the idea (and ideology) of absolute music has finally lost its privileged position in Western art music and it is no longer a dominating paradigm in the scholarly study thereof. Absolute music has become relative" (3). There is no more Absolute.

Musicologist Susan McClary points to an association of absolute music with traditionally gendered plot lines, something we constantly questioned in Proust. Proust's eroticized musical experiences are both penetrating and embracing, both masculine and feminine, and if Proust's feminization and eroticizing of music is one way to point to a certain binary relationship, perhaps it is also a way to problematize it, to rip it away from

history and binary relationships.¹⁸ As Deleuze says, we are always reading Proust from two distinct viewpoints: from the viewpoint of an “apprenticeship in progress,” and from the viewpoint of a “final revelation” (83). These terms apply as much to us as to the narrator and my first conclusion puts too much emphasis on the final revelation; it is limited and Christian-rooted and implies a teleological movement towards the narrator’s salvation. But that is only one type of movement. The movement of both plot and musical perception are much more complicated.

If “only art gives us what we vainly seek in our beloved” (Deleuze 42), then once art has given us that do we still find desire? Kristeva considers the “risk of desiring another person” to be the most interesting element of eroticism; Winquist sees “desire” as being the central theme of all theology. For both the reader of Proust and for his narrator, having escaped or transcended the erotic through art—in a process that necessarily includes desire and the erotic—do we then double back to include it? Has it always already been there? Should we think of the narrator’s perception of music as not *referentially* erotic but *absolutely* so? In other words, the narrator’s musical experiences must contain the erotic and desire; they don’t exist outside of this context.

Deleuze focuses on the separation of the sign of art from the sensual sign. Each, he says, offers a different type of “time regained” (45). But as the text draws the reader back in, time reverses, and the eroticization of art seems a necessary step: A step that is *absolutely* part of the musical experience, and therefore of the music. It is impossible to separate Proust’s ideas of the sacredness of music and erotic desire. (The narrator goes so

¹⁸Swann, on the very edge of a transcendent experience, realizes that the “pleasure which the music gave him. . . . was in fact akin at such moments to the pleasure which he would have derived from experimenting with perfumes, from entering into contact with a world for which we men were not made” (I.259).

far as to compare not understanding art to being a virgin.) And in the “time regained” of art, the erotic moments are *saved* along with the rest of the narrator’s life, so that they are not now distractions from the essence of art, but erotic moments in that art itself.

By concentrating on teleology we fall into the trap of viewing art through a traditional and Christian goal-oriented time frame. We ignore process: of reading, listening, desiring, and of metaphor. As Kristeva points out, Vinteuil’s music exists entirely in metaphorical terms, and as she says, it is a “reversible” metaphor: both woman is music and music is woman. In the same way both religion is art and art is religion. And as musicologist Leo Treitler suggests, the “expressive effect of metaphor is musical” (49). The power of metaphor is not in what it says or even in what it describes, but in the creative process involved in its perception—an “erotics” of perception that exists in listening to music or in reading Proust. The process of reading Proust seems to suggest that if art does have a relationship to life, it is ultimately in the complexity of the response: the “unstable opposition, the original complication” (Deleuze 47). So while the dialectical tension of absolute and referential music provides a starting point, while Hanslick and Schopenhauer provide some context, perhaps the best way to listen to the language of music in Proust is through the metaphor of sleep and the sensuous dream—the scene of confusion where the novel begins.

Coda

This scene, which brings us back to the church and a string quartet on page one of the novel, leaves us still grappling with the confusing roles of religion and art, Christianity and music, and their contradictory positions in Proust’s work as a whole. In

The Fragile Absolute or Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?, Žižek makes a distinction between “traditional” and “modern” (or postmodern) art, a distinction that we can use to conclude.

If, then, the problem of traditional (premodern) art was how to fill in the sublime Void of the thing (the pure Place) with an adequately beautiful object. . .the problem of modern art is, in a way, the opposite (and much more desperate) one: one can no longer count on the Void of the (Sacred) Place being there, offering itself to be occupied by human artifacts, so the task is to sustain the Place as such, to make sure that this Place itself will “take place.” (26-27)

When Proust creates a church and a string quartet on page one we assume that they are vessels waiting to be filled. Art, acting as a form of religion, (or religion acting as a form of art) will fulfill these two sacred places, and bring the narrator to a state of salvation. What we see, reading this scene again through Proust’s whole novel, Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” and Žižek, is that the challenge has shifted. One no longer strives to fill the Void, but to create the Void in the first place (Žižek, *Fragile* 27). “Piss Christ” is not simply a blasphemous demonstration, but as Žižek would say “bears witness to a desperate strategy to ascertain that the Sacred Place is still there” (*Fragile* 31). Proust’s use of religious patterns and Christian art is not just a filling of a church with art, a string quartet with music, or a novel with meaning, but is part of a more serious project of creating the very abyss that needs to be recognized before it can even begin to be filled.

Chapter Five

Schoenberg's Godless Silences: Atonality and the Challenge of Coherence

Part I: Modernism's Emancipation of Dissonance

Visions of Silence

Perhaps the two most famous defining moments of modernist music are the 1913 premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacré du printemps*, including the riots that followed, and the 1908 premiere of Arnold Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, Opus 10. The last two moments of the Schoenberg Quartet, which include soprano, are often cited as the moment music arrived at absolute "atonality," where there is no longer any sense of a pitch center around which the music is tonally organized. The performance, while it avoided the riots associated with *Le Sacré*, did incite controversy and dissent. Music critic Richard Batka wrote that "[t]he majority of the public took against the work; various dissonances caused elegant ladies to utter cries of pain, putting their hands to their delicate ears, and elderly gentlemen to shed tears" (Reich 36). The text of the quartet, by Stefan George, includes the phrase "*Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten*," ("I feel air from another planet"), and is often cited as appropriate for the strange new world that music seemed to be entering.

Schoenberg's celebrated "turn" to atonality produced what is still considered uncompromising, modern, and "difficult" music. Schoenberg's early atonality comes from the idea that there should be no tonal center, no diatonic scale. Schoenberg, never liked the term "atonal," but allowed that "the overwhelming multitude of dissonances cannot be balanced any longer by occasional returns to such tonal triads as represent a key" (Reich 31). Both his Opus 11 and Opus 16, written about the same time, had no key

signature, no central pitches, and dissonances were allowed to sound without resolution to a consonance.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky attended a second concert which included on the program Opus 10 as well as Schoenberg's next atonal work (Opus 11) for solo piano, and was inspired to depict the event in a series of studies and a painting, *Impression III (Concert)*. Although the two had never met, Kandinsky sent Schoenberg a letter explaining that, "what we are striving for and our whole manner of thought and feeling have so much in common that I feel completely justified in expressing my empathy." Kandinsky felt that Schoenberg had achieved in his music, something that he, as a painter, had been also attempting to do: "the independent voices in your compositions is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings. . . I am certain that our own modern harmony is not to be found in the 'geometric' way, but rather in the anti-geometric, antilogical." Kandinsky's recognition of "independent voices" and the "antilogical" corresponds to what Schoenberg would call the "emancipation of dissonance" and the "elimination of the conscious will," both characteristics of his early atonal style that he stresses in his essays. Schoenberg's response to Kandinsky begins, "I am particularly happy when it is an artist creating in another art from mine who finds points of contact with me," and later in the letter Schoenberg offers to show Kandinsky some photographs of his own paintings. Kandinsky, who was also a musician and composer, helped arrange for Schoenberg to have some of his paintings and writings on music featured in a Blue Rider exhibit and publication. Kandinsky and Schoenberg continued to exchange letters and to occasionally meet for years until they split after Schoenberg heard a report of Kandinsky making anti-Semitic remarks.

A recent exhibition, “Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider,” at The Jewish Museum in New York City, focused on the “singular meeting of artistic minds” (Wasserman 17) between Schoenberg and Kandinsky. The exhibit displayed letters, documents, and paintings of Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and other Blue Rider artists. Schoenberg’s early atonality was concurrent with the period in his life when he painted seriously, and Kandinsky was supportive of Schoenberg’s painting. The second room of the exhibit was lined with Schoenberg’s self portraits and his more abstract “Gazes,” and “Visions” which are also primarily heads and faces. The paintings, showing the influence of Klimt and Redon but maintaining a unique somewhat amateurish style of their own, appeared as a row of floating heads staring straight ahead, but appearing not to see outside the frame. To view these paintings together is to see the faces begin to recede into the canvas, becoming more detached, dissolving, leaving only the questioning eyes. The feeling of being surrounded by these paintings, all the staring and haunting eyes, which Adorno described as “harsh expressionist visions of loneliness” and “phantoms of transcendence” (Hoeckner 223), is one of emptiness. The viewer is left with first only heads, then only eyes, and the eventual impression is the breaking down of the pairs of eyes into single unattached orbs.

Although, like most major museum shows, the exhibit was constructed to show parallels and cohesion—between Schoenberg and Kandinsky, between painting and music—a counter narrative emerges that tells stories of rupture and silence. Like the separating of the eyes from their familiar context, Schoenberg’s writing, painting, and music implicitly question the possibility of unity and of their own modes of communication. George Steiner writes that “Schoenberg, as a writer and painter, as well

as a composer, achieved an effect of clarity and abstract energy by *leaving out syntactical qualifications or half tones*” (Steiner 237, my emphasis). It is the “leaving out” of the connective steps that the museum exhibit demonstrated. These missing steps or “half tones” become moments of silence—both metaphorical and literal—moments of transition that do not exist. Schoenberg’s paintings themselves seem strangely silent, they suggest no movement or sound (Kandinsky’s paintings from the same time, are full of both.). The museum exhibit demonstrated these gaps and silences in Schoenberg’s career as well: he stops painting almost completely in 1912, he composes almost nothing from 1917-1922, and his friendship and letters with Kandinsky cease abruptly in 1923.

These silences resonate with the silences of modernism. They are the silences of an artistic era self-consciously creating experimental and difficult texts. They are the silences of a modern music that, as Adorno says, “sees absolute oblivion as its goal” (133). They are the silences, both metaphorical and literal, that John Auchord finds in the omitted scenes, unspoken sentiments, and unread letters of the Henry James novel—the “pervasive sense of negation—of ubiquitous absence” (2).

Critics have increasingly found silence a powerful force in modernist poetry and music—both between words and among them, the silence separating music and meaning and word and image. In *The Literature of Silence* Ihab Hassan anticipates postmodern theory’s interest in negative theology when he writes of this modernist silence:

Silence develops as the metaphor of a new attitude that literature has chosen to adopt toward itself. This attitude puts to question the peculiar power, the ancient excellence, of literary discourse—and challenges the assumptions of our civilization. (15)

Hassan finds in this silence a “metaphysical revolt and at the same time metaphysical surrender, which is the desire for nothingness” (5). In this chapter, by looking at the music of Arnold Schoenberg, the poetry of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, and at two moments of “silence” in Schoenberg’s compositional career, I want to demonstrate how modernist music and poetry have challenged the assumptions of language, theology, and meaning that surround their very existence—moments that indeed question a traditional metaphysics of presence and express a desire for nothingness.

The two silences of Schoenberg that I am focusing on are literal silences; they are moments when the music stops, when the lack of music speaks loudest. The first silence is the gap in Schoenberg’s career from 1917-1922—a period of compositional inactivity following his move into atonality and preceding the presenting of his new twelve-tone system of composition. The second silence exists at the end of the second act of *Moses und Aron*, a moment when Moses falls to the stage in despair, ultimately unable to convince his people of his new God. Although the opera was originally intended to have a third act, Schoenberg never composed the music; Act Three exists only as a libretto. My reading of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* sees it as overlaying a theological crisis onto an aesthetic one. *Moses und Aron* is a theological debate that questions the language of modernist music, and a musical work that questions the presence of theology.

These two moments of silence reflect a larger aesthetic and theological shift within modernism. They relate to the larger issue of the breaking down of grammar and syntax in both music and poetry. They point to silences and gaps between sign and meaning and word and image that demonstrate paradoxical representations of

modernism's complex and uneasy relationship to both atheism and the Divine. My belief is that revisiting these two familiar moments in music history can reveal a deep cultural, aesthetic, and theological abyss within the modernist language and grammar of both poetry and music.

This chapter, as it moves through Nietzsche's views on grammar and religion, Schoenberg's early essays and atonality, poems by William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, and Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, will focus on the 19th century death of God on the level of syntax and then move into a discussion of Schoenberg's late modernist attempt to "write religion." In tracing these paths we see how the Nietzschean death of God affected poetry and music and the artistic representation of God himself. But whether metaphorical or literal, the death of God and the representation of God in art become a related discourse rather than opposing efforts. "We still believe in God because we still believe in grammar," writes Nietzsche and this statement resonates through a modernism that often attempted to recreate grammar and to not believe in God.

Breaking With Tonality: Abandoning the Center

From the Renaissance until the early 20th century, all Western music had been based around a tonal center: a note or a chord (the "tonic") which the rest of the harmony is analyzed in relationship to. In traditional music, harmonic movement and the overall tension and relaxation of the music are determined by movement away from and towards this tonal center. In music before the 20th century, as one of Schoenberg's followers puts it, "the magnet is the key-note, which forces all the other eleven notes into relationship

with itself” (Rufer 15). The movement of traditional musical narrative is driven harmonically by two main features: the movement of a fifth in the base line, and the leading tone (a movement of a half step upwards) that pulls the listener’s ear to a resolution. Dissonance (best described as an unstable harmony) always resolves to a consonance (or a stable harmony) in an expected way, often using the anticipated movement of a fifth or of a leading tone. While music of the late 19th century increased in harmonic ambiguity and therefore created a weakening of the standard harmonic perceptions there still existed a “pact” between composer and listener that a work would be “causal, teleological, and closed” (Jordan and Kafalenos 134). This “pact” determined (and still determines) the listener’s expectations, and how they hear a harmonically ambiguous passage from this period. Yet it is the perceived break with this pact as, exemplified in the music of Schoenberg that expresses the epistemological doubts of modernism and makes for such a radical transformation in the perceiver’s experience.

Although epistemological doubt is not unique to the 20th century, by appropriating philosophical doubt into the constructing of artistic language, modernism created a break with previous art. The faith in artistic representation is rooted in a Medieval and Renaissance theological interpretation of language and signs. The key to the Renaissance’s *episteme*, according to Michel Foucault, was an emphasis on “resemblance,” which was “*without doubt* the most universal thing” (29, my emphasis). Furthermore, in Foucault’s analysis of the 16th century, its language and its grammar are purveyors of unquestioned meaning:

The value of [Renaissance] language lay in the fact that it was the sign of things. There is no difference between the visible marks that God has

stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures. . . have set down in the books.” (*Order* 33)

Foucault suggests that this faith in language is inseparable from a belief in God.

Renaissance music, as well as most post-Renaissance music, reflects the idea that any language is a form of signification based upon the ultimate communication of the Absolute. This attitude manifests itself in the belief in the divine role of early text-oriented music, in religious theories of “absolute” or “pure” music, and in the development of a teleological and centric music theory—concepts that survive into the 20th century.

Musicologist Susan McClary describes traditional Western music’s “goal” as to “first produce a teleological model of time organization in terms of beginning, middle, and end,” and then to “depart from home base and explore various potentialities latent within the opening materials; and finally to restore certainty in a *dénouement* that secures the key of the opening, thus resolving the tensions that have kept the piece in motion” (22). These elements of traditional music have contributed to descriptions of music as feeling divinely dictated, of fulfilling or completing a providential path. Formalist music theorists such as Heinrich Shenker (who remains the most influential music theorist in music conservatories today), focus almost exclusively on locating one controlling harmonic line and see the role of music theory as a search for one true meaning which he also compares to divine order: “in the cosmos the single cause is God—in music the only cause is the *Ursatz* [fundamental structure]” (qtd in Ringer 20). The music of the early 20th century not only created a new musical language and necessitated new, gradually

accepted, modes of music theorizing, but forced a rift in historically accepted analogies between the function of music and the function of God.

Schoenberg's Logic of Atonality

Schoenberg wrote that music “should be formed in harmony with the Divine Model” (*Style* 215), and the need for a Divine Model or Law colors much of Schoenberg's early theoretical writings. When describing a chord progression of his disciple Alban Berg in his influential 1908 treatise *Theory of Harmony* (*Harmonielehre*), he remarks, “laws apparently prevail. What they are I do not know” (420-421). The unnamed laws suggest a historical presence that asserts itself even as artists attempt to transcend traditional boundaries. Throughout *Theory of Harmony*, Schoenberg, while continually redefining terms, also looks back to find precedents in music history and the works of the “masters.” This double movement of both recreating and looking back into tradition develops a tension where, although he appears to be breaking away from traditional modes of locating music's “meaning,” he still relies upon the idea of “correctness” or musical “laws” emanating from somewhere.¹

The influence of Schoenberg's “break” with tonality on other composers and artists was due to his prose writings as much as his music.² Modernist artists were very aware of their breaking with traditions, were confident in their new directions, and as such, loved the authority of manifestos and artistic treatises. From the Futurists to the

¹The assumption of the existence of laws and this mysterious search for divine structure suggests the connection between the Law of Moses and Schoenberg's twelve-tone row that I will explore in *Moses und Aron*.

²The poster announcing the famous 1911 concert that Kandinsky attended contained excerpts of Schoenberg's early theoretical essays. On the poster was an excerpt from “On Parallel Octaves and Fifths,” which would be in *Theory of Harmony*.

Surrealists to Ezra Pound, the first quarter of the 20th century saw an explosion of treatises and manifestos proclaiming the new art of the future. Mary Ann Caws writes that “the manifesto is Modernist rather than ironically Postmodernist” (xxi), and Schoenberg’s confident assertion about the necessary directions of music echos this attitude. Schoenberg’s writings, while they play a major role in defining breaks with traditional style, also promote an interpretative approach that stresses the traditional and insists on a work’s cohesiveness.³

In *Theory of Harmony* Schoenberg emphasizes that older music and musical forms are not “under attack” (408), and that his work is only part of a great process of evolution: “everything is only a preparation for a higher stage of development” (97). On the other hand, Schoenberg claims to hold no nostalgic feelings towards tonality; it is not a “natural law of music, eternally valid” (9). Early in the work Schoenberg recasts the very building blocks of music when he defines a single note or tone as being a composite sound containing a complex series of overtones. This radical redefinition resembles the redefining of the word or the sign that developed throughout the 20th century from Saussure to Derrida that ultimately finds in a single word a series of dissemination and difference rather than a stable unit of meaning

As Allen Shawn points out, Schoenberg presents his music theory⁴ as “something embedded in the human condition itself” (136). For Schoenberg, the true musical idea must reflect something real in the way the mind works. Music, he writes, should “correspond to the laws of human logic.” Kandinsky, however, had praised Schoenberg

³ For example, Schoenberg’s claims that his method was evolutionary and that its sole purpose was to promote comprehensibility define following generations of music criticism.

for his “anti-logical” approach to composition and this contradiction is an important aspect of interpreting these early works in the larger context of modernism. Can atonality (or abstraction) be logical? And if a work is deemed as either logical or illogical, where do the laws of logic come from? This question must be seen in the context of Nietzsche’s remark on grammar and God and in Schoenberg’s assumption of absolute musical laws. Does the construction of new musical languages say anything about music’s relationship to theology?

The movement into atonality appeared so radical that early commentators often tried to explain it through autobiographical⁵ or social forces. The relationship between abstract musical languages and shifts in religious beliefs has been discussed since early in the century. One way to place musical atonality within a larger cultural context was to associate it with the rising tide of agnosticism and atheism. In 1924 for example, the *Leipzig Zeitschrift für musik* labeled Schoenberg a “denier of God” (Reich 149). But while connections were drawn between early 20th century agnosticism and musical atonality, other early critics found in Schoenberg’s difficult music a path *to* the divine. In 1934 Franz Wertel wrote

In [Schoenberg’s] devotion to the unconditional, this master of music comes perhaps closest to the old masters of the cabbala. Just as they attempted through the ‘Sanctification of the Name,’ to draw the Divine into the earthly realm, so Arnold Schoenberg endeavors, through the sanctification of the work of art, i.e. through the exclusion of all impure

⁴ Music theory, as it might be supposed, is not analogous to literary theory, an analogy more accurately given to musicology. Music theory (or “analysis”) is the theorizing of the “objective” fields of form, melody, and harmony.

secondary goals (effect, success, accessibility), to draw the absolute into the world of sound. (qtd. in Ringer 23)

Wertel locates Schoenberg's goal as drawing "the absolute into the world of sound."

Wertel's use of "absolute" offers different readings. In addition to the spiritual aspect of his music, Schoenberg stubbornly insisted on music's nature as absolute: as communicating meaning *only* as musical ideas. Schoenberg complained in an essay that "[t]here are relatively few people who are capable of understanding, purely in musical terms, what music has to say" (*Style* 141). But Wertel's absolute seems more suggestive of the spiritual Absolute. What is the relationship between Absolute and absolute in Schoenberg's music? For Kandinsky, Schoenberg's music leads us into a new realm, where "musical experiences are no longer acoustic, but purely spiritual" (149). On the other hand, Adorno felt that Schoenberg's music reflected the alienation and chaos of modern society, a "surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked" (133). These two reactions demonstrate another example of contradictory response to Schoenberg's music and its relationship to ideas of the absolute and the divine. To different interpreters, Schoenberg's music can either lead to God or suggest a culture that has lost God. This contradiction is a recasting of the questions of logic or anti-logic, fragment and unity, which force themselves into discussion of atonality and Schoenberg's later move into twelve-tone serialism. In the wake of the death of God, whether in the poetry of Stein or Williams or the early atonality of Schoenberg, the breaks from grammar present a challenge of meaning that has a theological edge. By questioning the teleology

⁵ One common autobiographical explanation is that Schoenberg had perhaps contemplated suicide during the composing of Opus 10.

and signifying properties of the sign they begin to recognize Nietzsche's Death of God; yet at the same time there is a resistance to this lack of metaphysical grounding

Of Grammar, Fragments, and Gods

It is no longer a question of whether or not to write fragments, for the fragmentary has become our destiny.

Mark C. Taylor (*Imagologies*)

It is in *Twilight of the Idols* that Nietzsche famously says, "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar" (48). While it is not clear in the context of this work what Nietzsche is referring to, and while Richard Rorty dismisses this comment as "a wisecrack," it has been frequently quoted and taken quite seriously by many modern critics. Elsewhere, Nietzsche relates the persistence of a grammatical system still married to the relationship between subject and predicate to the stubborn belief we have in causality and, by extension, teleology and God.

In his introduction to the influential *The New Nietzsche*, David Allison stresses the importance of Nietzsche's ideas on grammar. One of Nietzsche's main themes, according to Allison, is that grammatical functions can determine not only the terms of thought but also the rules *for* thought. In this view, our grammatical construction of and reliance upon subject and predicate leads to an organization of ideas based on identity, causality, and binary oppositions. The resulting concept of autonomous identity influences, determines, and stabilizes our ideas of unity, plurality, permanence, space and time, and self, ego, soul, and God. Our understanding of causality is based in an assumption of cause and effect, which, in turn, creates our belief in free will and determinism. Our development of thought systems based on binary opposition

establishes our understanding of concepts such as good/evil, human/divine, true/false, and immanent/transcendent (Allison xxii).

As Nietzsche describes it, the belief in language or belief in grammatical categories gives us an illusion of “substantial identity” which produces the false image of the autonomous self. Michael Haar writes that, for Nietzsche, “faith in grammar simply conveys the will to be the ‘cause’ of one’s own thought. The subject, the self, the individual are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality” (Haar 18). This perceived transformation of linguistic reality into substantial reality suggests a connection between the death of God and the death of the self. The ego, which for Nietzsche has lost its self-identity and is only a grammatical fiction, is directly connected to the death of God, to the concept of the One, and to unity. Therefore grammar, in Nietzsche’s sense, will “always be re-establishing an indefinite multitude of substitutes for the God who is dead” (Haar 35). The question then becomes whether modernism was breaking with grammar or creating a substitute system for it. And if a belief in grammar does indicate a belief in God, was modernism operating in a godless world or creating another substitute for God?⁶

Schoenberg’s turn to atonality, along with Picasso’s Cubism and Stein’s “abstract” poetry, represents an early break or refashioning of a traditional grammatical style. While for Schoenberg, his early atonal and later serial compositions were the only

⁶ If we see Schoenberg’s break with tonality as a “break” that carries with it a theological significance, it has as an analogue the later Death-of-God theologians or “Christian atheists” who did not see themselves as making a break with traditional theology, but as carrying on the work of traditional and historical Christian theology (Altizer, *Toward* 12). Schoenberg’s period of serial composition, which followed, his early free atonality also corresponds roughly to his return to a faith in God and to his interest in musically

possible way in which to compose, and “grew out of a necessity” (*Style* 216), they still reflects the fragmentation and doubt of the modernist period by refusing to obey traditional ideas of connection and unification. Interpretations of Picasso’s cubist paintings, Stein’s poetry, and Schoenberg’s atonality have often focused on analysis and on the recombination of disparate parts through the revealing of a system: unity is assumed, it is the critic’s duty to locate and describe it. This tendency is obvious in schools of thought like the New Criticism in literature, Shenkerian analysis in music, and Schliermachian hermeneutics in theology. More recently critics have been less concerned with recombination than with the recognition of the importance of fragments and fragmentation.

Theologian David Tracy sees the modernist impulse towards “fragmentation” and its preferences for the “syntactically unstable” (178) as leading to three interpretive possibilities. “Radical conservatives” writes Tracy, such as T.S. Eliot, “see ‘fragments’ with regret and nostalgia as all that is left of what was once a unified culture.” Tracy’s second category of thinkers, the “postmodernists,” as exemplified by Bataille, see fragmentation as “emancipatory” and “transformative” of the “rationality of modern onto-theology.” The third category, with which Tracy sympathizes, is based on the thought of Walter Benjamin and Simone Weil, and sees “fragments theologically as saturated and auratic bearers of infinity and sacred hope” (173). Tracy compares Benjamin’s privileging of the “marginal fragment” over “historical totally” to his own privileging of Mark’s fragmentary “discontinuous” gospel over the Luke/Acts “continuous realistic narrative” (178). Despite his emphasis on the fragment, however,

representing traditional Jewish themes, which mirrors the theological movement that felt it needed to break down Christianity in order to build it again.

Tracy is still ultimately trapped with the tension of fragment and unity. Derrida's critique of Tracy's position is to point out that even the use of the word "fragment" contains in it an implication of the possibility of the whole (181), a critique that questions Tracy's assumption of the fragment existing outside of unity. Tracy's acknowledged Catholicism, however radical, does not allow him to see the fragment as a force of rupture. Tracy sees primarily "infinity and sacred hope" while ignoring the darkness of Weil, Benjamin, and the Gospel of Mark, the only gospel without a resurrection.

Despite these problems, Tracy's taxonomy of fragments can be usefully translated into critical theory. Although Tracy presents his interpretations of the fragment as a theologian, they clearly represent approaches to reading modernism as well. Within modernist literature, both the act of composing in fragments and the strategies of reading a fragmented text, involve taking an ontological and epistemological stance. These choices can be seen in the various interpretations of Schoenberg's atonality. In the second half of this chapter, I will show *Moses und Aron* as a modernist text that bridges and dissolves all three of Tracy's positions toward fragmentation. While the opera presents neither an obvious nostalgia for more traditional tonality, nor an exaltation of the transcendent fragment, neither does it insist on Tracy's compromise between T.S. Eliot and Bataille. Schoenberg's music and text suggest both an argument for divine unity and stages a moment of its collapse. His "necessary" music of the future is allowed to conflict with its own possibility for coherence. The opera ultimately realizes the impossibility of recombination; it is a text that proclaims a God of unity and, in the process, deems both God and unity as not only unrepresentable but unrealizable and (perhaps) non-existent. At the end of *Moses und Aron*, when Moses falls to the stage and

sings, “O word that I lack,” it carries multiple levels of meaning that resonate with the lack of the Christian *Word* as well as the lack of an adequate vehicle of communication, verbal or musical. Despite the messianic characterization of Schoenberg’s tone row, Moses’ new god, and Tracy’s fragment, the true messiah is one who never comes, a fragment outside of a whole, the promise of an ending perpetually unfulfilled.

The tension, then, that we see in the perceived gap between Schoenberg’s early atonal works and his later twelve-tone pieces is an interpretation of the fragment. Is the move toward twelve-tone an attempt to reintegrate the fragment into a whole? Or does it reaffirm the idea of the fragment, give it justification and support? Set outside of traditional tonal structure how does a note relate to its surrounding structure?

Music and Poetry: Williams, Stein, and a Syntax of Doubt

Musical meaning, Adorno says, is determined by the “not-yet, the now, and the afterward; the promise, the fulfillment, and the omission” (76), or, in other words, it functions as a form of narration. While Adorno’s definition lends itself to analysis between music and plot, we can also see a connection between the grammar of musical notes and of words. Schoenberg’s break with the tonal system, like Picasso’s concurrent move into cubism, is often cited as an artistic revolutions that transcends its the own medium. Schoenberg’s atonality is not just a movement in the ever changing world of music tonality, but a challenge to ideas of narrative and grammar. David Herman says that “[i]t is by virtue of their syntactic features, of the way their basic elements are (re)combined into larger units, that music and language may be said to be analogous in the first place” (476), and it is in this area of syntactical comparison that a music-

literature analogy demonstrates the weakening of modernism's faith in teleological syntax. The fragmentation of music and language subverts the "propulsion towards an ending" and the fulfillment of expectations while it emphasizes the omissions. The syntax of the words/notes and the way they are perceived as connecting to other words/notes (grammatically or harmonically), both create and reward, delay or deny a perceiver's expectations.

As Hayden White notes, the nature of a musical work is that its structure is explicit, but its meaning difficult to discern; by contrast, in a literary work the meaning is easily discernible but its structure elusive (288). While this statement and the terms White uses ("meaning," etc.) are obviously open to deconstruction, it still points to the usefulness of the music-literature comparison. "Music is the best way to get the formal sense of a period" (Brown 76), and by studying music *and* poetry we can more easily discuss elements of form and syntax, as well as general epistemology and periodization, without tripping over the obstacle of discussing (or choosing not to discuss) what we traditionally see as "meaning." In his "Origins of Modernism" Marshall Brown demonstrates how music "helps us to see" semiotic tendencies in modernist literature without the "corrupting entanglement of words" (92). He focuses on parallels in sequential tendencies such as the lack of a pattern of rhythmic tension and relaxation in modernist narrative (87-88). For example, Brown points out that the fact that all music in the 19th century "must end with a cadence in the same key in which it began" gives us a critical base with which to analyze literary endings of the same period. Modernist music and literature introduce formal ways of questioning the binaries of form and content, surface and depth, and style and idea. In reading what Lawrence Kramer calls "purely

formal patterns” that “correspond loosely to the linguistic definition between semantic and syntax” (*Music and Poetry* 5), we can examine the shift away from the interpretation of structure as a monolithic stable entity.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith sees poetic structure as

consisting of the principles by which a poem is generated or according to which one element follows another. The description of a poem's structure, then, becomes the answer to the question, “What keeps it going?” To think of poetic structure in this way . . . is to emphasize the temporal and dynamic qualities that poetry shares with music. (27)

Smith’s definition exemplifies how discussions of artistic “structure” have turned towards the movements and relationships of the parts rather than towards the stasis of an autonomous object. Subsequently, structural comparison between the arts has emphasized perception, movement, and narrative.

Brown, Smith, and Kramer compare music and poetry to study the surface movement and tension of a text. This focus on movement foregrounds the structural “activity” rather than “structure,” which is a characteristic element of modernism; the instability of the structure is that activity. While it does not deny the existence of structure, this activity works against traditional static structure; it tests the limits of aesthetic construction. Schoenberg’s music and its stubbornness in rewarding a listener’s expectations on the level of syntax points to similar patterns in modernist poetry and Williams and Stein can be seen as analogous figures to Schoenberg in their construction of experimental form and language.⁷ Like the music of Schoenberg, the movement

⁷William Carlos Williams, for example, complimented Gertrude Stein for her ability to “completely unlink [words] from their former relationships in the sentence” (*Selected Essays* 116).

between words or signs in their poetry forces the reader to question the gaps between them. What propels us forward? What has the previous word suggested? Who supplied the meaning?

Traditional pre-Schoenberg music was characterized by, in Adorno's words, "propulsion towards an ending." Modernist composers and poets resisted the necessity of this "propulsion" and their ideal was a directionless, non-teleological syntax. A true non-teleological grammar would result in each note or word being perceived as standing on its own without necessary or gravitational connections to what surrounds it—a subversion or re-creation of syntax wherein the harmonic or grammatical pull on words or notes operating within the text is not operating according to traditional rules. These traditional rules govern the basic building blocks of the note or the word. In looking at this unit or sign, we see that both Schoenberg's school of musical composition and many modernist poets tried to establish the feeling of a word or note as a "thing" in itself.⁸ Although each unit is to be perceived as part of the whole, it is a whole without direction—a break away from traditional ideas of a narrative that unfolds in time.

Although its dictionary definitions are dominated by science, "Time," as the Western world understands it, is a theological concept. Mircea Eliade even argues that it is *only* in the Western tradition that there is actually the notion of a linear time (*Cosmos and History*). Christianity, as has often been pointed out, supplies time with an ending, history with a finish line. But it also has a beginning and "in the beginning was the word." Jewish concepts of time also retain a linear shape, and as Rabbi Abraham Joshua

⁸ Painters, as well, moving away from central perspective and representation, tried to achieve an isolation of or from the image. Blue Rider artist Franz Marc wrote that Schoenberg's music reminded him of "Kandinsky's 'jumping spots,' . . . which allow each tone sounded to stand on its own (a kind of white canvas between the spots of color!)" (qtd in Wasserman 21).

Heschel writes, “Jews think not only of the end but also of the beginning. We have our immortality in the past” (qtd. in Carroll 394). It is in the movement from beginning to end, in a forward progress determined by the memory of the past, that Western theological traditions come together.

As modernism worked through and dramatized the death of God, it necessarily reacted against the ideas of time and history that are interwoven into Judeo-Christian thinking. But modernist art was caught in a dilemma; it could not be both the means of destruction and an evolving phase in the history of art. For Mark Taylor, this dilemma indicates that modernism had not sufficiently grasped that the Death of God must mean the end of history or the death of the book (*Erring* 7-18). Indeed, although, “the end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book” (Derrida *Grammatology* 86), and while the modernists explored the limits of time, they did not completely abandon the linear. Even Joyce’s anti-novel, *Finnegans Wake*, still relies upon a reader being able to turn from page 628 to page 3, to connect ending to beginning. It is still a book, an example of “Specific Encyclopaedic Form” in Northrop Frye’s taxonomy in *Anatomy of Criticism* (321).

As modernist experimentation with syntax challenged the concepts of form, boundaries, and meaning, there was an often simultaneous move in the other direction to reestablish the solidity of boundaries and structure. In literature the counter-move led towards older poetic forms (Pound) and myth oriented structure (Eliot, Joyce). In music, Stravinsky’s neo-classicism, and the persistence of 19th century concepts of absolute music demonstrate a reluctance of artists to give up many of the very limit points they felt compelled to challenge. This dialectic is continually articulated by Schoenberg, and his

move from free atonality into twelve tone can be read as a reaching back to more formal and solid structures or as a progressive step into a more established atonality.

Schoenberg's twelve-tone serialism was, and continues to be, interpreted as *both* a force towards form and unity and as a force of fragmentation and destruction.

This double movement is a crisis of representation can often only be expressed—as Schoenberg himself demonstrates—in a theological framework. Aesthetic limits exist, as Daniel Albright points out, in the form of binary opposition, and “aesthetic heresies, like theological ones, come in binary sets Each limit-point presupposes an opposite limit-point” (ix). We can see these opposing limit points demonstrated in Schoenberg's dialectic between logic and anti-logic and the perceived formal freedom of atonality and the grid-like structure of twelve-tone serialism. Albright's pairing of the binary sets of aesthetic and theological “heresies” reveal the theological subtext of modernist's exploration of limits and opposites.

Wherever and whenever ‘God’ is names and conceptualized, or even
invoked or addressed, the gesture of this speech act is immediately broken.
It is folded to the point of collapsing in on itself and reverting into its
opposite. (de Vries 28)

If theology or God comes as a binary, binaries also come with a theology, and for Mark Taylor, “though consistently monotheistic, Christian theology is repeatedly inscribed in binary terms” (Taylor, *Erring* 8). The concept of God can be defined as a “limit-point,” and as “existing” on the fringes of the possibility of knowledge and of systematic and binary thinking. It is our belief in grammar (and therefore God), according to Nietzsche, that leads to our constructing knowledge within the framework of binary thinking.

* * * *

As modernist writers and poets reacted to a world that was beginning to question such things as sequentiality, causality, and purpose, some, like Joyce, felt that their innovations opened and expanded possibilities of constructing meaning on an epic scale. Others, like Williams and Stein, demonstrated the limitations of the language they were experimenting with. The conflicting desires to create new systems of signs and yet maintain some of the traditional faith in language contains a theological element that is seldom discussed. For Derrida, “the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God. . . . [t]he sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological” (*Grammatology* 13-14). Although the actual age of the sign and the divinity must necessarily be indeterminate (the origin being impossible to determine) it seems clear that they go through similar shifts around the turn of the 20th century. “Modernism,” although the term holds different meanings to historians of theology than to those of art, in both cases refers to a prominent doubt in historical foundations of absolute meaning.⁹ What, then, do the approaches to narrative and syntax of Stein, Williams, and Schoenberg’s say about modernism’s relationship to shifts in onto-theological ways of thinking? What does this distrust of “grammar” say about the relationships between literature, music, and theology? Is the breaking up of the traditional connective logic an attack on determinate meaning or does it merely shift the perception process?

The loss of God limited and made necessary new types of poetry; at the same time this new poetry, written in the absence of God, could never completely exist outside of a

⁹ Within theology “modernism” refers to movements, predominantly within the Roman Catholic Church, to rethink theology in light of new developments in science, philosophy, and culture.

divine figure. Reacting to lack of certainty and new poetic possibilities, early 20th century poets explored the challenges of both. Wallace Stevens often comments on the loss of a God and the effect on imagination and poetry. In *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* he writes “Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was/A name for something that never could be named” (*Collected Poems* 381). Stevens’s stabilizing god-force may perhaps be dead, perhaps can never be named, but this “something” still exists, within art. For Stevens, “after one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (*Opus Posthumous* 186). But his views on belief are rarely stable and are ultimately pragmatic as “it is the belief and not the god that counts,” (*Opus* 188) and “the poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary” (*Letters* 378). Although Stevens never offers a single answer as to a definition of this “something,” perhaps his most memorable formulation is his most silent and negative, a “nothingness that is not there and the nothing that is” (*Collected Poems* 10).

William Carlos Williams: Words as Things

William Carlos Williams rejected Stevens’s agnostic viewpoint as an “apparition” that falsely insisted on a center or a “fixed point of view” (*Imaginations* 13-16); Williams, as he states in the first chapter of *Paterson*, saw his poetry as a new language for a godless and fallen state. Joseph Riddel’s book on Williams, *The Inverted Bell*, a seminal and controversial work of American deconstruction, suggests that his poetry is ultimately a poetry of “failure” that deconstructs the “Word,” in both a linguistic and theological sense. Williams is “forced to name language as the essentially mediatory

power, and thus to name his own discontinuity with the gods” (Riddel 78). What Riddel found in Williams’s poetry were texts in which he could develop a Derridean and Heideggerian theory of writing that acknowledges the intertextuality of all reading and the arbitrary nature of the sign—writing that was forced to exist outside of the God-based logocentric world of language.

In the poetry of Williams, the idea of “linear causal progress” no longer seems inevitable or necessary; a phrase does not seem constructed to pull the perceiver through time or space. J. Hillis Miller identifies the disappearance of causal thinking in William’s poems, “[a]ll things exist simultaneously in one realm and though they may interact they are not related causally” (289). There is no center, no necessary forward or backward, no goal oriented or functional grammar, no divinely ordered process, or providential hand.

For Williams, “by reading it [a poem] backwards...from somewhere near the end back to the beginning and thus finishing . . . I find my own sensual pleasure greatly increased. I am much better able to judge of the force of the work” (qtd. in Dijkstra 44). Similarly, Schoenberg manipulated his tone rows by constructing them in retrograde (backwards) and inverted (intervals upside down). As he said about his music, “There is no absolute down, no right or left, forward or backward. . . tones [are] comprehended primarily as a mutual relation of sounds” (*Style* 208). On the other hand, a lifetime of reading traditional texts and listening to tonal music makes it impossible not to see and hear words and music in ways that reflect our habits of perception. The reader and performer’s struggle between old and new processes of perception mirrors artists’ struggle to break free of and yet claim descent from traditional structure.

It was this very “unanchored-ness” of his atonal language that Schoenberg was reacting to in creating his twelve-tone system. It is in Williams’s shorter poems that we find him questioning syntax on the level that Schoenberg’s works do. The poems in *Spring and All* (1921) arrange words on the page in a way that forces readers to be both aware of the lack of syntactical connections and of their tendencies to draw and create these connections. In these shorter poems Williams strips words of their surrounding supports; like a painting without a frame or a sculpture without a pedestal, words must now stand on their own. Like early atonal composers, Williams worked with very short forms, forcing the perceptual concentration to move in all directions, not following forward momentum to a distant conclusion.

The much anthologized poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” provides an example of how Williams focuses attention away from semantics and creates as a subject the surface tension of the syntax and the questioning of language itself.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens. (*Collected Poems* 56)

This poem is “about” the death of God in ways that suggest more Nietzsche than Stevens; it is more about style than idea, and more about syntax than semantics. Unlike Stevens, Williams does not *speak* of a world without God, but rather forces the reader to exist in a world where no divinity guarantees meaning. The poem gives no suggestion of authorial or perceptual presence and therefore exists as an ontological negation, without a suggestion of creator or creation. As one rereads this poem it becomes less and less a sentence or a sequence of words or a description of a scene. One ceases to attempt imagining a specific red or a white or any type of wheelbarrow. Williams’s poem stresses the “thingness” of the sign, and does not, ultimately, suggest an image. This reading of the poem resembles the aesthetic theories of Schoenberg who places the word above the image and the *idea* as supreme. Like Schoenberg’s choice of pitches, the very construction of this poem discourages momentum or connections; it forces the perceiver to try to see each word in isolation. On the other hand, as Miller says, “[t]o put down a single word in the middle of a blank sheet of paper achieves nothing” (297), and the poem is not simply about the isolation of word from meaning. As in music, although the relationship among signs has been redefined, there must still exist a tension between them—a tension formed out of the clash between the old and the new, the static and the fluid. The poem is *about* language, about the gaps and silences between the words.

The poem is organized by word count: a line of three and then one. In each pairing we seem to need the word from the next line to complete the previous word’s meaning, yet the placement creates a sort of delayed meaning. This creates a slowing down and defamiliarization process of conferred meaning that leads us to perceive a gradual loosening of our traditional expectations. The poem subverts teleological

syntactical direction by using words whose grammatical ambiguity forms multiple syntactical relationships and by the line breaks. The third word in each line can be either a noun or a verb (rain, wheel) or noun/adjective (white). If we read the word as a noun the end of a line gives a pause: “a red wheel.” Yet each three word line, when joined to the next line, creates an adjective out of the ending word. Finally, the word becomes both. The result of this for the perceiver is an ambiguity similar to Schoenberg’s ambiguity of harmony and tonality.

Because of the line break, each word pulls away from a traditional unquestioned grammatical function. The line breaks cause us to eventually question even sequentially connecting the lines. Must we read it always as “rain water?” Why not “glazed with rain”. . . stop . . . and then “water beside the white chickens”? This effect is similar to atonal music’s subversion of the traditional function of notes in harmony. In both cases the reader or the musician is responsible for “realizing” (in both senses of the word) this in performance. Violinists or singers performing Schoenberg are careful not to exaggerate (shorten the distance between the half steps) what might seem like a leading tone, in the way they would on a Brahms piece, for example. If they do the piece will assume for that moment a tonal center and harmonic direction that theoretically it should not have. In the same way, to fully appreciate the Williams poem, a reader must read (aloud or silently) in a way that does not assume (inflectionally or psychologically) a continuous sequence from one word to the next.

Gertrude Stein: "Never to return to distinctions"

If Williams creates the experience of the gap between word and meaning through minimalism, Gertrude Stein creates a similar effect of what Schoenberg called a "mutual relation of sounds" (*Style* 208) in a different way. By surrounding the reader with like words, sentences, and letters, she eliminates any sense of direction. Stein "invents another version of modernism by circumventing the image altogether" (202 Nicholls). Her series of "portraits" of visual artists demonstrates an ironic relationship between word and image. Her portrait "Picasso" begins

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming. (*Selected Writings* 333)

In "Picasso," Stein creates a swirling "portrait" based on repetition, a few characteristics of a man, and declarative statements. It is easy to see how this style can be taken to be a form of literary cubism, mimetically representing her subject's work, and the piece is often discussed this way. Yet there is also a strong relationship between her writing and the type of musical narrative that we have been discussing. The form of literary "portraiture," almost by definition, lends itself to stylistic experimentation, to the modernist focusing on language itself; in its attempt to render something outside accepted boundaries of language, the focus shifts to the word rather than the referent.

The shift away from direct perception is part of a movement that had been occurring in poetry and music since the late 19th century. In the late Henry James

sentence or the Strauss melody, there is a delay in the forward momentum and a subsequent weakening of the climax.¹⁰ In many modernist texts in general, and the Schoenberg melody or the Stein sentence in particular, the climax is not so much delayed as *spread throughout*. Schoenberg achieves this by creating his “emancipation of dissonance,” and Stein through her ambiguity of grammar and her *abstraction* of words. In the same way that Schoenberg’s notes function outside of their historical grammar, Stein’s words lose their historical (or autobiographical/personal) meaning. Through this abstraction the signifying process of words and musical notes becomes more similar. When composer Virgil Thomson set Stein’s words to music he found them perfect material because “with meanings already abstracted or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no temptation toward tonal illustration” (90). Thomson, like Schoenberg, distrusts the link between music and image, and finds a musical abstractness in Stein’s poetry. Stein often commented on her desire to avoid word painting, “I like to write with prepositions and conjunctions and articles and verbs and adverbs but not with nouns and adjectives” (*Look at Me Now* 128).

Stein achieves her abstraction of words in contrast to how Schoenberg organizes pitches. Schoenberg was adamant about avoiding the repetition of any note too soon because it could be heard as an emphasis of that pitch and would be a “disturbing reminiscence of former tonal harmony,” and “would create false expectations of consequences and continuations” (*Style* 219). Stein accomplishes the same effect, not through an avoidance of repetition, but through an excess of it. In “Picasso,” because of

¹⁰ Interestingly, in music history it is *at* moments of climax—a piece’s conclusion or a dramatic cadence—that, according to Schoenberg and his circle, the ambiguity of harmony begins. Anton Webern even tries to demonstrate in *The Path to the New Music* how the roots of atonality can be seen as early as the cadences of Bach’s Chorales (29).

repetition, the words “certainly,” and “completely,” and “charming,” have already lost most signifying functions by the end of the first paragraph. Neither Schoenberg nor Stein denies that meaning exists in words or notes, but they attempt to take them out of their usual contexts and create new relationships between them.

In other ways, Stein’s constant use of repetition plays on a reader’s perception in much the same way as music. Her famous “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” is a demonstration of her belief that each repetition is actually different. In music as well, because we are constantly revising our expectation of what is to come next, “repetition, though it may exist physically, never exists psychologically” (Meyer 49). Like Schoenberg and Williams, Stein’s style forces the perceiver to construct “meaning” differently. Majorie Perloff illustrates how Stein’s adjectives and verbs function as nouns, demonstrating the “arbitrariness of discourse, the impossibility of arriving at ‘the meaning’” (76). The language denies a reader’s expectations by subverting traditional forward motion. Her consistent use of the progressive form creates a sort of a solid state of what she called “a continuous present,” leaving a reader feeling timeless.¹¹ Where the reader of Williams’s poetry may lose traditional narrative flow *between* words, the reader of Stein loses it *among* them. This loss of flow, the confusion that readers feel as they don’t know what a word is doing or where it is going are moments of difficulty where the very possibility of communication is questioned, where the limit-points of knowledge are tested.

¹¹ Stein’s “present tense” echoes the difficulty many musicologists have had in applying theories of narrative to music—that is, music’s inability to create a “past tense.”

Grappling with God: Reading Twelve-Tone Serialism

While the new-found freedom of Schoenberg's early atonality clearly allowed for new harmonic and melodic possibilities, he also acknowledged its limitations: "every innovation destroys while it produces" (*Style* 217). No longer able to use forms and structures built on tonal model structures (fugue, sonata form), his first atonal works of instrumental music tended to be very short; often movements are less than two minutes long. As Schoenberg notes, the structural function of harmony is the "distinguishing feature of form" (*Style* 216), and composing in the new form made it "impossible to compose pieces of complicated organization or of great length" (*Style* 217). Without the structure of the forms based in traditional tonality, it seemed as if the only way for a composer to construct an atonal work of any length was to attach it to a text of some sort. Although Schoenberg's emancipation of dissonance seemed, to him, within traditional music development, his perceived need for structure reveals his fear of a lack of meaning at the level of note-to-note syntax.

In 1923, following his long silent period, Schoenberg introduced a new system in which the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are arranged in an order or "row" that stays fixed for an entire piece or movement. It was, in Schoenberg's words, a "method of composition with twelve tones relating only to one another" (*Style* 215). The melody and harmony are built exclusively from the one row or "basic set." Although the row itself is fixed, it can be transposed or subjected to various permutations throughout the movement or piece, including reversing or transposing the notes or breaking the row up into two groups of six or three groups of four. The original row can be constructed as an inversion (the intervals reversed), in retrograde (backwards), or in retrograde inversion,

giving the composer three operations. The row can also be transposed to any key; therefore there are 48 twelve tone rows at the composer's disposal. As a compositional device the basic set has two primary functions. It can operate analogously to a scale and it also serves as a motive or a theme.

As radical as his method seemed, Schoenberg continued to feel (or needed to feel) himself firmly rooted in artistic tradition. Like Picasso or Stevens, he expresses a loss of "faith" in historical structures at the same time that he is consciously or unconsciously reaffirming the roots of tradition—a familiar theme of modernism. Schoenberg comments on the tension between traditional and new forms of musical harmony: "[t]he struggle between two such fundamentals for sovereignty has something indeed very attractive about it, as numerous examples of modern harmony show" (*Theory* 128).

Schoenberg's characterization of "struggle" points to the tension in creating and perceiving atonal and twelve-tone music. This tension reflects the comment of Levi-Strauss that the story can be removed but the structure of the myth remains. In Schoenberg's avant-garde musical language, the center or "god-idea" is not removed, but is shifting away from being the essence of a structure to reflecting the implied role of its architect. While there is no central tone to organize a piece, the organizing principle itself—the twelve-tone method—is faithfully believed to ground the work. Yet although for Schoenberg, "[t]he main purpose of the row is to *unify the motival material* and to enhance the logic of simultaneous sounding tones" (*Letters* 237), there is always a struggle involved. Do twelve-tone music and the twelve-tone method serve to further fragment or to unify the musical material and the musical experience? It is this familiar struggle between unification and fragmentation contained in Schoenberg's music and

writings that points to how the twelve-tone row serves as an analogy of the God-idea, as a trope of criticism, and as parallel to movements in literature.

David Herman, in an article comparing Schoenberg to the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses*, sees twelve-tone serialism as a method of fragmentation analogous to literature. He finds that Joyce’s narrating “disrupts classical narrative form in a manner more or less strictly analogous to the way Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique wreaks change on classical conceptions of music” (484). For Robin Gail Schulze the challenge for modernists was that “the imposition of a causal chronological system upon the random play of experience was a potentially deadly thing.” She draws connections between the techniques of Virginia Woolf and Schoenberg, identifying and describing their aesthetic responses to modernist epistemology in a way that includes both music and literature. For Schulze, Schulze sees a parallel situation for Woolf and Schoenberg in that the abandonment of a traditional “causal chronological system” proved difficult and she cites an opposing and “enduring need for some kind of *artistic order* to generate meaning and save the author from utter chaos” (7, my emphasis). Schulz gives as an example of their creation of order, Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system and Woolf’s narrating strategy in *The Waves*.

Schulz and Herman present contradictory but paradigmatic interpretations of the significance of Schoenberg’s serialism and his twelve-tone system. Herman sees it as “disruptive” and Schulz as a move towards “artistic order.” If we return to the theological parallels, Schoenberg and literary criticism both reflect the contradictory rejection of and desire for a determinate center or god-idea in music and literature. The difficulty that arose from the need to resolve these two problems—the need to transcend

traditional teleology and yet find artistic structures, and the need to describe the conflict between freedom and structure—lies at the heart of Schoenberg's musical ideas and interpretations of his works.

Throughout most of the 20th century, artists and critics concentrated on explaining the structural scaffolding that reassures us there is unity beneath a difficult surface.¹² The longer and more experimental the work the more focus was put on the “combinatory apparatus.” This “rage for order,” in Stevens's phrase, or “rage for chaos” in Morse Peckham's, points to the tension between unity and fragmentation that we find in theories of absolute music and in theological theories of the fragment. It is indeed the “struggle for sovereignty” that is primary—a struggle that expresses a need for a unifying system at the same time resisting the totalizing tendencies of such systems.

Schoenberg's creation of his twelve-tone system is part of a familiar narrative of modernist artists searching for stronger organizing strategies to control experimental syntax. According to main stream criticism, the new-found freedom of writers and composers required them to move back towards methods of creation that relied upon more strictly determined methods. Milton Cohen, for example, comments that while both Schoenberg and Ezra Pound created new movements with their manifestos (*Theory of Harmony* and “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste”), each artist was later forced to “take similar corrective measures to assert the constructive organizing principles that are so notably absent . . . principles codified in Schoenberg's twelve-tone method and Pound's ‘rhyme and regular strophes’” (53). The accepted and well-documented story of Schoenberg's development of twelve-tone during his period from 1917-1922, is that,

¹² Examples would include T.S. Eliot's review of *Ulysses*, Campbell and Robinson's *Skeleton's Key to Finnegans Wake*, and almost all writings on Schoenberg until the 1980's and 90's.

troubled by the compositional roadblocks that arose out of free atonality, he spent years constructing this system of serialism or tone rows, before composing again. This story, told initially by Schoenberg and repeated since, has gone largely unquestioned by historians of music. Willi Reich, for example, writes of a “crisis” into which Schoenberg’s “instrumental composition had been plunged . . . he had given up the traditional links with a definite key or tonic.” Schoenberg, Reich writes,

sought unceasingly for new rules of law which would make the production of longer instrumental forms possible again, a search which finally led to the discovery of the ‘method of composition with twelve tone related only to each other.’ (55-56).

By constructing history this way, teleology is written back into music in the form of a historical progression. My objection to this accepted reading is that, while there is certainly a movement towards stricter compositional methods in later modernism, the historicizing of these methods into a teleological narrative sees them as necessary and progressive steps to a more advanced product. Atonality becomes only a stepping tone to twelve-tone serialism. Recent scholarship, however, has cast doubt upon this romanticized path to serialism and has reopened questions of music’s early atonal period.

Throughout his writings, Schoenberg constantly insisted that twelve-tone music had “no other aim than comprehensibility,”¹³ and following generations of twelve-tone analysis have led to the perception that Schoenberg’s twelve-tone works are more comprehensible than his earlier atonal pieces, and are therefore superior works more deserving of scholarly attention and musical imitation. In contrast, musicologist William

¹³ The words Schoenberg used were *Zusammenhang* (‘cohesion,’ ‘coherence,’ or also ‘unity’) and *Fasslichkeit* (literally ‘grasp-ability’) [Reich 24].

Benjamin finds in the atonal works from 1908-1911 music that succeeds *because* it resists the “coherence-making activity of theory” (6). For a critics and listeners raised on the writing of Jacques Derrida and the music of Morton Feldman, the adjective “incomprehensible” no longer rings as necessarily pejorative, and for Benjamin, it is this very “incomprehensibility” that is the “source of its meaning” (6). Benjamin sees standard interpretations of this period as a revisionist view that sees Schoenberg’s early atonality as only a step toward the discovery of twelve-tone technique. He also questions Schoenberg’s accepted *need* to find another method to compose atonal music, the necessity of developing a *system* of atonality. “Why Schoenberg retreated from his position of 1908-1911, with its total faith in intuition, is not absolutely clear” (Benjamin 29).

Benjamin interprets Schoenberg’s move away from “free atonality” into twelve tone music as a step necessitated by Schoenberg’s struggle with his developing idea of God. Benjamin proposes that, as God becomes, for Schoenberg, an abstraction infinitely apart from and greater than life, for an artist to rely upon the mysterious intuition to create his works seemed a “form of idol worship, the artist’s freedom a path to sin” (30). Interestingly, Schoenberg’s final music project of his atonal period was an oratorio version of the Biblical story of Jacob which he was unable to finish, meaning that he was almost literally *grappling with God* as he worked out the “laws” that would govern his twelve –tone music. Schoenberg, in other words, was uncomfortable with the mysterious creative inspiration of his early atonality because he clearly related the creative process to a God-like role.

To understand the very nature of creation one must acknowledge that there was no light before the Lord said: "Let there be Light." And since there was not yet light, the Lord's omniscience embraced a vision of it which only His omnipotence could call forth. (*Style* 215)

Since to even think about an artistic creation is to have "a vision of something which has not existed before this vision," for Schoenberg, the compositional process should be formed in "harmony with the Divine Model" (*Style* 215). Schoenberg's use of the word "harmony" here as a musical metaphor is suggestive. Where does "harmony" come from? Is it a natural, man-made, or god-ordained concept?

Christopher Hailey writes that in 1911 Schoenberg's "plunge into atonality unleashed a force of enormous momentum for twentieth-century modernism," but goes on to say that Schoenberg "had already begun evolving a strategy for *containing the consequences* of his actions" (95 my emphasis). What were these consequences? Were there similar consequences in the other arts? We are again faced with large questions that have diametrically opposing answers. Was Schoenberg's atonality too free—as is often assumed—too atheistic? Or was it, on the contrary, as Benjamin asserts, too God-like, too idolatrous? For Benjamin, Schoenberg's twelve-tone system is a method to replace the mystical intuitive process of creating *ex nihilo* that characterized his earlier atonal period. The "comprehensibility of Schoenberg's music increases only as he progressively dissociates his own activity from God's" (6). Benjamin also sees a connection between Jewish Law and twelve-tone technique. Both function as a concrete plan to illuminate the mysterious path from perceiver to what by definition must remain unperceived, whether it is God or artistic inspiration. Tracing these paths demonstrates

that Schoenberg's arrival at twelve-tone was both a move toward and away from a God-like role. That Schoenberg saw this process as a theological debate is suggested by both his writings and his later religiously themed works. But before we turn to Schoenberg's merging of his twelve-tone method into a depiction of God and Jewish Law, we will look at Thomas Mann's view of it as a force of Hell.

Dr. Faustus: The Devil, Adorno, and the Absolute

Thomas Mann's novel, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, fictionalizes and Christianizes Schoenberg and his musical innovations. In Mann's reworking of the Faust legend, the composer Leverkühn, despite his genius, ultimately only achieves success by apparently selling his soul to the devil. Mann "portrays music and theology as related disciplines with a parallel evolution" (Bergsten 204), and his two protagonists represent different ideas of the role of religion in art. But Mann's novel, a "quadrilateral connection between Nietzsche, the syphilitic artist, Nazi Germany, and the plight of the avant-garde composer" (Hayman 491), is deeply political and ethical, as well. Leverkühn, a figure of both Schoenberg and Nietzsche, is also a symbol of Germany in the 1930's, poisoned and damned, but still the center of the intellectual world and a source of creativity and artistic innovation.

The novel presents a dark and negative relationship of religion to modern music, suggested in the setting of a verbal tone-row near the end of the novel in the twelve syllables of Faust's statement, "for I die as a good and as a bad Christian" (487), which Leverkühn uses as a twelve-tone row in his *Lamentation of Faust*. This oratorio, Leverkühn's final composition, is an atonal serial work that, as he bitterly says, "takes

back the Ninth symphony,” a negation of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” and a negation of the religious (490). Leverkühn’s compositions are associated throughout the novel with the demonic side of Christian theology. The narrator, a professor of theology, comments early in the novel that “theology by its very nature tends and under given circumstances always will tend to become daemonology” (99), and Mann’s *Devil* also associates theology with music.

A highly theological business, music—the way sin is, the way I am. The passion of the Christian for music is true passion, and as such knowledge and corruption in one. For there is true passion only in the ambiguous and ironic. The highest passion concerns the absolutely questionable. (242).

The idea that atonal music comes from a place of chaos or evil now seems as naïve as the sinfulness of the tri-tone in the middle ages or Adorno’s flippant dismissals of jazz. What is more important is Mann’s incorporating modern music into theology. Mann sees the fragmentation of modern music in a post-Nietzschean world as part of a theological discourse. For Berthold Hoeckner, “[w]here Nietzsche’s God was dead, Mann’s God is absent. And where Nietzsche had no theology, Mann had negative theology. Even as the devil, Mann’s Adorno was still speaking of God” (246). What the *Devil* convincingly implies, however obliquely, is that music (or any art) after modernism can express a divine figure or emotion only through ambiguity and irony, and that the absolute can only be presented as a question.

In *Dr. Faustus*, Mann’s Leverkühn “discovers” a system of composition based on a twelve-tone row. As Leverkühn describes his new method of composition—obviously based on Schoenberg’s ideas and writings—he and the narrator walk near a dark image of

a “cow trough” that “fell off rapidly into darkness.” Leverkühn, looking into the pond, shivers, “cold, he says, “much too cold to bathe—Cold” (194), which suggests Mann’s feelings of the lack of emotion in twelve-tone music. The obvious dark symbolism is associated with Leverkühn’s compositions for the rest of the novel. Perhaps Mann sensed in Schoenberg’s theories and music what Steiner (writing of Heidegger here, not Schoenberg) called the German “genius for suggestive darkness, its ability to give to abstractions a physical presence and intensity” (263).

* * * * *

A common critical view would be that while Mann Christianizes music and demonizes the twelve-tone method, in *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg gives it the role of a Jewish monotheistic God. For the Moses/Schoenberg figure, (as he is often interpreted) twelve-tone composition—as a controlling force of “comprehensibility”—perhaps suggests the unity of a complex God. But if the twelve-tone row *can* suggest the Judaic God, then it must work through the idea of Unity and the musical Idea that comes out of concepts of *absolute music*. The contradictions present in the opera itself appear even larger in the context of the Mann/Adorno/Devil position. Does the road of absolute music dissolve itself? Does it lead, as Adorno and Mann hint, to Hell instead? For Daniel Chua,

Adorno the atheist, is really a theologian after all. Thomas Mann knew that, which is why the devil in *Dr Faustus* claims himself to be the sole custodian of a modern theology in which God has been proclaimed dead (275).

But although Adorno saw Schoenberg as the end of absolute music, more recent critics have critiqued Adorno for his failure to think outside of the idea of absolute music. Adorno's bias towards absolute music can be seen in his statement that "[t]ime and again [music] points to the fact that it signifies something, something definite. Only the intention is always veiled." We can best move on from Adorno, not by trying to prove this statement false, but by accepting it as "*historical truth*," as Lawrence Kramer suggests in *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (2). One of the projects in contemporary musicology, Kramer claims, is to historicize and "reconsider what the disjunctive 'and' means when we speak of music *and* language, or the musical *and* the extramusical" (3). In this "and" is contained a contradictory movement, not only the death of God, not only the death of absolute music, but also a questioning of the relationship of art, images, and representation that, although characteristic of modernism, also foreshadow the abyss of postmodernism that will work from within modernist artistic texts.

The concept of absolute music, which retained its privileged status throughout Schoenberg's and Adorno's life, participates in the paradox of part versus whole problematized by Tracy's essay on the fragment. Although, as we saw in Chapter Four, absolute music is often associated with a divine Absolute, Chua points out that to interpret absolute music *as* God produces a contradiction. A specific work of music can not *be* God; only *music*, in a universal sense, can be God. Therefore each work can only be a fragment that is yearning towards totality. This Hegelian process of both sublation and progress produces a state where "[a] musical work is therefore consigned to a perpetual state of contradiction as both a sign of totality and a sign of incompleteness"

(Chua 177). Schoenberg's music and theoretical writings have a complex relationship to this tension between totality and incompleteness, beginning, as we shall see, with his conception of the musical "idea," and culminating in *Moses und Aron*, where the question of totality and incompleteness determines the nature of God.

In *Moses und Aron*, Aron admits to Moses that in building the Golden Calf he "heeded the voice from within" (55), demonstrating the perceived danger of intuitive creation. In *Moses und Aron* we find a response to the larger aesthetic and cultural questions of modernist style, freedom, and philosophy. By interpreting Schoenberg's twelve-tone method as a more unified system, critics recreate a central core of meaning—a God of interpretation that stabilizes and domesticates the dangerous fragmentation of modernist texts. In *Moses und Aron*, this danger breaks free from its domestication, and questions the very ground on which it is constructed.

Part II: Schoenberg's Impossible God: *Moses und Aron*

As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Exodus 32:19-21 NRSV

"Unrepresentable God! Inexpressible, many-sided idea, will you let it be so explained? Shall Aron, my mouth, fashion this image? Then I have fashioned an image too, false as an image must be. Thus I am defeated! Thus, all was but madness that I believed before and can and must not be given voice."

Moses in *Moses und Aron*

"O word, thou word, that I lack"

The final scene of Act II in Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* centers on a debate over the nature of God. Upon returning from his forty-day absence, Moses accuses Aron of idolatry in constructing the Golden Calf then destroys the Calf by speaking: "begone you image of powerlessness to enclose the boundless in an image finite" (54). In Moses' absence, Aron explains, "since the people had long expected both law and commandment soon . . . I was compelled to provide an image for them" (55). Aron justifies his actions by claiming he has performed "just my task as it ever has been" (55). Moses, who associates image with idolatry, asserts the greater power of the *word*—"Your image faded at my word"—and the ultimate superiority of the *idea*: "grant you now the power which idea has over both word and image?" For Aron, the "idea" can only be made complete and functional *through* an image, and he contrasts his love for the people over Moses' love for the idea, maintaining that for them, the image is the "perceivable part of the whole idea" (57). The image also helps to communicate difficult concepts—while Aron acknowledges the complexity of Moses' God-idea, he is

convinced that he must “speak more simply than I understand it” (58). This confrontation foregrounds the essential questions of the opera and also of the position of theology within modernist art. What is a fragment and what is the totality? With what language does (could) God present himself to us? With what language can we represent God? How does a word represent an image? How does an image represent a thought? What does it mean to “represent”?

As the brothers argue, the chorus of Israelites move past them in the background, led by a fiery pillar showing them the way out of the desert (and off the stage). Aron interprets the pillar not as God, but as a symbol like the burning bush. But even faced with a visible sign of divinity, Moses persists in his idealism by referring to it as merely a “Godless image.” In response, Aron points to the Tablets of Law, devastatingly dismissing them as “images also, just part of the whole idea” (58).

Aron’s statement challenges Moses’ (and by implication, Schoenberg’s) whole enterprise of constructing a man-made law as a bridge to an essentially ineffable idea (of God or art). Moses smashes the tablets (seemingly more in despair than the anger implied by the Biblical version) and the act ends with Moses, doubting his own beliefs and efforts, collapsing to the ground and singing, “O word, thou word, that I lack” (60).

The finale of Act II crystallizes the opera’s theological and aesthetic questions, but the entire opera is a theological debate. Moses continually claims that God is unknowable, indescribable and ultimately a mystery, while Aron repeatedly counters that Moses’ God is not a God that people will accept, and that the Divine must be representational in order to be real to anyone. He argues that Moses’ mysterious God is just another image, no better or worse than his Golden Calf. This dialectic is a variation

of a familiar debate on the nature of the Western God. The opera re-presents the conflict between the terrifyingly unknowable God of Kierkegaard and the grounding Absolute of Hegel, as well as the paradoxical determinate/indeterminate relationship that I have located in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, modernist literature, and Jacques Derrida. This contradictory God-idea as presented through both Moses and Aron sets up an initial series of binary oppositions that reflect dialectical issues of aesthetics as well as theology. In Schoenberg's characterization of Moses and Aron we see idea versus style, abstract versus concrete, content versus image, inexpressibility versus speech, and God versus the Golden Calf. As we have seen in other works of modernism, it is in the negotiating of the contrasting tensions that we find modernist "theology." While Schoenberg's "God" is usually seen as constructed through either Moses' words, the opening chords of the opera, or the tone-row itself, it is through the negotiating of the tension and the space between these binary oppositions that we can begin to locate the opera's "God-idea."

From a Bush Burning to a Music Silenced

In *Moses und Aron* Schoenberg was offering a full-length exposition of his own system of composition—one that he felt was the necessary way of the future. Many critics have often commented on the autobiographical nature of the opera, positing Moses as a figure of Schoenberg and the opera's God and Law as analogous to Schoenberg's method of composing. Schoenberg himself encouraged such interpretations by commenting on his "prophetic duties" as a composer, and playing the role of the reluctant Moses-like bringer of law: "Somebody had to do it. Nobody wanted to. Therefore I had to take the job upon myself" (*Letters*). In his twelve-tone system of composition, he set

out to compose without the organizing principle of a tonal center and the teleology that resulted from it. He often remarked that he felt he was “called” to present this method. It is easy to see him in the role of Moses, bringing a new system of law and yet feeling doubt and anguish in the effort. Schoenberg, like Moses, feels called to deliver a message of a new order to an unreceptive public.

The idea of difficulty is significant; important music is as hard to understand as is God. But to compromise either to make them more palatable is to lose them entirely. For both Moses and Schoenberg it is only by not compromising, by not taking the easy familiar path, by forging ahead and acknowledging the difficulty of the new way, that we can evolve to a higher and better place. As Aron takes the words of Moses to the people, elongating his phrases, adding a melodic flourish, a magic staff or a Golden Calf to Moses’ idea of God, we see Moses as the “writhing composer in the audience at the concert” (Lewin 64)—an uneasy creator watching his creation cheapened by crowd pleasing parlor tricks.

Act One of the opera begins with the calling of Moses by the voice of god from a Burning Bush. The “voice of God” opens the opera as a six-voice chorus, sitting in the orchestra, sings a dissonant chord (Bb, Db, A, E) on the syllable “O.” At the moment the voices make contact with Moses (“here lay your shoes aside”) a second chorus—the voice from the Burning Bush—begins singing in *Sprechstimme* (inexact pitches).¹⁴ As these voices sing (“Only one, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived, and inconceivable God.”) the effect is one of disorientation; a listener cannot locate the source of the voices. Allen Shawn, like many critics, finds that this effect “suggests the

multidimensionality of the word for God in the Hebrew language, which is interpreted differently in different contexts but is ultimately untranslatable . . . The music, too, seems everywhere at once, and Moses in its grip” (227). Moses responds to God’s calling by giving his familiar protest that his “tongue is not flexible; thought is easy; speech is laborious” (25), a claim made more convincing by his mode of singing, also in *Sprechstimme* which feels melodically laborious. The Voice informs Moses that Aron will be his “mouth,” and that he should deliver to Aron the message that his people are “chosen ones” and are to give to the “one God alone” their worship (25).

In scene two of Act One, God orders Moses to meet Aron in the desert, and their ideological conflict begins. Schoenberg gives the conflict musical form by employing the same contrasting modes of singing that were presented together in the voice(s) of God. Their polarized conceptions of God are suggested by Moses continuing to sing in *Sprechstimme* while Aron sings more graceful melodies. Aron, in long notes, primarily in the upper register of the tenor voice, questions the practicality of an “invisible and unrepresentable God.” He asks Moses, “can you worship what you dare not even represent?” Moses, answering in faster and more rhythmic patterns, remains firm: “[u]nrepresentable because invisible, can never be measured, everlasting, eternal, because ever present and almighty” (27). When Moses and Aron bring God’s message to the people, the people are skeptical, but Aron, by subtly mediating Moses’ words and by performing magic tricks with Moses’ staff, convinces the people of the power of this new god. The contrast between *Sprechstimme* and pitched singing musically portrays Aron literally becoming the mouth for Moses’ ideas, as he takes Moses’ words and even his

¹⁴ In the score, Schoenberg even recommends in the score that “it might be feasible to separate the voices from each other off-stage using the telephone which will lead through loud-speakers into the hall where the

notes and makes them into more pleasant sounding melodies, more palatable for both the Israelites and the listening audience.

The majority of Act Two depicts the people's reactions to the absence of Moses and the wild orgiastic rites surrounding the worship of the Golden Calf. With Moses absent on Sinai, the people have grown restless and angry at the new god's refusal to show himself. The Elders dismiss this absent god and call for return to their previous gods. Aron's initial refusal is phrased in aesthetic terms: "You cannot expect form before idea, for together they'll make their appearance" (44). Finally, Aron consents to the Elders' pleas. "Leave distant things to one infinite, since to you the gods have ever-present and always-common substance. You shall provide the stuff, I shall *give it a form: common and visible*, imaged in gold forever" (46, emphasis mine). Aron seems here to struggle with artistic as well as theological questions. It is the idea that both God and art should have a common and perceivable form that Moses and Schoenberg most resist. And yet both critics and Schoenberg seem to question just such a "visible form" in their insistence on the primacy of the tone row.

The worship of the Golden Calf initiates scenes of dance, orgy, and sacrifice. The intensely dramatic music is essentially a five-movement symphony with voices and chorus. At the peak of the depravity, Moses finally returns, the Golden Calf vanishes, and the opera moves swiftly through to its conclusion: the final debate ending with the people following the flaming pillar and Moses falling defeated to the stage.

The unfinished third act is a single scene of dialogue between Moses and Aron. Although Schoenberg did, near the end of his life, give permission for productions to present this act as a scene of spoken drama without music, most productions of the opera

voices will then coalesce" (3).

end with Act Two. The third act presents once again the focus points and key terms of Aron and Moses' debate. Aron begins the act in chains as Moses' prisoner. Aron, pleading for his life, claims that "I was to speak in images, while you spoke in ideas." Moses responds that Aron has been "alienated from the source" and that "both word and image flee from him" (63). He is then set free by Moses, "hurled back into the desert," but then dies as the scene ends. Moses says to the fallen body, "in the desert you shall achieve the goal: Unity with god" (63).

Schoenberg cited many factors that contributed to his inability or unwillingness to ever compose the music for this act, among them some "incomprehensible contradictions in the Biblical version" (*Letters*), and a lack of time and financial support. Critics have given the opera's incompletion a more philosophical explanation. For Adorno, the incomplete third act has religious significance. It points out "the impossibility of aesthetic totality . . . by virtue of an absolute metaphysical content" or the idea that the God-idea is essentially incomplete (qtd. in Goldstein 151). For Andrew Ringer, the unfinished opera resonates with Schoenberg's concepts of unity, and the idea, as it "assumes cultural significance of a very special order as the subconscious concomitant of his axiomatic identification with a purely spiritual idea so all-encompassing that it cannot and must not be explicitly communicated." For David Lewin, "[i]f the triple-play combination of God to Moses to Aron to *Volk* has broken down between Moses and Aron, and if the Moses-Aron link cannot be repaired, then the catastrophe of the philosophical tragedy has occurred in Act II and the drama is over" (62).

Although Adorno, Ringer, and Lewin (philosopher, musicologist, and music theorist, respectively) each point to one aspect of the metaphysical significance of the

truncated ending, they each incompletely realize the negation that occurs in the abyss between Act Two and Act Three. The end of the second act forces us to confront questions of completion, unity, God, method, communication, and autonomy. Whatever the “actual” reasons for the unfinished opera, the negation and absence of music after Moses’ collapse is suggestive of levels of subversive meanings beyond what critics—musical, literary, or theological—have generally located. The central question is: Does Moses’ despair come from his sense that he has failed to convince the people of his truth, *or* that he sees his position as flawed or self-destructive? Moses’ stubborn rejection of any characterization of the divine seems to leave him (and us) without answers.

Although physically the Calf disappears and while musically it may seem to represent traditional music or a “nice hummable tune,” the doubt and despair Moses feels are convincing, both musically and theologically. If the Golden Calf and all it symbolizes must be rejected, do Moses and Schoenberg’s proposed alternatives of an ineffable new God and a new system of composition replace them? Do Moses’ doubts in the power of the Law reflect Schoenberg’s doubts in his compositional method?

In the Biblical version, Moses’ rejection of the Golden Calf has been seen by critics as a hypocritical act in light of his use of magic to convince the people of his God-given authority. The staff and the Golden Calf, they claim, are on a similar level of magic or pagan superstition. In Act Three, Schoenberg’s Moses will make a similar judgment when he accuses Aron of using God’s wonders to draw attention to the act of magic not the divine origin of the power. “You made of the rod a leader, and the waters of the Nile attested the supreme might” (61), Moses accuses Aron. These words of Moses demonstrate what we have seen in his depictions of God; throughout the opera

Schoenberg invests Moses with a stubborn integrity that is actually greater than God's or the Hebrew Bible's. As Bluma Goldstein phrases it, "Moses may have adopted a conception of the deity far more abstract and rigid than the deity himself holds" (175).

Schoenberg's refashioning of the Biblical version is most powerful in the dismissal of the role of the image.¹⁵ In the Bible, as my opening epigraph to this section shows, the calf is ground and eaten. While interpreters vary in their reading of this scene, one point would seem to be that the calf does *not disappear*. A trace remains within the people; the danger of the calf is not wiped clean. Schoenberg's Moses however, who has caused the Calf to vanish completely ("Your image faded at my Word"), gives language and the idea a dominance that is not in the Biblical version. The perceived power of the word lends Moses' ending exclamation ("O word that I lack") a more powerful sense of despair. For Goldstein, "[w]hat remains ambiguous is whether the word he lacks is God's word, his own, or perhaps both" (181). The unfinished, and unfinishable, argument of *Moses und Aron* is whether this Word, or this Idea, is just another powerful substitute image, or whether it is true divine action—an Absolute Other or unrepresentable God for which twelve-tone music is both an analogue and the only true path.

What does it mean that Schoenberg's God and story are not the God and story of the Hebrew Bible? How convincing is the portrayal of an "Unrepresentable, Inexpressible, many-sided idea" of God? Are Schoenberg/Moses' systems of belief as

¹⁵ The opera is freely adapted from the Book of Exodus in several other ways. Most obviously the ideological conflict between Moses and Aaron is exaggerated and foregrounded and the depiction of the Golden Calf—only briefly mentioned in the Bible—is detailed and expanded in the opera. In Schoenberg's version, it is Aaron not God who promises the people an *actual* land to settle, and it is Aaron, not Moses, who strikes the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded. Moses, in the unfinished third act, judges Aaron for these actions: "You then desired actually, physically to tread with your feet upon an unreal land

impractical as Aron claims? Can they survive without a distortion on the level of the Golden Calf? Or, in Derridean terms, are they just substituting one center for another? This is a problem that goes right to the heart of understanding modernism and modernist music, and their relationship to theology and literary theory. The deviations from the Biblical text stress the abstract and absolute character of Moses and his God. Schoenberg also makes shifts in the Biblical version to focus attention on the central concept of the “idea” (*Gedanke*) in the opera.¹⁶ In Moses’ most Biblical rendering of God, Schoenberg begins by quoting “God of my fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” and then creates his own characterization, “*who has reawakened their ideas in me,*” in order to emphasize the *idea* (24, my emphasis). Throughout the opera Moses continues to associate God with the word and concept of idea, as, for example at the end of Act Two when he addresses God as an “inexpressible, ambiguous Idea” (60).

To discuss Moses’ faith in the supremacy of the “idea” over word and image is to invite comparison to Schoenberg’s emphasis on the musical “idea” as central to the creating and understanding of music. Schoenberg insisted in his writings, that to remain relevant, opera “will have to be an opera of *musical* ideas” (*Style* 337). Schoenberg, like Moses, often referred to “ideas” as being the ultimate unit of expression—more “pure” than either words or images which misrepresent music’s true essence. As Pamela White asserts, “in *Moses und Aron* the religious level and the level of meaning as an allegory for the creative process are drawn together as the same mystery, with the word as Idea and Holy at once” (75). In the libretto to Act Three, Moses even elevates the Idea *over* God

where milk and honey flowed. You then struck the rock, instead of speaking to it, as you were commanded to do in order to make water flow from it” (61).

himself, and replaces him with it: “To serve, to serve the *divine idea*, is the purpose of the freedom for which this folk has been chosen” (62). It is not the *Divine*, we note, that the people are to serve but the divine *Idea*. It is impossible not to hear in this an echo of Schoenberg’s writings about music, and the absolute supremacy of the purely musical idea.

Like any artist who writes extensively about his own creative methods, Schoenberg influentially defined the terms and methodology for his music’s analysis. In the same way that critics of Wallace Stevens focus on the Stevensian terms of abstraction and imagination stressed in Stevens’ own writings, critics of Schoenberg borrow from his essays in establishing the grounds for the analysis of his works. Despite his own insistence that his method should be secondary, and despite not providing material for analysis of any of his works, most theoretical works on Schoenberg’s music have focused on “correctly” locating the tone row and then determined how melodic and harmonic material are generated out of the row. Identification of further musical meanings—Schoenberg’s “god-idea,” for example—are also then analyzed in the manner in which they relate to his specific compositional technique. Until recently, any analysis of Schoenberg’s music that wanted to be taken seriously had to identify and develop an interpretation of Schoenberg’s tone-row method. A history of the analyses of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music and of *Moses und Aron* demonstrates how intertwined twelve-tone analysis is with aesthetic, philosophical, and theological interpretation.

¹⁶ The centrality of “idea” in Schoenberg in general and in *Moses und Aron* specifically has been addressed by many critics. See especially White 73–76.

Organizing the Twelve Tones of *Moses und Aron*

Moses und Aron is at once the fullest statement of Schoenberg's philosophical and theological ideas and the largest scale model of his twelve-tone method of composition. It is, as George Steiner puts it, "both Schoenberg's *magnum opus*. . . and a composition rooted in the logic and development of his entire musical thought" (236). The importance of *Moses und Aron*, as is widely recognized, goes beyond modern music and stands as an important moment for twentieth century art and theology. *Moses und Aron*, Steiner says, "belongs not only to the history of modern music . . . but to the history of the modern theatre, of modern theology, of the relationship between Judaism and the European crises" (235). *Moses und Aron* has a tremendously complex relationship to the surrounding political climate, not least because it seems to be an endorsement of absolute subservience to a dictator and an attempt to glorify the superiority of German music. Schoenberg's writings consciously position him in direct descent from Bach and Beethoven and he claimed in 1921 that his twelve-tone method was a "discovery which will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next 100 years" (qtd in Stuckenschmidt 277). In addition to the political irony of this nationalism, Schoenberg's position suggests a stronger connection between Moses' new god and the new compositional system; each can be seen as a dominant ruler forcing a new uncompromising system of laws upon subordinates.

Critics writing on *Moses und Aron* have often chosen to write either on the music or the text. Literary theorists often feel inadequate to professionally comment on the intimidating fields of musicology and music theory, yet most agree with Steiner, who says "it is difficult to conceive of a work in which music and language interact more

closely than in Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*" (235). On the other hand, musicologists Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker feel the need to say that "'analyzing opera' should mean not only 'analyzing music' but simultaneously engaging with equal sophistication, the poetry and the drama" (*Analyzing Opera* 4), a comment aimed at the formalistic tendencies of music theorists who often slight the "nonmusical" elements.

The tendency to focus on compositional method in *Moses und Aron* is exemplified by Pamela White's statement in *Schoenberg and the God-Idea*, that "before investigating how the music of *Moses und Aron* expresses the text, it is necessary to examine the compositional techniques present" (113, my emphasis). The traditional theoretical approaches to atonal and twelve-tone music show a certain familial relationship to the New Criticism. Like New Criticism, twelve-tone analytical theory was created to demonstrate cohesion and patterns in difficult texts. Like New Criticism, it tries to stay "within" the text, not concerning itself with social context, biography, or intertextuality. Music theory focuses on identifying tone rows and mapping out compositional manipulations of these identified patterns.

This kind of analytical approach to a complicated method often leads to discussions of difficulty, both in Schoenberg's music and in the analytical texts of music theory that surround it. Steiner comments that "one would wish that the intrinsic difficulty of the subject had not been aggravated by the 'initiate' technicality of their approach" (234).¹⁷ On the other hand, Schoenberg resisted the purely analytical: "I

¹⁷ Milton Babbitt epitomizes this kind of complex musical writing. Even an introductory paragraph on the basic organization of twelve-tone music offers a challenge to non-specialists, "[t]he stipulated operations upon the so-specified 'prime' set are the three independent ones of transposition, inversion, and retrogression, and of all combinations of these. The 'justification' for the incorporation of these operations into the system resides in those unique musical invariants associated with each of them, that is, those characteristics of a set which are preserved under such a transformation, and those relations between a set

cannot often enough warn against the overrating of analysis since it invariably leads to what I have always fought against: the knowledge of how something is made; whereas I have always tried to promote the knowledge of what something is" (*Letters*).

Furthermore, he claimed that "one has to follow the basic set; but, nevertheless, one composes as freely as before" (*Style* 224). Schoenberg does point to a problem with much criticism, the inability to separate compositional method from the music works.

However, the autonomous existence of "what something is," points to ontological presumptions that are also problematic. Schoenberg's belief that one can separate what something "is" from its creation is suggestive of Moses' absolute and unbending ideas of God.¹⁸

As Schoenberg's method evolved, one compositional development was his limiting the repetition of the entire twelve-tone row in a single instrument or voice, disseminating the row throughout the orchestra and singers, therefore making it harder to hear or identify the row, but allowing him to compose longer pieces without excessive repetition. The opera is the largest scale example of the twelve-tone method; each tone in the whole composition is generated from the same tone row. For Schoenberg this represented the culmination of his development since his "emancipation of dissonance" 25 years earlier.

In the first works in which I employed this method, I was not yet convinced that the exclusive use of one set would not result in monotony.

and its transformed version which are inevitably and universally determined by the transformation. Thus transposition (which, for present purposes, may be regarded in its usual sense, with the important stipulation that the transposition is performed on pitch classes) preserves, for example, the intervallic succession of a set" (54).

Would it allow the creation of a sufficient number of characteristically differentiated themes, phrases, motives, sentences, and other forms? At this time, I used complicated devices to assure variety. But soon I discovered that my fear was unfounded; I could even base a whole opera, *Moses und Aron*, solely on one set; and I found that, on the contrary, the more familiar I became with this set the more easily I could draw themes from it. Thus, the truth of my first prediction had received splendid proof. One has to follow the basic set; but nevertheless, one composes as freely as before. (*Style* 224)

In *Moses und Aron*, it is not until measure 124, with the vocal entrance of Aron that a single voice articulates what theorists have identified as the twelve-tone set.¹⁹ Because Schoenberg avoids repetitions to the extent that patterns are difficult to find, much less to hear, the level of variation in *Moses und Aron* is difficult both for the listener and for analysis.

As Schoenberg himself rarely identified what his tone rows were, the mapping out of his compositional devices became a major project in itself. In (date) Milton Babbitt, “the first to provide twelve tone theory with a consistent technical vocabulary” (Perle ix), provided the paradigm setting and seminal study of the opera, opening with an magic square showing the prime tone row and the basis variations of it that show the initial 48 patterns of twelve notes from which the rest of the notes will be taken.

¹⁸ Ironically, the tone-row dominated analytical approach has been more recently criticized for producing static interpretations (what something “is”), at the expense of the creative process of listening, the opposite of Schoenberg’s warning.

¹⁹ C# D G# F# G F B A Bb C Eb E

By the 1980's, studies often focused more on Schoenberg's motivic structure than on the permutations of the tone row, finding in the opera a more traditional organization, some going so far as to say that *Moses und Aron* is "actually within the mainstream of 19th century operatic compositional technique" (White 229). Later theorists also paid more attention to locating connections between the theoretical compositional method and the ideology of the text, often placing the "row" or the musical "idea" as analogous to the role of the opera's God-idea. White's uses music and textual analysis as well as biographical information aimed at a fuller understanding of Schoenberg's philosophical and religious beliefs. She states confidently that

Schoenberg intended the purist use of his own system, the twelve-tone system, to represent God, while its distortion is meant to represent the distortion of the God-Idea. Schoenberg most likely viewed the row itself as a compositional rule parallel to the Law (Torah) or the Commandments.
(153)

White's partiality is given away in her phrase "most likely viewed." She is more interested in the conjecture that Schoenberg likely had a relationship in mind than in pursuing the larger implications. White and others ignore many of the complex contradictions of Schoenberg's relationship to his God-idea, and the role it plays in his music. In their theorizing, God is allegorically depicted as the "idea," *and* as the tone row. Depending on whether the row or the work itself is privileged, God can also become a Platonic idea standing for the idealized work apart from the compositional method that distorts it. One can see the row as the origin of the work, or as a tool that

strives to reach a certain unattainable musical essence. Schoenberg's compositional method thus becomes both God *and* an insufficient path to God.

Analytically, as well, contradicting sides of the God-tone row metaphor are suggested: The row generates the "God chords"—the actual sequence of notes used in the opening chords depicting the voice of God; or, the God chords generate the row, which within the opera appears later with the entrance of Aron. For White, "[w]hile the specific notes of this important motive were certainly drawn out of the row, it is likely that the basic idea of a contrasting and memorable melodic motive pre-existed the actual notes" (150). What does it mean to pre-exist? In the compositional process? In the perception process? Do the motives and themes exist only within the frame of the work?

In contrast to White's assertive tone of showing the textual significance of Schoenberg's compositional methods, David Lewin, throughout an influential essay, "*Moses und Aron*: Some General Remarks, and Analytic Notes for Act I, Scene 1," takes a more mathematical and yet more tentative approach. Lewin's essay, which opens by establishing the parallels and tensions between Schoenberg and Moses and between divinity and music, gives a more theoretical analysis to the traditional biographical interpretation. Lewin takes great care to suggest parallels between idea and theory, music and theology, compositional method and perception, without overstating the coherence. In connecting musical ideas to the theological he uses phrases such as "this *may* symbolize the notion that God," "*presumably* this represents Moses listening to the Bush," or "this *seems* to have to do with God's turning to thinking about the *Volk*" (66,67,71, my emphasis). His method combines strict formalism with a subjective and probing phenomenological awareness of the limits of language. By identifying the row, not

as a “concrete and specific musical subject or object,” but as an “abstraction that manifests itself everywhere (*‘allgegenwaertiger’*) in the work,” he casts the God/tone row analogy into a more indeterminate relationship.

Indeterminacy defines much of the work of current music theorists who look to blur the distinction between tonal and non-tonal music, and to concentrate more on process than on static identification. In twelve-tone music, rather than locating an original, the focus on perception turns to the phenomenological, the subjective, and the undecidable. Joseph DuBiel, for example, encourages theorists to “try to undermine the received image of the twelve-tone method system as a forceful method of construction, and portray it instead as a loose and flexible way to define some possibilities of choice” (37). Other theorists have moved towards taking twelve-tone music away from “analysis” altogether. Arved Ashby encourages theorizing to move the music “away from scientific ideas of problem solving,” and towards the “cultural significance of twelve-tone methodologies” (625).

If we wish to understand the term *twelve-tone* itself in any meaningful sense, we need to shift discussion toward heuristics, establishing phenomenological and cultural as well as paradigmatic meanings for this music. (Ashby 587)

My point here is to demonstrate a trend in twelve-tone analysis that has far reaching significance in a theological interpretation of *Moses und Aron* and of modernist atonality. From the mathematical precision and complexities of Milton Babbitt to the subjective and metaphorical analysis of White and Lewin to the elimination of the grounding control of a tone row in favor of shifting cultural analysis, music theory and musicology continues

to move toward new ways of organizing twelve-tone music that *de-emphasize the row itself*. The consequences of this trend are theories of twelve-tone music which, if applied to *Moses und Aron*, result in questioning the God-tone row analogy accepted by earlier theorists.

Even more radically, some current theorists and philosophers have concluded that serialist techniques are ultimately arbitrary, and, in fact, within a piece of music, *do not exist*.²⁰ Thus we can rewrite the history of Schoenberg's famous struggle with the excessive freedom that his early atonality gave him. The gap in his composing life from 1917-1923, often romantically interpreted as his ingenious creation of a solution, results in a system, some would now say, that is theoretically indistinguishable from what he was writing before. As I said previously, Schoenberg's creation of his twelve-tone system has been interpreted as a move away from the idolatry and responsibility of God-like composition, at the same time that the row itself has been seen as a metaphor of the divine. Newer forms of analysis, then, have taken away both Schoenberg's attempt to avoid playing a creator god, and his substitute god—the twelve-tone row.

* * * * *

Keeping in mind the negation suggested by twelve-tone theorists, we start as we always start, having always already started, with the questions of God. Early critics of *Moses und Aron* tried to maintain the idea of its religious and musical unity. Karl Wörner, says "with Schoenberg. . . there is only one spiritual idea. Its name is God, and it is in the summons to Moses and the promise to the people, that this idea manifests itself" (qtd in White 160). But musically and otherwise the question of unity multiplies

²⁰ Greg Sandow cites as examples of this point of view, Roger Scruton, Fred Lerdahl, and Joseph Swain (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 June 2002).

itself. If, on the one hand the removal of a tonal center is a move away from a God-center, on the other hand, the idea of a tone-row that generates all the surrounding pitch patterns acts as a substitution of a new God. If the musical “God” of *Moses und Aron* is the tone row—the source from which all the musical phrases are spun—what does it mean that the tone row in its entirety is not stated until the entrance of Aron in measure 120? Why is it Aron’s statement that represents the musical core from which every note in the opera generates, when it is Aron’s conception of God that the opera seems to resist? Or do the God-chords in the opening of the opera precede the revelation of the tone row? Is this idolatry in the music? (Or does the idolatry exist in the theory generated by the music?)

The problem is one of creation and imitation; there is no originary row, no originary God or meaning. If there is no originary god, which god does the opera present as new? If the God of the burning bush is the new god does it function as a substitute for the Golden Calf, or is it the Golden Calf that is a substitute for the Bush? Musically, Moses’ singing style is rooted in 20th-century technique, but his words are then rearranged into a more traditional style when sung by Aron. Therefore the new God must be communicated through the more traditional style, which has been Aron’s argument all along. Is there anything *in* the opera or *in* the music that privileges one god over the other?

The Bible obviously presents God as both an invisible, incorporeal being, and as visible and corporeal. *Moses und Aron* seems to privilege only one of these ideas, the invisible, while dismissing the visible God. Yet musically and philosophically, the unified, coherent God-ideas of the opera can’t support themselves. Schoenberg’s conflict

between the “multi-faceted” God vs. the God of Unity may point to a Jewish version of the dialectic between the determinate and indeterminate God I have been describing throughout this work. The Jewish concept of God makes more of the concept of “unity” than other Abrahamic religions, yet Jews have developed very diverse and contradictory ideas about God: the Anthropomorphic God of the Midrash, the Aristotelian God of Maimonides, the Kabbalistic God of process. Moses’ God of unity is constantly being broken up into parts, musically and textually; the God of *Moses und Aron*, the God-idea of twelve-tone music and fragmented syntax can be neither unity *nor* pluralism.

Sounding the Abyss: Thoughts Toward an Ending

How does *Moses und Aron* fit into my work as a whole? If works like *The Golden Bowl* or *À la recherche* can be shown to contain shards of a belief system—however negatively formatted—and of theological assumptions and paradigms, what can we do with a work that sets out, as its apparent main premise, to depict, in words and music, a God “unrepresentable,” “inexpressible,” and “many-sided”? Is *Moses und Aron* a “religious” work? Can we consider *Moses und Aron* a work of *atheology* in the same vein as *The Golden Bowl* or *À la recherche*? Is *Moses und Aron* an explicit example of what I have interpreted other works as doing implicitly? Can a work so consciously theological in its content be said to “contain elements of negative theology in its margins and fragments,” as I said in my opening chapter?

Moses und Aron could, on the surface, both confirm and challenge my overall thesis that there is an unconscious theological presence in modernist texts that takes up a contradictory space of closure and totalization as well as wandering and free play. One

the one hand, Schoenberg's opera is a work that appears overtly theological and is about the relationship between modernist language and the representation of God. His entire aesthetic and theological project in the opera seems to be to portray the indeterminate and indescribable god that I have located within the metaphors and textual play of other works. Yet, on the other hand, we can find in even Schoenberg's representation of a non-representable God a process that is subverted and destabilized by the very contradictions it presents as artistically and theologically central. These constantly pulling and opposing forces in the opera and its musical style take part in what Herbert Schneidau says is perhaps the "fundamental message of the Hebrew Bible—that of a need for change which derives from ambivalence toward culture of any kind, but particularly one's own" (3-4). Schneidau sees this subversive drive of Hebrew culture represented throughout Western art, but particularly as embedded in the difficult works of modernism, which he, following Stanley Fish, calls "self-consuming artifacts."

The question, "is God Difficulty itself?" (Almond 526) is the question neither Moses nor Schoenberg can answer satisfactorily. Moses wants his people to see that God is difficult, that unless they are willing to address the difficulty they will backslide into pagan beliefs. Schoenberg's difficult system, as well, is, for him, the way of the future. But both Moses and Schoenberg claim to have an answer. The true god idea of the modernism—a god of negation—is formed in the debate between Moses and Aron. A debate that ends in silence—a silence that recalls the "dismemberment of Orpheus. . .and also reverse[s] the original Biblical miracle, which witnessed the transformation of the Word into Flesh" (Hassan 17).

Moses und Aron is characteristically modernist for, as Steiner wrote, it has its “own possibility as essential theme. . . .it asks of itself—as Kafka does of fiction, as Klee asks of visual form—whether the thing can be done at all, whether there are modes of communication adequate” (238). The opera’s answer to this question may indeed be no. This testing of the limit point of knowledge is, as we have seen before, a theological process. As Adorno pointed out, if the libretto creates the theological “scandal” of speaking of

One God as the idea, then this is a scandal that is duplicated in the texture of the music, though rendered almost unrecognizable by the power of the art. The absolute which this music sets out to make real, without any sleight of hand, it achieves as its own idea of itself; it is itself an image of something without images—the very last thing the story wanted. (qtd. in Hoechner 213).

Adorno’s locating of the subversive force at the aesthetic/theological center of the opera resembles Schneidaus’s thesis and, as an interpretive strategy towards *Moses und Aron*, has been picked up by contemporary musicologists.²¹

What does it mean when the modes of communicating even the idea of ineffability are in themselves inadequate to communicate this idea? The answers, or at least our *via negativa*, are in the complex intersection of the musical style—the God as represented in all his contradictions—the role of the composer, the intertextual relationship with the Biblical narrative, and the history of the reception of Schoenberg’s

²¹ For musicologist Gary Tomlinson, “Schoenberg not only “shares Moses’ dilemma of representing the unrepresentable,” but “in the process of representing metaphysics through an integrated musical totality loses the possibility of representing the impossibility of representing metaphysics” (qt. in Hoechner 213-

opera and his musical innovations through philosophy, musicology, theology, and literary criticism. Within this web of associations the opera becomes postmodern in its striving to “present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 76). *Moses und Aron* not only presents this fact, but also demonstrates how this “fact” itself cannot be demonstrated. Despite Schoenberg’s emphasis on the “comprehensible,” and his critic’s attempts to organize each individual tone, his opera, his music, and his essays slip out from modernist control and into the postmodern.

These communication gaps—between music and text, Moses and Aron, God and Moses—embody a deconstructed Godlessness that relies upon an idea of God and in the same gesture pulls it out from underneath itself—the opera’s libretto, music, and context create a bottomless abyss. This movement is an example of what Derrida would call a negative theology that “casts suspicion on the very essence or possibility of language” (*On the Name* 48). But we can see this negative moment not as failure, but as an aesthetically and philosophically *staged* representation of a movement from theology to negative theology to atheology.

Absolutely Atheological

Absolute music, which remained the dominant paradigm for understanding music well into the 20th century, ultimately leads to a philosophy where “music not only explains itself, but is the source of all explanation” and actually “was made to *usurp God as the unifying explanation of the cosmos*” (Chua 174, my emphasis). The idea of absolute music affirms the pure signification of the sign: music = music. But this

214). In other words, Schoenberg’s positive portrayal of negativity renders negativity impossible rather than this intended effect of showing the impossibility of the positive.

absolute pure signification also contains and relies upon a concept of the negative. To speak itself, is, as the romantics believed, to articulate the ineffable. Absolute music therefore defines itself by a lack of signification, an emptying itself of meaning that resembles negative theology's approaches to God. Absolute music and the musical idea represent God because God has no representation. Like Jewish prohibitions on speaking the name of God, or Moses' fear of idolatry, it was "forbidden to name the meaning of instrumental music lest it became a kind of graven image" (Chua 180).

Absolute music, without reference to anything outside of itself, is, as I said in Chapter Four, "the Idea in music, the statement without words, becomes the name of God." Schoenberg could be strongly dismissive of a music appreciation that relied upon a "program" or intertextual narrative.

There are relatively few people who are able to understand what music has to say purely through their musical faculties. The supposition that a piece of music must evoke images of some kind, and that if these are not forthcoming the work is unintelligible or worthless is as widely believed as only false and banal ideas can be (*Style* 222).

Modernists composers often express the idea that music can represent the ideal union of form and content because, as Schoenberg says, the content of music is not feeling, but "ideas, and because a musical idea is strictly musical, there is no separation of form and content" (*Style* 221).²² Or, as Aron says to the Elders, "you cannot expect form before idea, for together they'll make their appearance" (44). A "strictly musical" or "pure" musical idea can only exist in the world of absolute music and Schoenberg's insistence

²² See Patricia Carpenter's "Musical Form and Musical Idea: Reflections on a Theme of Schoenberg, Hanslick, and Kant."

on music's absoluteness, along with his concept of the musical "idea" as purely musical, does create strong analogies with the elevation of the "idea" in *Moses und Aron*. The "idea" for Schoenberg, as for his Moses, reigns supreme, more important than words or images, musical programs or analytical magic boxes and tone rows. The musical Idea, as Schoenberg sees it, is Kantian in the sense that it is above all experience, it is Platonic in its superiority to the actual physical music, and it is characteristically modernist in that it is both logical (and therefore unified) and also possesses a "true Nature" that is "irrational" (*Style* 142).

In *Moses und Aron*, although as an opera with words it is not absolute music in the pure 19th century sense of the term, the connections between ideas of the absolute and the Absolute, the God-idea and musical idea, are firmly connected to theories of absolute music. Reading absolute music through Mann, Adorno, Dahlhaus, Schoenberg, and Chua, we see represented in each of them contradictions and difficulties that are theologically dramatized in *Moses und Aron*. Not only, as we saw earlier, can music only be a fragment of the Absolute, but *Moses und Aron* points to a deeper contradiction. Music as an analogy for God *must* be absolute; music, to be an analogy for God (or anything), *cannot* be absolute. The "idea" is the pure purveyor of musical meaning, and suggests an ineffable relationship to the Divine, at the same time that modernism and postmodernism gradually dissolve the idea of absolute music.

We can place this difficult contradiction in the gap between Moses and Schoenberg and their creations. Schoenberg, whose new system of composing music was seen by him and others as blazing a path to a new improved music, is presenting a music

system that does not hide its difficulty,²³ just as Moses does not pretend that his God is not difficult. At the same time God is described as a God of “unity,” or a God through which all meaning must make sense just as Schoenberg calls his composing method one of “comprehensibility.” The implication is that there is no meaning and there is no progress without difficulty; difficulty becomes a necessary characteristic of artistic bridges to the absolute.

There is here a simultaneous progression—both of perception and of history—that demonstrates Schoenberg’s concept of the musical “idea” relying upon the concept of absolute music in the same way that Moses’ concept of God relies upon an impossible and inexpressible ideal. However, the idea that absolute and autonomous music conveys the inexpressible is predicated on the opposition of music and language—an opposition that Lawrence Kramer and others believe “is untenable from a postmodernist perspective.”

Once music and language are understood, not as antitheses divided by the lack or possession of constative power, but as common elements in the communicative economy, their differences become practical, not radical.

(*Classical Music* 16-17)

We must see *Moses und Aron* in this larger context. Rather than promoting the autonomous musical idea and the determinate but ineffable God, the opera dissolves both these ideas; when Moses collapses on the stage it is the negation of all that he, his ineffable God of unity, Schoenberg’s method of composition, and the opera appear to stand for. There is no way to go on to Act Three. Schoenberg, despite himself, has

²³ In George Perle’s book of twelve-tone theory he writes that, “[i]f, as a result of my efforts, the composition of twelve tone music shall have become more difficult, I shall feel amply rewarded (ix).

deconstructed both Moses' God and Aron's God leaving only music and a composer—neither which can finish the story or restore the fragments to a unity.

Moses' God, too severe and uncompromising even for the Bible, is the “other” of most practical theology, although it strikes close to much philosophical theology that posits God as *Absolute Other*. Rather than collapse on the ground in despair, the philosophers accept (or even celebrate) the “impossibility” of this God. Whether our use of “other” or “Absolute Other” refers to a divine being, a person, or an artistic text, the experience of contact with the other calls for the construction of an apparatus to form the bridge for us to the other (even if the other is always partially contained within). *Moses und Aron* dramatizes both musically and theologically the imaginary nature of bridges to the other.

By the end of the opera, Schoenberg admits, he moved away from the row as a base of composition. Although he claimed this was because the row was now established in the listener's ear, this act is similar to Moses' collapse. If, as White states, Schoenberg “most likely” associated the row with Jewish Law, this turning away from it indicates that not only is Moses' God impossible, but so is Schoenberg's compositional method, his bridge to the Absolute Other, and to a unified stable meaning.

Moses and Schoenberg's error is expecting their God to be always and already *both* determinate and indeterminate—a God that can be ineffable and yet write the commandments in his own handwriting. While the God-idea *is* often both determinate and indeterminate, it cannot be so through stable and absolute representation. This dialectical god-idea can only exist through a challenging of metaphysical ideas not an affirmation of them. To call the God of *Moses und Aron* indescribable and ineffable, or

to categorize Schoenberg's music into serialized and static tone rows, are both moves to both compartmentalize and totalize. To see the *God-idea* of Moses und Aron, it is necessary to look beyond the *God* in the opera, who is just part of the multifarious atheological experience of the work.

The Death of the God of Modernism

Schoenberg, Williams, and Stein, were modernist prophets who did not (like Joyce) try to redeem the Word, but to dramatize its limits and its absence. They reversed the Christian process of Word made flesh and brought us back to a point before a burning bush spoke to Moses; before meanings and Laws were written in stone tablets. The age of manifestos was over. The death of God, the end of the self, and the end of the book were beginning to be realized in their work. One of Schoenberg's next works with a Jewish theme would be "A Survivor from Warsaw," and the political situation that forced Mann, Adorno, and Schoenberg to flee Europe erupted into Nazi Germany and World War II, leaving God and language at the "limits of representation." The silence of James, Williams, Stein, and Schoenberg became the post-existential, post-holocaust, post-modern silences of playwright Harold Pinter and composer John Cage, more literal silences written into texts that remain empty.

* * * * *

Running concurrently to the Schoenberg and Kandinsky exhibit at the Jewish Museum was an installation by Dara Birnbaum, based on and inspired by Schoenberg's 1909 atonal opera *Erwartung*. The installation is one room with a sheet of plexi-glass near one end. On the glass is an enlarged reproduction of Schoenberg's sketch for

Erwartung. Projected onto the glass and also through the glass onto the walls of the main room are images of a woman and words from the opera. Electronically altered music from the opera is heard in the room.

The first impression upon entering is one of disorientation. The room is dark, and although images are projected onto the plexi-glass, the video is also refracted and reflected by the glass onto the other walls and the floor of the room, resulting in reversed and upside words and images. (Like the permutations of a twelve-tone row) Although visitors are soon oriented by a bench that faces the plexi-glass, their attention is inevitably drawn to the wholeness of the room rather than the screen. The piece seems to have no center and no focus, the words and images and sound surround rather than fill the empty room. It is impossible to step outside the piece, because once entered your shadow is also part of the wall collage. Although the notes about the work refer to its making a feminist statement, we can also think about its relationship to Schoenberg's work and the final silence in *Moses und Aron*.

Moses' fall to the stage brings him to the edge of modernism, the edge of theology, and the edge of Western art music. Birnbaum's piece demonstrates where Moses' silence resides today. In the postmodern, art, poetry, and music are intertwined as are image, word, and idea. The words from *Erwartung* spread throughout the room, separated from any context, it is clear that Moses' privileging word over image no longer makes sense. The word is never simply a word but is always also an image. And furthermore, as Mark Taylor says, "images are not merely the object of study but are also the medium of thought, action, and communication" (*Imagologies*, "Styles" 8). Like the final moment of *Moses und Aron*, Birnbaum's piece conflates and erases the difference

between image and word, unit and fragment. It presents this lack of distinction as an empty space, surrounded but not contained by fragments of signs.

Ultimately for Moses/Schoenberg, the Golden Calf stands for not just a “hummable tune,” but for *any* spoken or written word or note, and the possibility of signification itself. And although one seems a moment of victory and one of defeat, the Golden Calf’s disappearance and Moses’ despairing cry are the same. The Calf, Mosaic Law, and twelve-tone rows are all physical attempts to cross the impossible gap between Man and God.

There is an atheological relationship in two moments of rupture, two moments of musical silence: the break between “pure” atonality and twelve-tone music and the break between Act Two and Act Three of *Moses und Aron*. We can locate both of these moments of silence historically, including all of the noisy commentary that has been perpetuated by them, but what stands out is their absolute incomprehensibility—an incomprehensibility that leads to an atheological God. This God is not a compromise between the two positions, but is a God of indeterminacy, a god who “may be,” in Richard Kearney’s phrase. Music, too, finds its indeterminate God-idea not in a new compositional method, but in the doubt cast upon that and any other compositional method. The possibility of portraying an ineffable God and the modernist faith in new forms of representation collapse with Moses onto the stage. The rest is silence.

Chapter Six

The Other Side of God: Metaphors, Monsters, and Vampires

Part I: Monsters of Hermeneutics

My monster looks like me. She has brown skin, chin length black hair, bangs, black eyes, red lips and is the size of a metrocard. She is wearing a purple shirt, and superimposed on the shirt is her heart. Her heart is large and black. Her right hand is a brown Bible, and her left hand is an orange outline of the United States.

Margie Pearce, Age 14, Brooklyn, NY

To see (and by the same token, to read: 'to see letters,' 'to see ghosts,') is therefore paradoxically not only to perceive, but also not to perceive: to actively determine an area as invisible, as excluded from perception, as external by definition to visibility.

Shoshana Felman (152-153)

The Return of the Monster

The pillars of fire and cloud leading the Israelites out of the desert in the final scene of *Moses und Aron* present a space of conflicting interpretation. To the Israelites, the pillar is the true God of Abraham, to Aron it is a symbol of God, to Moses it is an idolatrous image, and to the opera audience it is a special effect, an obvious illusion. This moment of theological ambiguity mirrors a central scene in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* when heroine Mina Harker describes the vampire count, as he seeps into her bedroom in the form of a mist.

It seemed as if it became concentrated into a sort of pillar of cloud in the room through the top of which I could see the light of the gas shining like a red eye. Things began to whirl through my brain just as the cloudy column was now whirling in the room, and through it all came the scriptural words "a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night." Was it indeed some spiritual guidance that was coming to me in my sleep? But

the pillar was composed of both the day and the night guiding, for the fire was in the red eye. (285; XIX)

Dracula—a Victorian novel on the edge of modernism, an English novel steeped in Catholic ritual, and a novel of good versus evil that subverts both—is characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. This passage, in which a perhaps dreaming Mina describes in scriptural terms the evil force come to seduce her, exemplifies the novel's blurred boundaries between god and monster, religion and superstition, dream and reality, sanity and insanity, and darkness and light. It is significant that the pillar of cloud, which in the Bible comes by day, appears to Mina at night and is “composed of both the day and the night.” Darkness and light are combined and reversed, and indeed the novel, like Mina's image of the vampire, is symbolically composed of both light within darkness and darkness in light.

But what is it about her traumatic experience that compels Mina to recall and render it (the next day, in her journal) as a Biblical image? Who puts the Biblical words in Mina's mind? Are the “things” that “whirl” through her brain influenced by the evil mist in her room, or is it her dreaming mind that creates the image out of a reading lamp and a foggy evening? When the same scene is reenacted in an episode of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Dracula encourages Buffy to see the darkness within herself and her power, and convinces her to voluntarily submit to his bite and then to taste his blood. The *Buffy* version suggests a darker and more sexual side to the Mina Harker character, a side that is repressed in *Dracula*. Does Mina too, want to be tasted, to taste, to explore this forbidden knowledge? Does Dracula aid her in seeing the darkness in herself? What does the Mina/Buffy character *desire*? What is this “spiritual

guide” and what mythical, mystical, theological, or imaginary world does it come from? Does it really come in through a window or is it already there to begin with?

* * * * *

Despite the early and long-lasting popularity of *Dracula*—indicated in the first part of the 20th century by the many films that it inspired¹—the novel was denied serious critical attention until the early 1970’s.² Although horror itself—from Kurtz’s final words through Dali’s sliced eyeball—was never forgotten during the modernist era, monsters and vampires, like religion and theology, were primarily relegated to popular and metaphorical roles by early 20th century authors, artists, and thinkers. In the 1920’s and 30’s, monster literature, like that of H.P. Lovecraft, was published almost exclusively in semi-amateur pulp magazines. Despite his marginalization, Lovecraft’s thought anticipates much later critical writings on the role of monsters and monster literature. In a 1927 essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft defines the monster as a “liminal creature who exists both in and outside of traditional religion.” A monster represents “the defeat of those fixed laws of nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (15-16). For Lovecraft, religion and horror complete the full dimensions of cosmic mystery, and the monsters of literature represent a darker side of theology that is left unacknowledged by traditional religion practices.³

¹ Most significantly, from the modernist perspective, are F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931).

² In the 1970’s there was an explosion of critical interest in the novel. In 1972 alone the following important books were published: *The Bram Stoker Bedside Companion* (a selection of Stoker short stories, including the never before published original first chapter to *Dracula*), *In Search of Dracula*, and *A Dream of Dracula*, both which included new biographical information about Stoker and interpretations of *Dracula*.

³ Lovecraft wrote a series of monster stories that, while they attract some critical attention today, were exclusively relegated to marginal pulp horror magazines in his own time. His stories are presented in a fragmented modernist style built from scraps of letters, memories, dreams, and various mythological sources. Lovecraft’s most famous story, “The Call of Cthulhu,” about a monster or god that is worshiped by a very ancient and very secret cult, plays on the ambiguity between religion and superstition. Like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, the story is told through various voices and documents giving the impression of

Critics of modernism have been more comfortable referring to the metaphor of the monster and the vampire than the real thing, pointing to themes of “vampirism” in culture and in literary works. Leon Edel, for example, sees a “vampire theme” (16) running throughout Henry James’ career, most clearly expressed in *The Sacred Fount*, where an observer spends a week-end in a country house studying couples depleting each other of their metaphorical life blood. James Twitchell sees in D. H. Lawrence’s novels a “vampiric pattern” in which a woman will prove too demanding and “suck” her partner dry (193). Since the 1970’s, however, critical writing about “vampires” often means, at least partly, a literal vampire, a creature of the night that exists by ingesting human blood. A shift in the late 20th century saw monsters, like religion, return in unexpected ways, understood literally by some and theoretically by others, but occupying a more influential role. Nina Auerbach, who edited a recent edition of *Dracula* and has written a critical text on vampires, remarks that vampires “may look marginal, feeding on human history from some limbo of their own, but they have always been central” (1). It is indeed this ability of a vampire to exist both as mysterious other and as a creature deeply rooted in our psychology that has kept them returning to literature and culture.

Not only have monsters and religion “returned” in both popular culture and academic discourse, but the return itself is essentially related to Western ideas of both monsters and God. Just as, in Western culture, to be human is to have an awareness of a

being both a factual document and a multivoiced modernist work of literature. Recalling *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, the story tells of the terror of sailors isolated at sea facing the horror of the monster. A sailing vessel happens upon Cthulhu’s dwelling, a submerged island that very rarely rises above the surface. Only one sailor lives to tell of the island, which then recedes back under the water. Lovecraft describes Cthulhu and his island using the language of modernism to express their unimaginable unworldliness. Cthulhu’s city is “futurist,” giving “broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces.” The geometry is “non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of sphere and dimensions apart from ours” and angles are “both acute and obtuse” (166-167). Lovecraft’s world of monsters is a world of modernist art, and one where monsters and gods are indistinguishable.

single autonomous life with a beginning and an end, to be a god or a monster is to transcend this limitation. In his book *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen posits the ability and tendency to return as one of the essential traits of being a monster: “No monster tastes of death but once” (5). From the ancient Babylonian Tiamet in the *Enuma Elish* to Jesus Christ in the New Testament to the monster of *Alien*, *Aliens*, and *Alien Resurrection* in Hollywood films, it is often the return itself that qualifies a being as either divine or monstrous. “No matter how many times we exorcise them, blow them to bits, or banish them to outer space, they keep coming back for more” (Beal 12). Scholars of religion, as well, speak of the return when analyzing late 20th century trends. Gianni Vattimo compares religion to a “wound reopened” and speaks of the contemporary religious journey that “comes to be experienced as a return” (79).

Late 20th and early 21st century critics have pointed to the importance of reinterpreting works like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Standing at either end of the 19th century, these two monster figures found new life at the end of the 20th century in the theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction, and monster theory. The turn of the 21st century sees the defining boundaries of humans, animals, and machines called into question, and, as Elaine Graham writes, it is the monster myths, the “stories we live by,” that will be critical tools in determining what it means to be human in the new digital and biotechnological age (17). Both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, in addressing the possibility of knowledge of the divine, are ultimately theological novels. The figure of the monster, the vampire in particular, provide the 20th and 21st centuries with a symbol of their epistemological and ontological instability. If Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* provided the 19th century with a monster to remind them of the limits of

human knowledge and the line between human and divine, then Dracula and his many sired imitations are an exploration of what lies forever beyond human understanding. *Dracula* crosses the barriers that *Frankenstein* erects and questions the gap between human and the unknown, human and the other, and human and the divine. Whereas, in the final scene of Shelley's novel, both Dr. Frankenstein and his monster attempt to warn a ship captain *not* to continue on his quest to explore beyond the known world, Dracula comes from and invites us into such a world. For Twitchell, "Dracula, unlike his literary brother the Frankenstein monster, simply cannot be explained" (133). Dr. Frankenstein created his monster in an attempt to play God, but Dracula, a figure of random evil and unknown origin, is ambiguously located in relationship to the divine and the sacred.

In this chapter, monsters will be read as a way of exploring the indeterminacy of the God-idea and as a comment on the (a)theological process of reading and interpreting modernism. Monsters are often seen as representing a force of chaos that is antagonistic to religious, theological, and divine presence. Yet, as I have demonstrated, theology comes with its negative, disruptive, and chaotic side as well. It is as forces of discontinuity and intervention that monsters and gods are *not* opposite, but necessary partners that illuminate each other. It is in this context that I use monsters as interpretive tropes of the atheology of modernism.

The two epigraphs at the beginning of the chapter illustrate two possible interpretive paths towards the idea of the monster in contemporary thought. Margie Pearce, a young student from Brooklyn, writes of a monstrous version of herself. Although she is writing to fulfill a class assignment, her description points to a level of unconscious "monster theory" that dwells in popular culture. As an African American

student at a predominantly white private school, her monster “looks just like” her, and its claim to otherness is revealed only through its dark skin, hair, and eyes, and its extremely small size and large black heart. The hand that is a Bible suggests the extent to which monsters are related to religion and to the Biblical. The other hand, a representation of the United States, reinforces again the familiarity of the monster and also hints at the relationship that American culture has in domesticating and literalizing traditional classical and Biblical monsters⁴. The second epigram, by theorist Shoshana Felman, depicts a monster that is not of the self or near to home, but is outside of place and understanding. Her monster does not “look like me” but is an incomprehensible visualization. Her ghost is monstrous in that to look at it is only to see it as not perceivable. Reading or “seeing” the ghost implies that “knowledge is, exists, but is located in the Other” (157, emphasis Felman). Her equating this paradoxical “seeing” with reading and of ghosts with letters marks the connection between monsters and written texts that informs my entire chapter.

These two depictions of the monster, one a creature from within, based on the self, and the other, a monster so strange as to make perception impossible, form two primary paradigms of monster theory. These two models are analogous to the determinate and indeterminate God. Like the two models for God, they exist in a tension formed by their simultaneous relationship of symbiosis and incompatibility. The decline of the determinate God in modernism parallels the lack of serious attention given to monster narratives. The recent critical attention on the indeterminate god of negative and

⁴ American religion in particular, has encouraged literal belief in monsters by a wide spread and powerful literalism that insists on multi-headed dragons and demons as actual, and by an openness to interpretation that allows for radical reconceptions of sacred and profane creatures.

postmodern theology is also philosophized in monster theory, and the rise of determinate gods and monsters within popular culture has accompanied this critical attention.

* * * * *

To write of the absence of God and the impossibility of expressing God is, like Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, to come up against an impenetrable paradox of representation. The problematic locating of this God-idea or God-space within the context of God's absence looks in the white spaces and gaps between words, listens to the silences within music, and finds the monsters hidden in our metaphors. To write of a postmodern negative theology is, like Derrida, to realize that one must *perform* an act of negative theology as well. Throughout this work, I have found myself writing words about words that must go beyond the word. This is why I have turned to monsters in my final chapter and why I have so often turned to non-literary texts rather than criticism: a photo (Serrano's "Piss Christ"), a video installation (Birnbaums's "Erwartung/Expectation"), and in this chapter, a television show (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and scientific theory (theoretical physics).

While the unstable dialectic of the religious and the monstrous (or the sacred and the profane) has been grappled with throughout history, resulting in such concepts as the sublime and the uncanny, the turn of the 21st century offers new directions and reintroduces ancient questions. Driven by the intersection of atheism, religion, and informational technology, the rise of interest in monsters of all kinds—demons, vampires, angels, aliens, cyborgs—can be seen in popular religion, popular culture, and in the world of theoretical scholarship. Monster Theory has become a branch of postmodern cultural thought that uses monsters—taken from the Bible, *Beowulf*, ship logs, and contemporary

popular culture—as tropes of marginality and otherness.⁵ Monsters are seen as an “epistemophilic” forces which compel us to question origins and causes (Braidotti 138), as creature that “stand at the entrance to the unknown, acting as gatekeepers to the acceptable” (Graham 53), and they are identified as “colloquial names for the experience of alterity” (Kearney, *Strangers* 13). This “experience of alterity,” of grappling with difference, is—as I have tried to show—analogueous to the desire for an absent God or the confrontation with a difficult text.

The images of monsters, like ancient and medieval texts of negative theology, provide guides to patterns of thought that have been reinvigorated in a postmodern criticism that seeks to question more than answer. The reinterpretation of both negative theology and monsters functions “to actively determine an area as invisible . . . as external by definition to visibility” (Felman 166). Felman’s use of the metaphor of *seeing* as understanding, but where to see is to understand that something *cannot* be seen, is a form of the negative theology involved in textual interpretation—an interpretation where, rather than claiming to see or name or totalize what a text is, we instead allow for *différance* and for alterity. If, as Derrida suggests, every negative sentence is already “haunted by God,” (“How to Avoid” 76) then monsters also do that haunting.

As I have demonstrated in my other chapters, the appropriation of the God-idea into modernist texts, while it is often part of a move for stability, may instead manifest itself as the indeterminate god of disruption. Monsters, as a literary trope, also exhibit a need for stability that is instead an atheological force of chaos or disruption in the texts. From *The Golden Bowl* to the Golden Calf there are tensions between

⁵ Publications such as *Monster Theory* (1996), edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Religion and its Monsters* (2002) by Timothy Beal, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2002) by Richard Kearney, and *Representations*

unity/fragmentation, belief/disbelief, and the determinate/indeterminate God that also exist in the figure of the monster. It is the role of the monster of neither fact nor fiction to explore these spaces and to allow us to see what it means to be on the dividing line of the in-between.

Metaphor as Monster: Wrestling with the Stranger

Perhaps it is time to ask the question that always arises when the monster is discussed seriously: Do monsters really exist?

Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (*Monster Theory* 20)

What does it mean to say, “I believe?” *I believe* in God? *I believe* in vampires? *I believe* in you? To believe, by definition, is to not *know*. The statement “I believe in God,” or “I believe in vampires” is an ambiguous and subversive statement that admits of simultaneous possibilities and impossibilities, of presence and absence. The three statements of belief—I believe in God, I believe in vampires, I believe in you—are inextricably related; each statement supports and supplements the other. Each is a statement of absence and presence, each is a plea for autonomy and presence.

“My thesis is this,” Van Helsing says to Dr. Seward, “I want you to believe. . . . To believe in things that you cannot” (*Dracula* 212; XIV). It is this shifting and ultimately unlocatable line between fact and fiction that Elaine Graham finds so essential to the cultural work that monsters currently do. “If the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines . . . are clearly under pressure in the digital and biotechnological age, then the relationship between another supposed binary pair, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is also central” (13). In our virtual world where fact and fiction are no longer seen as clear

of the Post/Human (2003) by Elaine Graham are examples of the trend.

opposites, Graham finds monsters crucial in continuing to define ourselves and our relationship to the divine. Believed in by millions, unseen by the rest of us, monsters perch precariously on the edge of imagination, sifting like mist through the windows of our subconscious, demanding our attention, and influencing our creations and interpretations.

Monsters *do* exist for those who believe in them, people who have no interest in the logic or science that says they don't exist. Our popular reliance on science or logic or rationality is just as tenuous as one that points to the Bible to prove the existence of a demon. For Graham, both science and popular culture are best seen as forms of *representation* (14), and "the cross-fertilization of scientific discourse and speculative fiction has long played a crucial role in the formation of discourses about what it means to be human" (62). If we see monsters as only "anachronistic products of premodern superstitious ignorance or as the future products of biotechnology" we fail to "account for the persistence of such myth in contemporary form" (Graham 38-39). In other words, we can't ever be certain in our forms of knowledge acquisition. The idea of certainty is related to the concept of a determinate God that, in Derrida's definition "makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge" (*Grammatology* 92). The monster, however, breaks through that wall of self-knowledge and forces a redefinition of our gods and our certainties.

Monsters as Metaphors

Within critical discourse monsters usually stand *for* something. Most theoretical and philosophical texts discuss monsters in their role of defining "otherness" as it applies

to human interaction in the areas of race, religion, and gender. According to this approach we demonize or create monsters out of our fear of the unknown. *Dracula* represents, according to critics, a fear of Jews, the Slavic non-European, the New Woman, breast feeding, capital, or non-traditional sexuality.⁶ Killing *Dracula* protects our culture and “our women” from these outside monstrous forces. Ancient monsters such as centaurs and satyrs represent man’s baser natures of sexuality and drunkenness; to slay these monsters is to defeat the lower non-human instincts. Historians look to the creation of monstrous “scapegoats” that emerge from volatile political situations. For example, the witch craze in Europe rose out of the instability of the early reformation,⁷ and images of Satan are still marked with medieval Europe’s stereotypical physical characteristics of Jews.

For Freud, monsters and God both represent something internal and psychological, and their tendency to return is just a part of their repression:

The monstrous is a revelation not of the wholly other but of a repressed otherness within the self. The monster . . . stands for that which has broken out of the subterranean basement or the locked closet where it has been hidden and largely forgotten. (“The Uncanny” 212, 216).

Other readings of monsters diverge from Freud by focusing on the monster as other, as a metaphor for an unknowable entity. From this point of view, they represent the unthinkable; they exist in the shadows and the abyss, on the fringes of the imagination and the dream world, beyond the borders of medieval maps. This monster is something

⁶ See Jules Zanger on *Dracula* as Jewish, Rosemary Jackson on sexuality, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 119-121, Franco Moretti on *Dracula* as metaphor for capital (in *Signs Taken for Wonders*), and Joan Copjec on vampires as representing anxiety about breast feeding.

⁷ For example, “witches” in Catholic towns tended to be Protestant, and vice versa in Protestant towns.

outside of us, so absolutely other as to be inconceivable. Monsters, then, are paradoxically interpreted as both the other *and* the self. Monsters are the strangers we can never hope to understand, or they are the dark recesses of our souls that we will never reach.

This duality has a parallel in the God-idea. As I have been emphasizing throughout this work, within Western theology God is simultaneously presented in two opposing and seemingly incompatible ways: as a force that makes all meaning possible, and as that which is always impossibly beyond understanding. Many thinkers, even those oriented towards a religious tradition, acknowledge that the monstrous and the divine are inseparable. Kearney points to this conflation in the work of Levinas, for whom the experience of irreducible alterity is ultimately indistinguishable from that of irreducible abjection. For Kearney, Levinas's "God beyond being becomes an abyss beneath being" (*Strangers* 9). Is the difference between the divine and the monstrous purely relative? As Kearney asks, "how are we to differentiate between the voice that bade Abraham kill Isaac, and the voice that forbade him to do so?" (*Strangers* 10). When is supernatural power divine and when is it monstrous?

Biblically, we can see these two interpretations combined in the story of Jacob wrestling with an unknown figure, seemingly a dark demonic figure from his inner dream world that is turned into a god or angel by the light of day. In the story, as Jacob sleeps alone a figure materializes and fights with him throughout the night. His adversary strikes or touches his hip, putting it out of joint. At this point Jacob appears to be winning the battle, and his opponent asks to be let go for the day is breaking. Like many monsters, it appears he can only exist at night.

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' (Gen. 32:24-32)

This strange sparse story, which is monster-like in its interruption of a longer narrative, is the only Biblical portrayal of physical conflict between a man and a divine agent.

Jacob's opponent is (literally and figuratively) difficult to pin down. Man? Demon? Angel? God? The figure seems to come in a dream and then injure, and bless Jacob. Not only does this figure go from inner demon to unknown other, it moves from Monster to God.

The moral and theological ambiguities of the more literal monsters in the Bible are notoriously hard to define and interpret. Timothy Beal points to the figure of the Leviathan, mentioned in Genesis, Job, Isaiah, and Psalms, as a contradictory being that is depicted as part of God's plan in Psalm 104 and as an opponent to it in Psalm 74 (26-27).⁸ For Beal, "Biblical monsters bear no single meaning, no overt unity or wholeness. They are theologically unwholesome [. . .and] stand for the for the haunting sense of precariousness and uncertainty that looms along the edges of the world, the edges of

⁸ There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
These all look to you
To give them their food in due season. (Psalm 104:27)

You broke the heads of the dragons in the waters
You yourself crushed the heads of Leviathan. (Psalm 74: 13-14)

society, the edges of consciousness and the edges of religious understanding and faith” (57). This double and contradictory movement of being part of or opposed to the ordained structure or known patterns is found throughout the Christian depiction of the devil, as well. Radicalized from his Jewish roots by being cast as a snake in the Garden and as the wild terrifying beasts in the Book of Revelation, he has also been continually domesticated into whatever human figures currently threaten the perceived Christian unity (Jews, Communists, abortion doctors, Arabs). Christians, therefore, have made Satan both more and less human, both a multi-headed dragon and your next-door neighbor. This pattern is also seen in depictions of the vampire in the 20th century, which offer a pattern of domestication from the strange un-human Dracula to the urban or western toughs of Hollywood films in the 70’s and 80’s, but also in a reverse evolution towards the less humanized futuristic vampires of science fiction.⁹

These various interpretations point to a significant ontological question: Are monsters and gods (or God) some sort of indefinable “other” that surpasses all efforts of interpretation and representation, or are they inner demons waiting to be understood and tamed? Most philosophers in the Continental tradition see gods and monsters as unreachable others, outside of the realm of human understanding. The desire and attempts to reach across this abyss, to communicate or understand these radical figures of alterity are seen in the experiences of art and of prayer. To experience this alterity, one must open oneself up to the possibility of the impossible other, be it God or monster or alien in an attempt to see, interpret, or understand this moment of alterity. As John Caputo

⁹ The religious history of American Christianity has been constructed around this propensity towards domestication—God as kindly father, Jesus as friend—at the same time that it has been open to new mythic formations from the *Book of Mormon* to UFO sects.

portrays it, this unknown, this “impossible, unimaginable, unforeseeable, un-believable, absolute surprise” (*Tears* 73), then, *can* be seen as a god, but only by a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, an act of total irrationality. Kierkegaard’s leap, making the blind and terrifying connection between self and absolute other, implies that even within Christianity, God is an unknowable and monstrous figure. Levinas, as well, emphasizes relating to the other *as* other (rather than reducing the other to recognizable form) which keeps God indeterminate and ineffable, but also keeps monsters in the dark and under the bed.

Other theorists see monsters differently. For example, Stanley Cavell says, “if something is monstrous, and we do not believe that there are monsters, then only the human is a candidate for the monstrous” (418), and for Stephen May “[a]ll supposed talk of the other is really projection. Aliens are metaphors for ourselves” (41). For these thinkers, to understand the monster, whether imagined by an individual or a society, is to perform a psychological act, even a psychoanalytical one.

But by insisting on the metaphorical nature of monsters, we perform an act of domestication that forces monsters back into the repressed or unknown areas from which they came. The repressive act of the metaphor and the emergence of the monster represent two contrasting interpretations of language. In traditional theories of language a metaphor is a figure of language, not of thought (Lakoff 202). This view leads to an assumed split between literal and metaphorical languages. According to this way of thinking a monster interpreted through metaphor could not also be literal. More recent theories of language, as I discussed in chapter two, see the assumption that a subject can always be comprehended without metaphors as false (Lakoff 204). It is then possible to

treat metaphors as literal statements and as the creation of something new. Metaphors, like monsters, allow us to see and construct a reality that they play a role in creating. A metaphor's meaning is created by the *action* that results from the perception of it. A metaphor does not domesticate the monster, but is the only way we can understand the monster's existence. The monster does not become a metaphor, the metaphor acts like the monster, both defining and expanding our imaginative limits.

If metaphors are interpreted as two opposing terms—one a poetic rendering (the vampire, for example) of a more “truthful” and objective signifier (The Jew), then the power of the monster is negated. To read the monster, both sides of the metaphor must destabilize the other, and neither side should be privileged or judged as opposing or as more truthful or objective. The vampire's act of drinking blood may be a metaphor for oral sex or breast feeding, but if we lose track of the horror of a vampire draining his victim of their blood we deny the full experience of both the monster and the sexual act. The importance of monsters as a cultural force relies upon the extent to which they are aw(e)ful.

Reading Gods and Monsters: Philosophy and Theology's Search for an In-Between

Philosophy has traditionally resisted a relationship with popular religion, considering it a more appropriate field of study for anthropology or sociology. Although the celebrated “turn to religion” or the “return of religion” in philosophical discourse has occasionally been connected to the coinciding “return” of some forms of popular religion,¹⁰ popular and philosophical religious discourse differ so sharply in their

¹⁰Hent de Vries, for example writes that “[t]his is not to deny that the explicit return of the religious to the agenda of philosophy and cultural criticism is prompted less by the definitional or conceptual instability of

definition of “God,” that attempts at demonstrating coincidence are weakened. The God of the continental philosopher is a purely indeterminate God, the God of the negative theology of Christian mystics like Pseudo-Dionysus, a God that is on the edge of metaphysics, a God that is “beyond being.” This God, to a popular religion where Jesus walks and talks with you, is just an intellectualized nonsense, or merely “that theological stuff.”¹¹ In discussions of monsters we see a similar clash of interpretation. While cultural theorists discuss monsters as “dwell[ing] at the Gates of Difference,” and “polic[ing] the Borders of the Possible” (Cohen 7, 12), thousands of believers are preparing to join a physical battle against Satanic Demons, spreading garlic around their window sills, or suffering from the horrific and very real after-effects of alien abduction.

Contemporary believers in monsters put an emphasis on the “real” and on “proof” (Biblical justification for demons, scientific evidence of alien abductions), striving to make material connections between human imagination and the divine, to give unexplained forces presence. We can see in most of our reactions to monster belief a similar psychological move to that of the belief itself: the need for “presence.” When scholars historicize monsters, render them metaphorical, or just attribute them to ignorance they are, in a sense, expressing a similar need for presence. The act of confining monsters to a poetic trope resembles a literary criticism that finds unity in a complex poem, a music theory that reduces a musical piece to the 48 possible permutations of a tone row, and a theology that finds in God the source that makes all meaning and unity possible.

the term *religion* than by the resurfacing of religion as a highly ambiguous force on the contemporary geopolitical stage” (6).

¹¹ Taken from a reader’s review of Frank Peritti’s Christian Fantasy novel *This Present Darkness* on Amazon.com.

If monsters and gods are not clearly distinguishable in their effect and perception, and if we take existing beliefs seriously, there is no rationale for a different philosophical treatment between what we choose to call God and what we choose to call monsters. Borrowing ideas of God and the divine from postmodern theologians and Continental philosophers who develop a God that neither is nor is not, but a God who “is yet to come” or who “may be,”¹² we can examine actual “belief” in monsters as part of a cultural epistemology based in a paradoxical popular religion that demands literal representation at the same time it is constantly erasing and recreating itself. What if we construct a philosophical interpretation of monsters built on the assumption that they *may be*? In other words, what happens if we apply ways of thinking about God to monsters? Can we somehow place both our beliefs and our skepticisms—conditioned by centuries of metaphysical thinking—in a sort of limbo? What does this limbo bring to an interpretation of 20th century texts? Monsters exist in the primordial world before our existence and they wait for the moment when we close our eyes for the last time. Monsters were here before humans and will be here to replace us when we are gone.

The indeterminate God of negative theology and postmodernism is, as we have been discussing, a force for discontinuity and rupture. Similarly, the paradigm of all monsters, Beal argues, is the ancient chaos god or chaos monster, a beast that must be defeated by a new god who creates or maintains cosmic order (15). Chaos gods and monsters are figures of radical otherness and alterity, created in a time before history but always threatening to return, to reintroduce chaos. Both gods and monsters can be seen

¹² See Richard Kearney’s *The God Who May Be* (2002) or Jean-Luc Marion’s *God Without Being* (1991). Kearney, for example, sees the tradition of defining God as falling either on the side of a positive metaphysics or a negative non-metaphysics, which both insist on an either/or definition, a definition which he feels is too absolute. He compromises with previous philosophical and theological positions by positing

as literary tropes of alterity and Levinas' *adieu* (*à dieu*). They are simultaneously moving towards and leaving meaning and understanding, creating both order and chaos, they are an impossibility that has been repressed, denied, and returned to.

The God-idea that resides in modernist texts is an unacknowledged, unconscious, and unintended presence; therefore, the critical act of locating it relies upon an indirect approach. Nietzsche's God-who-is-dead was an anthropomorphic God based in human nature. The task of identifying this God's influence necessitates addressing the human desire for the divine presence. One way of understanding the human desire for the divine is to understand the monsters that are created from similar impulses. The modernist move to elevate humans to the space left vacant by God relies in turn upon monsters to define the human.

Modernism's relationship to religion and theology, as I have been developing it throughout this work, is a complex network of competing beliefs, assumptions, and unconscious paradigms. Modernist literature, as it recreates an absent God, forms spaces of tension and difficulty that grapple with the god-idea, and its forces of order and chaos, unity and fragmentation. This struggle points back to ancient stories of gods and monsters and reminds us that every god of order is also a chaos monster.

God as "neither being (onto-theology) nor non-being, but as something between the two, an eschatological promise that may be." (167).

Part II: Becoming Postmodern: *Dracula* and the Twentieth Century Vampire

Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explains not, then it says there is nothing to explain. But yet we see around us every day the growth of new beliefs, which think themselves new, and which are yet but the old, which pretend to be young.

Abraham Van Helsing
In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (210, XIV)

For the haunting of a vampire three things are necessary: the Vampire, the Devil, and the permission of Almighty God.

Montague Summers
In *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (32)

The dark can get pretty dark. Sometimes you need a story.

Willow Rosenberg
In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Lie to Me")

An Arrow in the Side of Him Who Died

The complex figure of the vampire helps us to explore the liminal concepts of atheology in ways that echo the role of the bowl in James, the "little phrase" of music in Proust, and the calf in *Moses und Aron*. Vampires occupy a space between belief and disbelief; they are "a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6), they emerge from the negativity of Plato's ancient *khora*, and they help define the 20th century's negative theologies. By looking at three vampire texts we will see how vampires subvert and control the metaphors that reassure us that we live, think, write, and read rationally. My three texts, Stoker's *Dracula*, Montague Summers' *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, and the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* illustrates in three different eras, through three different styles of narration, philosophical attitudes toward vampires and religion.

Dracula, published in 1897, stands on the edge of the modernist period.

Blanketed in Victorian décor—the men standing outside of Mina’s door as Dracula ravishes her wonder if it is proper to barge in—it nevertheless is modernist in the fragmented style of its narration and in its subversive philosophical nature. Montague Summers’ *The Vampire* was published in 1928, the same decade that saw *Ulysses* and “The Waste Land,” but appears to come from an earlier time. Yet, even as his point of view seems to be equal parts medieval Catholic and 19th century gothic, it is revealing in its flattening of European culture, Catholicism, and vampire legend, lore and literature into a level playing ground, a move only possible in the 20th century. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, at the close of the 20th century, is a new kind of monster story, yet it is one that is rooted in the epistemological and ontological questions and issues of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, reinterpreting and reenergizing old stories for a postmodern audience.

While the early 20th century relegated vampires to popular film and pulp fringe magazines and novels, contemporary critics such as Nina Auerbach have reasserted the vampire’s cultural importance. For Auerbach, “[w]hat vampires are in any given generation is a part of what I am and what my times have become” (1). Auerbach claims that vampires “matter because, when properly understood, they make us see that our lives are implicated in theirs” (9). Recent critics have looked to the vampire as a creature of ambiguity and liminality. Its very existence challenges the accepted boundaries between life and death, human and divine, and mind and body. Not dead, not alive, the vampire’s essential act of sucking blood is simultaneously that of a suckling child, a passionate lover, and an act of creation or procreation.

Yet while vampires may force us to more completely understand ourselves, we, like vampires, cannot always see ourselves in the mirror. The blank mirror reflects an absence of a soul or the belief in our own autonomous existence. In Sartre's *No Exit*, Estelle comments, "I've six big mirrors in my bedroom. They are there. I can see them. But they don't see me. They're reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window—but how empty it is, a glass in which I am absent" (*No Exit* 19). Estelle and her two companions find themselves in Hell, existing like vampires with the memories and personalities of their previous human selves, yet no longer human. Mark Taylor sees these modern absences in mirrors and paintings as making "visible our invisibility by presenting absence. First the transcendent God, then the incarnate Christ, and finally the self itself disappear—die" (*Deconstructing Theology* 89). This absence is the imaginative space for our art, our religion, and our vampires. The vampire's absent presence, symbolized by the vampire's body in front of a blank mirror, is the essence of the vampiric questions of representation to which writers must continually return.

* * * * *

According to Eastern European folkloric wisdom a vampire should be buried at a fork in the road so it will not know what direction to go when it arises. The vampire as a trope of literary criticism offers a similar position of apprehension and ambiguity. Buried in the text, when the repressed vampire (or god) arises or is summoned there is an impossible decision to be made. Is it a creature of chaos or order? Does it come from within or is it Other? Was Christ's tomb at a fork in the road?

Folklorist Alan Dundes writes that vampires are a unique example of a subject that is found on all three levels of culture: elite culture, popular culture, and folklore

(160). Like any figure that inhabits legend, lore, psychology, and literature (an intersection God inhabits as well), the vampire has a complex history that cannot be reduced to any simple pattern of historic development. The 19th century vampire emerged as a literary figure in works like *The Vampyre* (1819) by John Polidori and Thomas Prest's *Varney the Vampire* (1847). By the time of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampire had become an aristocrat. Stoker's vampire lives a solitary life in a castle, has a title, and embodies Christian evil. Stoker's late Victorian vampire is undead, unhuman, and very literally an anti-Christ, risen from the dead, offering an alternate possibility of eternal life.

The vampire is defined in *Dracula* as “an arrow in the side of Him who died for man” (276; XIX). This characterization of the vampire as a weapon against Christianity is the essential battle that Stoker establishes in *Dracula*. Yet as an arrow piercing Christ's side the vampire is not only a force against Christianity, but is a part of Christianity as well. The arrow is clearly a reference to the lance that the Roman soldiers thrust into the dead Christ on the cross, resulting in, according to the Gospel of John (the only source of this scene), what appeared to be blood and water gushing out. But this scene comes down to us not only as an act of violence, but as an act with a specifically spiritual and Christian meaning. As portrayed in many Renaissance paintings, the wound and gushing blood has been taken to symbolize the new covenant and baptism. According to some Christian legends whoever possessed the spear holds the destiny of the world in their hands.¹³ In Wagner's Christian opera *Parsifal*, the spear is central to the plot. King Amfortas has been wounded by the sacred spear, a wound that condemns him to eternal suffering. When Parsifal returns with the spear he can heal Amfortas's wound which is “healed only by the spear that smote you.” Žižek refers to Amfortas's wound as

“undead” (“Vampirism” 31), in its eternal suffering, a clear reference to the vampire.

Van Helsing’s claim, then, that Dracula is an “arrow in the side of Christ” is a complex and paradoxical metaphor. Is Dracula puncturing or healing the wound that is Christianity? Is the wound a symbol of Christ or the vampire?

As I have pointed out before, the idea of conceiving of God in terms of the desire *for* the divine,¹⁴ rather than as a divine essence or being, is suggestive of the God-idea as it is manifested in modernism. As art and literature rid themselves of the idea of an actual determinate God, their desire for this absent God hides in the tensions between unity and fragmentation and totalizing but unstable metaphors. There is a correlative to this desire for God in the fear of absent monsters. The absent evil, devil, demons, witches, and vampires present in earlier eras, still exist as the fears and anxieties of a post-enlightenment mentality. Just as gods and monsters confuse the lines between desire and fear, sex and death, these urges for absent monsters and gods are equally present in Mina Harker’s bedroom as she desires and fears Dracula, and desires and fears God.¹⁵ The vampire’s existence for Mina as a space between outside and inside, between good and evil, between fear and desire, recalls Julia Kristeva’s concept of “abjection”:

There looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. . . It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desires. (*Powers of Horror* 1)

¹³ The spear also became a symbol of world dominance to Hitler, who claimed to possess the actual weapon.

¹⁴ See especially Charles Winquist’s *Desiring Theology*.

¹⁵ For Žižek, as well, evil and the Freudian death drive are not only equivalent but “diabolical evil is another name for the Good” (*Plague of Fantasies* 229).

Mina's encounter with Dracula resembles Kristeva's psychoanalytic model, and psychologically, we can interpret Mina's experience in several ways. She may be creating the fantasy of the pillar of smoke to obfuscate the true horror of the situation. Or the narrative could reflect an attempt to disguise a desire for either God (or God's phallic pillar) or the radical sexual experience of Dracula himself.

It is important to remember that Mina is literally the author of the encounter and Freud often admitted that it was impossible to ascertain if the narratives drawn from a patient's unconscious were truth or fantasy. Stephen Marcus's construction of a Freudian case study, demonstrates the modernist leanings of *Dracula*. For Marcus, the famous case history of Dora is primarily a work of modern "writing" of literature that displays (1) the impossibility of knowing the truth; (2) the dissolution of linear narration and its expansion into multiple narratives; (3) the lack of a reliable narrator or authoritative source; and (4) the undecidability between fiction and reality (64-65). This close relationship between a Freudian Case Study, modernist narrative, and *Dracula* points to the role of the vampire monster as a figure inaugurating the modernist era. Monsters and Gods are figures of the repressed that return to connect the themes of fear, non-linear narrative, indeterminacy, and impossibility that mark the presence (and absence) of the equally repressed theological (or atheological) fragments in the modernist text.

In Mina Harker's Bedroom: Writing the Divinely Monstrous

When Mina imagines Dracula as a Biblical "pillar of cloud" forming in her room, Stoker combines in one image and in one scene, the paradoxical literary and theological

themes of the vampire. Dracula, the arrow in the side of Christ, is now paradoxically pictured as a metaphor *for* God.

The God of Exodus is a God of Smoke and fire. When he finally first appears to the people it is as a terrifying volcanic deity: "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" (19:16-24). This shocking entry of God into his people's story is much like the shocking entrance of Dracula into Mina's narrative. In the same way that Mina controls her story by casting the vampire in a biblical image, the Israelites domesticate the fire and smoke on the mountain into pillars of fire and cloud. Mina may have chosen a more appropriate image than she was aware of. The God of Exodus is not just a fearful volcanic God, but a blood obsessed one as well who slaughters thousands of his own people. In Exodus blood is drained from twelve oxen, collected in basins, and then thrown upon the altar and the people (24:8). In a later ordination ritual, the blood of bulls and rams is spread over the altar and participants (24:10-28).

The scenes of Dracula visiting Mina in her bedroom are the psychological and artistic center of the novel. When the Count returns to Mina's room, the scene is described by Dr. Seward, who breaks into her room in time to see Dracula

forcing [Mina's mouth] down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast, which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink. (311; XXI)

As Mina and the Count engage in a ritualistic sharing of blood, the separation between sacred and divine, sex and ritual, sight and hallucination, and faith and fear, dissolve into a sexualized dream-vision of violence and ecstasy. These borderlines also point to limit-points of comprehension and form a philosophical crisis whereby characters in the novel must question received knowledge and epistemological reality. Mina's metaphor of a pillar is written in her journal and is an attempt to convert a radically transgressive experience into something familiar. In doing so she revealingly chooses a religious, mythical, and phallic image created thousands of years earlier to tame an equally incomprehensible and transgressive god of violence and blood ritual. Other characters, sane and insane, evil and virtuous, will also try to organize their chaotic world through misplaced Biblical allusions. The often cited "for the blood is the life," for example, is a misreading of the Old Testament prohibition *against* drinking blood (Gen. 9:3-6, Leviticus 17:10-11). For Carol Senf, "inexact [scriptural] recollection and imprecise interpretation reinforce that the distinctions between religious faith and magic are as muddled as the distinctions between sanity and insanity" (67). Mina, who is both physically experiencing Dracula and writing about him, demonstrates in her scripturally based journal entry how impossible these distinctions are.

The visit of Dracula to Mina's bedroom is a paradigmatic scene that presents the central issues for the monster/God within the shifting epistemology of the 20th century. Modernism's attempts to banish monsters to invisibility or to our unconsciousness merely changed the monster's location or appearance. The psycho-sexual presence of a monster/divine figure at the limits of rationality, religion, and sexual possibility pushes its way into modernism disguised as the dream visions of surrealism, the nihilism of Dada,

or the linguistic experimentation of *Finnegans Wake*. The novel *Dracula*, the scenes in Mina's bedroom, and the figure of the vampire reveal destabilizing forces that anticipate the intellectual, theological, and aesthetic crisis that drives the modernist revolution in the arts.

We can organize these attacks on stability into three categories. 1). The erosion of stable boundaries between binary oppositions such as religion/superstition, good/evil, and human/monster. 2). The subverting of the possibility of a truly essentialist understanding, either religious or humanist. 3). The questioning of the communicative potential of the word, the possibility of mimetic writing, and the existence of the book. The vampire is a figure of challenge to each of these models—a challenge that will be further taken up by postmodern conceptions of discourse and textual play.

1. Liminality and the In-between

Traditional organizations of *Dracula* point to Stoker's creation of a primary structural conflict between religion and superstition (represented by Van Helsing's Catholic Christianity against Dracula and the non-Western land from which he comes). Stoker clearly sets out to show this conflict as a battle between East and West and between Christian good and Satanic evil (or Christians and non-Christians¹⁶). The split between the two worlds is drawn geographically, ethnically, and theologically. In the first paragraph of the novel, as Jonathan journeys to Transylvania to see Dracula on business, he announces significantly that "we were leaving the West and entering the East" (1; I). As Jonathan travels to see the count, the country is painted as primitive—there are no maps of this country that compare with the West—and the land is portrayed

as containing “every known superstition” (2; I). The peasants he meets seem strangely superstitious and the gypsies that Jonathan sees are “without religion, save superstition” (45).

However, these oppositions are unsteady and ambiguous from the start. Dracula may be “superstition itself come fantastically to life” (Herbert 101), but he is a superstition with a Christian characterization. Jonathan is made uncomfortable by the sight of many peasants making the sign of the cross, and when an old peasant woman, upon hearing of his journey to Dracula’s Castle, places a crucifix around his neck he does not know whether to recoil or to accept the offer: “I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous” (5; I). Catholic symbols and folk beliefs are blurred together, as when a crowd of peasants make both the sign of the cross and of a charm against the evil eye (6; I). Catholicism is characterized as magic and as True religion. Although it is the Catholic cross that will eventually ward off Dracula, at this point in the novel it blends with the mistrusted peasant superstition.

Although for most of the characters in the novel the Catholic Church has been “replaced,” its symbols still affect those who are born under its power, a rationale that also explains rituals from outside of the church. Set primarily in England, the novel also demonstrates a clash of religion and superstition between the Anglican Church of England and the visiting vampire authority, Van Helsing, who is Roman Catholic. Van Helsing advises that “[t]o superstition must we trust at the first, it was man’s faith in the early, and it have its root in faith still” (362; XXIV). It is, evidently, the Roman Catholic accoutrements that can fight against the vampire. This seems to be because they both

¹⁶ See Jules Zanger’s “A Sympathetic Vibration: Dracula and the Jews.”

arise out of the past. The literal power of Catholic symbols such as crucifixes and holy water, while they repel the vampire, are questioned by the very people who use them, and become a part of a collection of weapons, including knives and Winchesters, that accompany them into battle. Although Jonathan feels “a mighty power fly along” (338; XXIII) his arm when he extends the crucifix toward Dracula, from the beginning he finds it “odd that a thing which I have been taught to regard with disfavor and as idolatrous should in a time of loneliness and trouble be of help” (31; III).

When the Host scars Mina’s forehead it appears that these Christian objects are indeed primarily dangerous weapons that must be handled with care. Use of the Host throughout resembles magic ritual such as when Van Helsing (who has been given an “indulgence”) grinds it and mixes into a putty substance or makes a circle of the Host around Mina to both protect and contain her. Catholicism and superstition, Christianity and paganism blur together in the mysterious powers of the vampire, the Host, and blood. God has disappeared, replaced by the “mighty power” Jonathan feels in his arm and the burn Mina has on her forehead—mighty power without a source.

Dracula’s structure as a battle between religion and superstition is further weakened by its taking its narrative impetus from assuming that vampires and magic are real, therefore privileging superstition. Although the gypsies may represent non-Christian superstition, it is the non-Christian vampire from their land that presents a challenge to Christianity and the Christian God. Religion, God, and church are all consumed or sublated into a system where they are on a level plain with magic and monsters. In other words, how miraculous is the Catholic transubstantiation of wine into blood when a vampire can change himself into a bat or a misty fog? When the men are

setting out to battle Dracula they list the advantages they have over the vampire but significantly do not include having God on their side.

We have on our side . . . resources of science; we are free to act and think; and the hours of the day and the night are ours equally. . . . We have self-devotion in a cause, and an end to achieve which is not a selfish one.

These things are much. (262; XVIII)

Since all we see of God's presence are reactions to the vampire, God and Christianity appear weaker and less important than Dracula himself. Christopher Herbert identifies the "main plot device" of Dracula as the premise that "moral perverseness. . . can be caught by physical contact,"¹⁷ and this physical manifestation of evil is the closest anything in the novel comes to a religious presence. The characters and the novel seem to accept and endorse such a view. Although Van Helsing tells Jonathan that "God is merciful and just," they must accept that the Good Mina is "unclean" and rejected by God until they can kill Dracula. Stoker's God evidently subscribes to the superstitious thinking that his band of Christian warriors is fighting against.

The fragile opposition of superstition and religion is only part of the dialectical structure of oppositions of the novel, which is also based on the tensions between good and evil and human and monster. Veronica Hollinger gives a postmodern reading of *Dracula* when she notes that "however threatening Stoker's vampire is, it serves a crucial function in his novel; in its role as evil Other, it necessarily guarantees the *presence* of the Good." She contrasts this reading with modernist works such as Kafka's *The Trial* or Becketts's *Godot* which "dramatize the sense of loss" and postmodern works which

¹⁷It is this aspect of vampirism that is explored by novelists like Brian Aldiss who have used vampires as a metaphor for AIDS.

ultimately “emphasize the more liberating implications of this absence of the transcendent” (202). In *Dracula*, on the other hand, “beyond the margins of the Good, the human, and the natural, the vampire’s very existence acts as a confirmation that these categories remain in place, demarcated against and defined by that which is not Good, not human, not natural” (202). But although Hollinger sees vampires as an “inherently deconstructive force” (201), she reads the novel *Dracula* as confirming and reinforcing cultural categories. Her reading underestimates the novel’s challenges and subversions of these very categories. Each of the sets of binary oppositions has a relationship that is symbiotic but also overlapping. Although *Dracula*, like all vampires and monsters, exists beyond human limits, these limits become visible only when they infiltrate them. Like the set of teeth nearly piercing Jonathan’s neck, monsters push against the membrane of difference and, like Jonathan, we do not know if we want them to punch through or not.

While *Dracula* may be the “most religiously saturated popular novel of its time” (Herbert 101), it presents “religion” in such a contradictory and subversive manner that to position *Dracula* as a Christian novel is to see the vampire not as opposed to Christianity, not as some pre-Christian evil force, but as a part of Christianity. *Dracula* can only exist within the world of Christianity, a religion that stresses the resurrection, the return of the body, and the blood. Herbert finds that “vampirism in *Dracula* acts out the phantasmatic return of the frightening repressed aspects of Christian Faith itself, the aspect of itself that faith denies” (111). In this context, we can see *Dracula*’s Christ-like attributes not as just demonic parody, but as partaking of an element of Christianity and acting as a necessary supplement to an essential lack in Christianity. *Dracula* illuminates Christianity’s need to separate itself from the monsters it creates. “There is in Christianity,” writes Bataille,

“a will NOT to be guilty, a will to locate the guilt outside of the Church” (*On Nietzsche* xii). As Sylvère Lotringer glosses Bataille’s words, “this accounts for the Church’s inability to deal with Evil, except as a threat coming from the outside” (*On Nietzsche* xii). As *Dracula* demonstrates, this evil is always already in the faith, and the line between religion and superstition, monster and god, other and self, and Good and Evil is an illusion. As when Dracula peers out through the church window at Whitby—a vampire in a church next to an insane asylum—the separations fade away.

In that asylum, worshiping Dracula as his master, is the patient Renfield, the only character initially aware of Dracula’s presence in England. Renfield, an apparently educated man, appears totally sane only when talking to Mina Harker, whose bedroom hallucination/experience combines the forces that rule and define his character. Renfield understands that Dracula is a supernatural figure whose power mimics and exceeds the Christian God. Renfield’s lapping up of blood off of the floor and capturing and eating of insects are an obvious parody of the Eucharist and as Herbert points out, Renfield injects “into the book the dangerous idea that the holy and the infectiously dirty may finally be one and the same” (107). For Herbert, Renfield introduces “severe complications into the theological argument of the novel,” and serves to “theorize the collapse of religion” (106). Although both the power structure of the insane asylum and the various voices of the narrative try to limit his voice, his presence provides a dark undercurrent to the intended religious direction of the novel, the victory of Christianity over superstition.

Renfield, although often characterized as merely a raving lunatic in film versions of the novel, is complex, well rounded, and, ideologically speaking, the most significant

human character in the novel. Renfield's worship of Dracula, his "master," is a dangerous relationship that subverts Christian interpretations of the work. As the most worshipful and "religious" character, his literal acceptance of the vampire narrative, and of the power of scripture (He repeats the Biblical phrase "the blood is the life," and compares himself to Enoch who "walked with God" [296; XX]) presents a version of Van Helsing's blurred world of superstition/Catholicism and moral absolutes taken to its inevitable conclusion. In other words, Renfield's "insanity" is rational behavior within the theology of Van Helsing and Stoker's world.

Renfield's apparent vacillations between insane and sane point to yet another unstable border in the novel. Throughout *Dracula* characters constantly question which side of sanity or reality they are on. Trapped in Dracula's castle, Jonathan writes, "whilst I live on here there is but one thing to hope for: That I may not go mad, if, indeed, I be not mad already" (40; III). Later Dr. Seward will voice the same concern: "I sometimes think we must all be mad and that we shall wake to sanity in strait-waistcoats" (301; XX). Placed in incomprehensible situations, characters write in order to convince themselves they are still on the side of rationality. Jonathan's experience with the "wives" of Dracula, he physically experiences the limit point of understanding his own rationality and his inability to separate fantasy from reality.

The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet, and sent the same tingling through the nerves as her voice, but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood. . . . Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and

chin and seemed about to fasten on my throat I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart. (41-42; III)

Like Mina's experience with Dracula, Jonathan has been asleep and is perhaps dreaming or hallucinating, yet through the medium of writing tries to describe objectively this moment of the absolute edge of consciousness and rationality. But in his writing, Jonathan clearly renders it as a sexual scene, a sexuality that is related to evil, and that admits of his own desire for the female vampires. The thin membrane of the skin of his neck becomes a tenuous border separating him from absolute evil and absolute ecstasy.

Jonathan's scene of erotic transcendence is, like Mina's, a moment of sublimity that conflates good and evil. Like the breath of the female vampire that is both honey-sweet and offensively bitter or the red eye shining through the pillar of cloud, these descriptions by Jonathan and Mina are sensual symbols of the novel's contradictory construction of the monstrous. Dracula's hands, which initially seem delicate and pale, upon closer inspection are course and hairy with razor-sharp nails. Dracula and the figure of the vampire contain darkness within light, a contradictory paring represented by their sleeping in the sacred ground of a church yard. "For it is not the least of its terrors that this evil thing is rooted deep in all good; in soil barren of holy memories it cannot rest" (265; XXVIII).

2. *The Essence of the Thing*

“Is it that there is something in the essence of the thing itself?” (31; III) Jonathan asks of the crucifix, in a question that is never answered. Where indeed is the essence, the Real Presence, of either the Christian objects or the vampire’s evil soul? In the confusing web of power between magic, monsters, religion, and God, the novel, despite itself, anticipates the modernist crisis of questioning the very concept of “essence” itself. What makes Mina “Good” and Dracula “Evil?” What part of the Host, ground up and mixed into putty, maintains an essence allowing it to repel the vampire?

When the men read the Order for the Burial of the Dead over Mina, it is because when the touch of the Host scars her forehead, it indicates to them that she is spiritually dead. However, as Senf points out, this is a most “heretical scene, for it suggests that Mina’s faith is inadequate and that the power of Dracula somehow outweighs the ability of God to grant grace to those who believe in Him” (69). Although her male counterparts describe her as “good,” and Mina herself defines herself as Holy—“I who have tried to walk in meekness and righteousness all my days” (317)—God’s presence is indicated only by this marking of an individual as being lost to divine favor. There is no doubt, among the men of the novel, that Mina is already damned and a creature of the dark despite her devout and unselfish nature: “so far as symbols went, she with all her goodness and purity and faith was outcast from God” (340; XXIII). Why does Dr. Seward say “so far as symbols” here? Is he saying that the essence is in the symbols? Or that there is an essence deeper than symbols? Does God exist *only* in the symbol? How can Mina be “good” yet more a demon than a Christian? Where does “goodness” come from? Is Dracula more *real* than God, more real than the Real Presence? When Van

Helsing places his putty compound of the Host around Lucy's tomb so that she cannot enter, he remarks that it is only effective because she is newly a vampire, and is not effective against Dracula. The body of Dracula, in other words, is more powerful than the body of Christ.

Jonathan rebels against the inconsistency of these interpretations by determining that if Mina should become a vampire he will go with her. His decision further confuses the sacred and the profane by associating love with evil: "just as their hideous bodies could only rest in sacred earth, so the holiest love was the recruiting sergeant for their ghastly ranks" (328; XXII). His comment, the closest any of the men come to pure blasphemy, essentially defining mating with Evil as holy, goes unchallenged and unpunished. The novel ultimately portrays not essence or presence but only spaces of tension. *Dracula* is a battle ground where concepts of "real," "true," "faith," "Christian," "Good," and "Evil" are never stable but can only exist in a vortex of shifting definitions.

It is this very liminality that Mina, Renfield, and Dracula present and that the men, with their superstitious Christianity (or Christian superstition) cannot understand. It is Mina, and Lucy before her, existing as neither human nor demon that provides the horror of the novel and the essence of the vampire myth throughout history. Lucy is the first character bitten and we watch her slowly lose her humanity until, on her deathbed, she is seen passing back and forth between human and vampire.

The moment she became conscious she pressed the garlic flowers close to her. It was certainly odd that whenever she got into that lethargic state, with the stertorous breathing, she put the flowers from her; but that when she waked she clutched them close. (175)

At the moment Lucy appears to die and is finally lost to humanity, the puncture wounds on her throat heal. The fact that only the human side of her can contain the wounds inflicted by the vampire stresses her liminality.

Lucy's in-between state is further increased because she was bitten while sleepwalking—a state of neither waking nor sleeping. Unlike other vampires, she lies in a state of her natural beauty in her vampire's coffin. The men then must actually “kill” what appears to be Lucy's peaceful beautiful sleep. “Is this really Lucy's body, or only a demon in her shape?” they ask themselves. “It is her body, and yet not it,” Van Helsing replies (234; XVI). This moment brings the men face to face with the three challenges to stability I presented at the beginning of this section. Lucy defies their understanding of what it meant to be dead or human. Their either/or mentality is insufficient to process the information. By killing a dead body, by driving a stake into what appears beautiful and alive, they must ignore their received ideas about what is good and right. They must also recognize that they cannot properly understand the codes they are given. While the situation demands that they attempt to read a woman's body to determine her essence, they must admit that this reading is impossible.

It is this moment of looking at a vampire, trying to read the essence of good or evil, that most haunts the men in the novel. Lucy's “beauty” is coded good for them in the same way that Mina is good, even when the Host scars her forehead. While they may ask “God” for help, the final choice for them, a matter of life and death, resides in reading and interpreting the bodies, and in writing and interpreting their collaborative story.

3. *Writing and Text*

As has often been pointed out, Stoker features many new technologies in the fictional construction of his “book.” Characters use and comment on the efficiency of the phonograph and the typewriter, and use both in order to keep their narrative current with the rapidly developing events. Although the epistolary novel was a popular 18th and 19th century form, *Dracula*, by making it a more realistic possibility, and with its construction and deconstruction of God and monster through writing, also “writes” itself into a characteristically postmodern abyss.

The front page of *Dracula* has this statement:

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past events wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them. (n.p.)

While intended to enforce the impression of immediacy and “reality,” the last phrase of this statement brings us back to a position of ambiguity. If the records were indeed written “from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them,” then we are reading a nomadic truth at best. The act of writing, although its importance is often cited by critics of the novel, is underestimated in the way it results in questioning the truth of its own narration. For the characters in the novel, despite their

best intentions, writing is not a collection of facts, but is an attempt to convince themselves of their sanity and their righteousness.

Stoker goes to great lengths in the novel to make the epistolary structure appear realistic and feasible. Characters are seen writing, rewriting, and collating documents into what we see as the book. Jonathan and Mina write journals in shorthand, Mina and Lucy exchange letters, and Dr. Seward keeps a journal on his phonograph. Characters write obsessively in transit and between events to keep current and read each others' texts to be aware of the whole story. At certain points, the keeping of the narrative even dominates the actions being described. The collected documents, as they are passed around, recopied, and reread, become templates for the future actions as well as the past. Mina finds out about Jonathan's experiences at Castle Dracula, not through him, but by reading his journals. It is this experience that allows her to accept as real the existence of the vampire: "If I had not read Jonathan's journal first, I should never have accepted even a possible" (199; XIV). The others learn of these events by reading Mina's transcriptions of the journal, typed out from Jonathan's shorthand notes. In another example, Jonathan remarks upon entering the building containing Dracula's coffins, that "it was startlingly like the image conveyed to me in Dr. Seward's diary of the opening of Miss Westenra's tomb" (275; XIX). The written narratives become, for the characters, their sacred texts, their guarantee of truth.

The documents gain in importance as the novel progresses until even Dracula seems aware of them. Immediately after the men discover Mina sucking the blood from Dracula, the count escapes and en route throws manuscripts and phonograph cylinders onto the fire in the study. Although there is no explanation as to why Dracula does this or

whether it is intentional or not, at this point in the text it acts as the ultimate act of pure chaos, symbolizing the disruption of the narrative. Not only is Dracula attacking their women, but he threatens their story and thus their truth. In attempting to destroy the narrative itself, Dracula becomes the ancient chaos monster/god. Dr. Seward immediately credits the safety of a physical narrative of the vampire to his divine figure of order. “Thank God there is the other copy in the safe,” he says, more worried about the loss of the narrative than of Mina’s humanity, and implicitly relieving God of his responsibility for Mina’s soul.

Dracula’s characters literally write themselves into the book, and Mina’s privileging of the written text over the physical experiences takes over the narrative of *Dracula*. “You do not know me,” Mina says, but “when you have read those papers. . . you will know me better” (242; XVII). The novel enacts Žižek’s idea that “the answer to the question ‘Why do we tell stories?’ is that *narrative as such* emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession” (*Plague* 10-11). Mina, with some help from Jonathan, works hard at collating, transcribing, and typing until they are able to “show a whole connected narrative” (247; XVII).

Although we increasingly see characters writing of their experiences, it is only *through* Mina that the narrative fragments develop cohesiveness and move towards a conclusion. She becomes the primary writer and redactor of the text. Dr. Seward, as the narrative nears its climactic finish, says to Jonathan

You must be scribe and write him all down, so that when the others return from their work you can give it to them; then *they shall know as we do*.

And so I have written it whilst we wait their return, and Mrs. Harker has written with her typewriter all since she brought the MS. to us. (379; XXV, my emphasis)

The manuscript and Mina Harker's transcriptions then, represent a monolithic and communal knowledge. Yet monsters are never whole or connected; words never completely define them; they are what fall outside of the narrative. They are "that which nothing precedes, [and] that which follows from nothing is what awakens anxiety. Anxiety registers the non sequitur, a gap in the causal chain" (Copjec 26).

Writing in *Dracula* moves from the classical model to the late 20th century model of writing defined by Taylor as an act of wandering—no longer a tool for the tracing of truth, but an interplay of signs that produces a constantly shifting web-like text. Mina and her fellow scribblers subscribe to the belief that their words represent truth, and if they can only organize the written truth on their side they can defeat the enemy, the destroyer of categories of truth, the chaos monster. The novel becomes a battle of two kinds of *writing*—writing as God-ordained truth, and writing as wandering. Writing as a search for definitive meaning to the word is also a search for supernatural presence. "While not always explicitly named God, the transcendental signified *functions* as the purported locus of the truth that is supposed to stabilize all meaningful words" (Taylor, *Erring* 105). But if meaning is seen as destabilized then, as Taylor says, "the disappearance of the transcendental signified creates the possibility of writing" (105), a creative/destructive process that is embedded in the multi-layered narrative of *Dracula*. As the traditional concept of God is confused, questioned, and dissolved, writing is the impetus of this movement towards instability.

For a text that fears and represses the sexual appetites of women, it is ironic and revealing that a woman controls the text. Like a god-like first person narrator, Mina completely controls the flow of words, written, spoken, and published. “Supposing truth is a woman?” Nietzsche asks to open his Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, and, for Nietzsche, truth (woman) does not allow itself (her self or her truth) to be possessed. In this case a woman is ultimately our only authority, unreliable as she is. *Dracula* reflects not only a fear of the New Woman as a sexual aggressor, but the New Woman as a form of unstable writerly or intellectual control. There are many reasons to distrust her account. Much of the manuscript is feverishly collated and recopied by her after she is at least partially under the influence of Dracula. Texts are hurriedly translated from phonograph cylinders or shorthand, and always under intense psychological pressure and time constraints. When Mina writes in her journal of Dracula’s visit to her bedroom, is she relating a dream? Is the vampire narrative suggested by Van Helsing and her husband combining with her erotic urges and religious sensibilities to form this image and scene of vampirism in her unconscious?

The whole novel can be read as a hysterical hallucination perpetuated by writing and guilt, and facilitated by Mina’s editing energies. This alternate narrative would go something like this: Jonathan, an engaged bachelor beginning to suffer from a “brain fever”, is seduced by a woman while traveling in Eastern Europe. Mina, who is in love with several men and a woman, reads of her husband’s affair in his guilt and fever inspired manuscript and at the same time exchanges letters with a disturbed sleep-walking friend whom she desires. She and her friend exchange letters inflaming each other’s amorous desires, and Mina begins a sexual affair with the very (non-Christian,

perhaps Jewish) man her husband had written about while traveling. As Mina reads and writes and recopies the escalating stories, the mass-hysteria increases into a monster story. The climactic scenes when Dracula visits Mina in her bedroom are scenes of exchanged and illicit oral sex, producing further guilt and repression by both Mina and the men who witness the act. The men, who had all had sexual relations with Mina (symbolized in the blood [i.e. semen] transfusions) set out to destroy the Easterner who is stealing their women.

In “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida, referring to Freud’s well-known analogy of memory as a mystic writing pad, interprets the unconscious as a “writing machine.” For Derrida, writing “supplements perception before perception even appears to itself” (*Writing* 224). Mina as “writing machine” expresses the unconscious impulse to write and in the process create monsters and gods. But although we have seen how the desire for gods and monsters is always part of a text, if monsters are truly other they cannot be captured in the words of a human text. The impossibility of writing gods and monsters can be usefully seen through a reading of Derrida and Mark Taylor. In Derrida’s critique of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* he points to Foucault’s claim to write from the point of view of “madness itself.” But for Derrida, in writing a book with a theme of “madness itself” Foucault’s madness remains “within the language of reason,” and therefore is not madness (*Writing* 43). The attempt by the feverish and obsessive journalists in *Dracula* to capture and totalize all meaning through writing, to understand the incomprehensible through the organization of notes, in the process creates a text of mystery, wandering, and rupture. The text of *Dracula* can also be seen in light of Derrida’s concept of “archivization” which must result in an “annihilation of memory”

and a necessary questioning of what is “outside of the archive” (*Archive Fever* 2, 11). The Victorian inhibitions of the men in the novel to enter an endangered woman’s room, or of Mina to write of the physical presence of evil, force us to question how truthfully they could describe a tale of transgressive religious, sexual, and cultural forces and desires beyond their understanding. Renfield, as the raving lunatic in the asylum, perhaps is the only voice to be trusted, but his words are suppressed and transcribed through the editing layers of Dr. Seward and Mina. What is outside of the archive in *Dracula* is the monster, the memory that is annihilated is what happens in Mina’s room that she doesn’t remember (or won’t translate into writing), and what is outside of Christianity is the vampire.

If writing is an act of transcription, capable of producing a written document of completion and truth claims (i.e. a sacred text), then monsters challenge and disrupt the possibility of this totality. They are what can’t be written down, that which cannot be completely understood or described. But if writing, as Taylor says, “inscribes the disappearance of the transcendental signified,” if it is always, in other words, “not about something, but is *that something itself*” (*Erring* 105, 119), and an analogue for the wandering non-essence of the indeterminate God, then monsters *are* “writing.” Their writing mirrors the effect of the modernist God and of the monster. In each case we see a tension between the lack of faith in traditional systems of knowledge and representation and the need to control and understand this lack. The monsters and Gods of the early 20th century fulfilled the multiple roles of being held responsible by their absence for the increased doubt in traditional systems and as being recreated through this doubt.

Montague Summers and *The Vampire*: Fact or Fiction?

The themes that I used to organize my reading of *Dracula* are central aspects of much 20th century art, criticism, and theory. The impossibility of truth claims, the fragmentation of narrative, the lack of an omniscient authority, and the blurred line between fact and fiction are defining characteristics of many modernist texts as well as works of deconstruction and new historicism. Although these aspects of modernism and postmodernism were foreshadowed in *Dracula*, perhaps the most widely read vampire text written in the first half of the 20th century was written against these modernist trends. Like Mina Harker's journal, it was written to control and contain the "truth" about the vampire; like Mina's writing, it fails to do so.

In 1928 the Reverend Montague Summers published *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, an attempt to write from the point of view of a church scholar, theologian, anthropologist, folklorist, and literary critic, a complete account and summary of all that was known about vampires. Summers' book covers such subjects as the origin, generation, traits and practices of vampires, as well as the vampire in literature and film. *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, once an important and influential book, is now mostly a curiosity. The work shows the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as well as the 14th century *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Catholic Church's official document on witchcraft and demons), and while they may not seem to have much in common, each work, like *Dracula*, attempts to draw a line between superstition and True Religion.

Summers' *The Vampire* is as significant for what it doesn't do as for what it does. It almost completely ignores the issues of myth and psychology in favor of piling up anecdotes and examples. Summers' comment on *The Golden Bough*, that it "is

unscholarly and slovenly,” is evidently written in reaction to Frazier’s subjective interpretation and a lack of emphasis on collecting data. He writes from the point of view of an unquestioned “Great Tradition.” He writes with the assumed presence of the Church and Church Fathers as absolute authority, without any sense of contemporary issues in 20th century anthropology. While high modernism implicitly responds to the questions raised by *Dracula*, Summers reacts against them.

He begins by stating that his purpose is “the philosophy of vampires” (xxiv). He immediately stresses the liminal and in-between state of the vampire, saying that “he is a thing which belongs to no world at all” (1) and that it is “[a] living dead body! The words are idle, contradictory, incomprehensible, but so are Vampires” (2). But Summers’s philosophical beginning gets swallowed up in his subsequent examples. Although he admits of contradictory traits, he does attempt to collate his information into conclusive characteristics of the vampire.¹⁸ In contrast to Stoker’s *Dracula*, vampires, according to Summers, cannot transform themselves into a wolves or bats. As for the fog that enters Mina’s bedroom at night, he says that although “in some traditions the Vampire is said to float into the house in the form of a mist. . . . this is mere fancy, and only deserves a passing mention as belonging to legend and story” (198).

But what about vampires *doesn’t* belong to “legend and story?” The work, which consists of summary of legends, anecdotes, and documents from a variety of countries and time periods, is a strange experience for the reader because it is ambiguous whether the author really *believes* in the actual existence of vampires. In the introduction to the 1960 edition, Felix Morrow writes:

¹⁸ Summers’ ambiguity about the essence of the vampire is, perhaps unintentionally, pointed to by his inconsistency in the capitalization of vampire.

With vast erudition he summons up Holy Writ, early, medieval and later church fathers and theologians; and it becomes clear that he feels confident that he speaks for all true Roman Catholics and, indeed, for all true Christians. Side by side with this, however, he takes the most enormous delight in freezing our blood and standing our few hairs on end with the most dreadful but fascinating stories of endless evil done through the centuries. Just what is going on? We may well wonder. (xiii)

Surrounded by hundreds of anecdotes introduced by phrases like “it is thought,” “it is considered,” or “it is commonly accepted,” is found a sentence, apparently totally in earnest, such as “it is obvious that those who die unbaptized or apostate will be liable to become vampires after death” (162).

But Summers, like Stoker, perhaps does not depict the world that the author intended. Summers’ book, like *Dracula*, is implicitly a work grounded in Christianity, but also one bordering on heresy and apostasy. *The Vampire*, while it occasionally recalls *The Golden Bough*, also fulfills the fear of the confusion of magic and religion that Frazer felt threatened Western Civilization. The line between magic and religion, especially at a time when the Anglican Church was fighting what it felt was a superstitious belief in the literal interpretation of Biblical scripture, was a complicated area. As in the scene of Moses’ staff, the magic of a true divine presence and the magic of an evil sorcerer become indistinguishable.

For Summers, there is no single vampire, and he prefers to “refer to phantoms of the vampire family rather than to the Vampire proper” (196). On the question of the essence of a vampire Summers comments that “there is some divergence of view whether

the Vampire is the actual person, energized with some horrible mystical life in death who visits his victims. . . or whether it is a demon who animates and informs the body” (178-179). Although in *Dracula*, Lucy the vampire is said to be a “foul Thing” which had taken Lucy’s shape “without her soul” (234; XVI), for Summers, there is little doubt, based upon evidence both anecdotal and theological, that the vampire is primarily still partially a person and not therefore a body completely inhabited by a demon. The “actual” vampire is not of the body it inhabits, but neither is it an independent entity. The ambiguous body, Summers emphasizes, is what is important.

The vampire has a body, and it is his own body. He is neither dead nor alive; but living in death. He is an abnormality; the androgyne in the phantom world; a pariah among the fiends. (6).

According to Summers, we know a vampire is *not* a spirit because Jesus said “for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (Luke 24:39). Of course, this also suggests a connection between the risen Christ and the risen vampire that Summers ignores.

Summers’ position on the literal existence of vampires is further complicated by his choosing to end his book with chapter on the vampire in literature. He tracks the history of the vampire in literature from a poem called “*Der Vampir*” in 1748 to *Dracula*, presenting it in the same learned and detached manner as his historical anecdotes of vampirism. His concluding statement articulates the theme of the conflation of fact and fiction in twentieth century vampires: “Consciously or unconsciously it is realized that the vampire tradition contains far more truth than the ordinary individual cares to appreciate and acknowledge” (337). But what kind of “truth?” The kind of truth that can be contained in terms of fact and fiction?

As Morrow portrays him, Summers was an ambiguous figure who may or may not have been an ordained Roman Catholic priest and began his career in the Church of England before converting to Roman Catholicism. A Catholic priest is the Christian figure closest to superstition and magic, and the ambiguity of whether one is or isn't a priest is one of ontological doubt. Summers was known as a highly respected Roman Catholic authority who was described as attending the theater in full clerical garb. According to Morrow, it is possible that he was ordained only as a minister in the Church of England, and, after his conversion, posed as a Roman Catholic priest. Other sources have him studying the occult and "black magic" for 15 years after leaving the Church of England and resurfacing as a visible Catholic priest.¹⁹

I give these biographical details to point to the figure of the author as the monster here—forcing reader to question the essence of religion, superstition, and narrative. Summers and his work, like a vampire, occupy both superstition and Christianity, forcing a questioning of the real presence and of essentialist definitions of true religion. Floating strangely both inside and outside of the 20th century, Summers' book is a retreat back to the established boundaries and categories of classical thinking, and his very life exists on the slash between fact and fiction and religion and superstition. If he was indeed "posing" as a priest, what was his relationship to the literal act of transubstantiation? Is his book equally a pose of authority? A necessary fiction to totalize and control the supernatural? How much have his readers needed him to be a liminal figure, ambiguously both a priest and a practitioner of the black arts? Where is the line between superstition and true religion?

¹⁹ More recent biographical accounts have done little to clear up these ambiguities.

Written at the height of modernist experimentation, Summers' book can seem anachronistic and reactionary with little current value. On the other hand, his book is a powerful reminder of literal belief and of the balance between fact and fiction. Without a scholar like Summers we would read *Dracula* differently today. In constructing what reads as a work rooted in Victorian style and medieval theology, Summers suggests many of the same conclusions as recent criticism of *Dracula* and of postmodern theorists of vampires like Auerbach. Echoing Auerbach, Summers concludes that there is no essential vampire. His many recorded vampiric attributes lead to an unstated conclusion that a vampire is anything we think a vampire is. Like modern critics of *Dracula*, he constantly writes in the blurred space between fact and fiction. And as in the work of postmodern monster theorists, his ideas of gods and monsters, religion and superstition, fact and fiction, and determinate and indeterminate are ultimately indistinguishable.

In his reliance on the church fathers and medieval theology, Summers implicitly casts modernism itself as the Other, as a monster. But religious as it is, Summers' book signals the end of vampires as an anti-Christian and theologically evil entity. Ironically, by trying to include all that can be known about the vampire, by trying to fully *explain* the creature, Summers makes it seem a naturally occurring phenomenon. As soon as the vampire becomes part of nature it ceases to be evil. It is only when it cannot be explained that the vampire is truly evil. In attempting to write an encyclopedic account of all that can be known about vampires, Summers only shows, once again, that we cannot know.

Desire for the Monster: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that he does not in the process become a monster.

Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (89)

"Evil be thou my good"

Satan in *Paradise Lost* (book iv, line 108)

The Postmodern Vampire of Absence

At the turn of the 21st century the vampire has reestablished a strong original presence in the narratives of theory, literature, and popular culture. Theorists such as Auerbach and Laurence Rickels, novelists such as Anne Rice, Brian Aldiss, Suzy McKee Charnus, and Jewell Gomez, films such as *Shadow of the Vampire*, and television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* feature a whole new approach to vampires and the philosophical issues that surround them.

Veronica Hollinger defines postmodern vampires as themselves victims of the "absence they have come to represent; they are as trapped within the framework of meaninglessness as their human counterparts" (204). She finds this subversion of traditional absolutes in Anne Rice's vampire Lestat, although, as she points out, Rice's novels do not sustain this subversive element, as they tend to revert to conventional moral categories. Ultimately Rice's vampires are more concerned with preserving culture than rupturing it; they become a humanist force against chaos. "Kingdoms rise and fall," says Lestat. "Just don't burn the paintings in the Louvre, that's all" (Rice 273). Although we could perhaps more easily turn to the avant-garde films of Guy Maddin and the video

installations of Aïda Ruilova for examples of the postmodern vampire,²⁰ in creating a dialogue with Stoker and Summers it is more fruitful to stay within the boundaries of the popular. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as an example of the new vampire story, often occupies this space between modernist and postmodernist, especially within later episodes, rarely giving in to easy categories and familiar narratives of Good and Evil. From 1997-2003, through seven seasons and 144 episodes, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* presented a heroine who killed hundreds of vampires and demons, fell in love with one vampire and then had to kill him, experienced various apocalyptic events, and sacrificed herself to save the world only to be brought back to life, all while trying to have a normal adolescence including math tests, proms, and jobs in fast food restaurants. The show has been praised for its sophisticated use of symbolism and metaphor, its linguistic playfulness, and for its complex development of ethical, religious, and philosophical issues.

Buffy Versus Dracula

Although in many ways *Buffy* is an “anti-*Dracula*,” in the opening episode of its fifth season it presented “Buffy vs. Dracula.” This stand-alone episode functions as a farce and parody of all that *Dracula* has become and at the same time serves to introduce the bleaker and more serious style that characterizes the final three seasons of the show. The episode offers a present day send-up of the commercial Dracula (bad make-up and accent) and also gives a postmodern demonstration of the conflation of the forces of

²⁰ Maddin’s 2003 film *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin’s Diary* combines silent film, black and white cinematography, and ballet into a version of Stoker’s novel. Ruilova (featured in the Whitney Museum’s 2004 Biennial) creates site-specific video installations that borrow images from French vampire film director Jean Rollin.

Good and Evil and Sacred and Profane that lurk underneath the surface of the *Dracula* story, pointing to a dark psychological and theological reading of both *Dracula* and *Buffy*.

In the opening of the episode, Buffy, in a familiar scene, chases down, fights, and stakes a vampire in the cemetery. Dracula materializes out of the fog and introduces himself. Buffy at first does not believe him. "Get out," she says, "are you sure you're the *real* Dracula? Because I've met more than a few pimply-faced vamps who call themselves Lestat." Dracula announces his purpose in visiting her:

Dracula: I come to meet the renowned killer

Buffy: I prefer the term slayer. Killer sounds so. . .

Dracula: Naked?

Dracula's answer shifts the episode to a darker more serious place, where, as in Stoker's version, Dracula challenges the accepted roles of those around him. Buffy, although momentarily shaken, confronts him with a characteristically arrogant and threatening question, "Do you know what a slayer is?" Dracula answers "Do you?" and his question turns into the dominant theme of not only the episode, but also the whole season to follow. Like monsters throughout history, Dracula's otherness forces those around him to confront the limits of their own identities, origins, and beliefs.

That night, Dracula sifts in through the window of Buffy's bedroom as a mist and, in a reenactment of the scene with Mina Harker, materializes next to her bed. Although upon waking she flippantly describes him as "wafting in here with your music video wind and your hypno-eyes," she is soon under his control. Dracula appeals to the part of her that desires and identifies with him. "You are different...kindred," he says, and tells her

that “I have yearned for you. For a creature whose darkness rivals my own.” She willingly submits to his bite—“Do you know why you can not resist? Because you do not want to.” Dracula then invites her to taste his own blood.

Dracula: All these years fighting us. A power so near to our own. And you’ve never once wondered what we fight for?”

Buffy: I’m not hungry.

Dracula: No, the craving goes deeper than that.

As Buffy sucks the blood from Dracula the scene stresses the repressed aspects of the encounter between Mina and Dracula. Does Mina want to be bitten? Why does she submit? What does she desire? Where is her God? We can imagine Dracula saying to Mina what he says to Buffy as she tastes his blood. “Find it, the darkness. Find your true nature.” The encounter reveals questions unasked by generations of *Dracula* movies and parodies—questions the men (and Stoker) are afraid to ask of Mina. Buffy, as the slayer as well as the victim, combines the role of Mina with the power to fight vampires that true religion provides in the novel; she essentially embodies the roles of Mina, the male posse, and the Catholic Church. Buffy’s submission echoes the defeat of God in *Dracula* as the communion wafer burns into Mina’s forehead. The blending of eroticism and fear, the desire for God and the drive for Death that we saw in *Dracula*, further their conflation in *Buffy*, beginning when she submits to Dracula and continuing through to her obsessive sexual desire for the vampire Spike in coming seasons.

The end of the episode turns back to humor when, after staking him into dust, Buffy waits for the particles to manifest back into the vampire commenting, “you think I don’t watch your movies? You always come back.” Despite her humor, however, Buffy

and the show will never be quite the same. The innocence is gone. The episode is a comment on the control old narratives and mythologies have over us, and Buffy's statement after defeating him, that she is now "chock full of free will," is typical of the series' ironic view towards traditional religion. Her claim of free will points to an existential crisis in believing in the possibility of an individual and free will. What the episode has confirmed, of course, is that Buffy *cannot* rely on having free will, nor can she ever again be sure of herself as an unmitigated force for Good.

Dracula and Buffy both have characteristics borrowed from Christ (Dracula rises from the dead to offer eternal life through his blood, Buffy will eventually sacrifice her life to save the world), and "Buffy vs. Dracula" points to the darkness in her own power and the divinity in Dracula's, therefore giving a reading of Mina Harker's image of the "pillar composed of both day and night." Essentially, Dracula forces Buffy to confront Nietzsche's warning that "whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster" (*Beyond*, 89: section 146). Is a slayer, as Buffy will ask, "just a killer after all?" By determining which monsters live and die, by determining who is a monster, is Buffy going too far, playing God?

Buffy's questions are the same questions of theology and theodicy that Mary Shelley's monster asks his creator scientist and creator God: Why did you make me? Why did you put me here? What kind of world is this? The crucial difference for Buffy is that there is no obvious presence to address these questions to. This absence is the very lack Dracula forces her to realize. "Where's the Lord?" a vampire who is terrorizing a church congregation asks sarcastically in one episode ("What's My Line"), and it is a question that is often implied, rarely mentioned, and never answered. Buffy has no

creator. She has no obvious religious faith or support. Even the mythical and mystical process that produced the line of slayers is a mystery until the end of the final season when she is transported back to the moment when the slayer line was initiated by a ritual that assimilated the power of demons, confirming Dracula's remark to Buffy that her power is "rooted in darkness."

Buffy's friend Willow will later accuse Buffy of needing to "screw a vampire just to feel" ("Two to Go"). Was this Mina's situation? Was Dracula's presence filling a void for her? Or for Jonathan Harker and Van Helsing, both of whom seem to need the vampire on some level? From this point of view Stoker's novel is actually an empty Godless world where all that remains are God's symbols and the empty shells of superstition. Hiding at the center of the novel is a vacuum that only the monster inhabits. The vampire becomes a necessary supplement to both God and humanity.

* * * * *

As critics have noted, *Buffy* both questions and fulfills traditional modes of cultural thought,²¹ and the space it allocates to religion likewise pulls in both directions. In the opening of one episode, Buffy, wearing a crucifix that has saved her life in the past, answers the question: "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?" with "you know I meant to and then I just got really busy" ("The Freshman"). Like many quotes from *Buffy*, this is both humorous and meaningful. We laugh, but we also sense the cultural "in-betweenness" that the show embodies. Behind the witty dialogue and the engaging characters, behind the metaphors of monsters and demons, the show occupies a space between belief and disbelief, between an absolute morality and nihilism. *Buffy* restores some of the metaphysical concerns abandoned by Hollywood vampire tales: the

moral dilemmas of fighting evil, the Freudian convergence of death and sex, questions of the social construction of myth, and the fragility of the lines between fact and fantasy and between superstition and truth.

Buffy has attracted many interpretations of its incorporation of elements of traditional religion,²² and while it clearly borrows symbols and themes from Western religious traditions, it is in its development of themes of absence that it is most original. In *Buffy*, we see no Christ and no God; there are few examples of functioning churches and there is no serious prayer directed towards a divine being. There are occasional references to the sacred/pagan nature of human versus demons and vampires, but only vampires quote the Bible. Although prevalent, the Christian symbolism of holy water and crosses is left unstated. Moreover, the presence and effectiveness of both lessened throughout the run of the series, until by the third season a vampire looks at a cross and a vial of holy water, sneers “whatever” and walks away (“Doppelgangland”). As Nietzsche says, however, it was Christianity that established the Devil in the world, and *Buffy* has a fully developed world of Hell and evil. Does, as Hollinger says of *Dracula*, the demonic presence require a divine one? Can we have an evil without a sacred? Throughout the series, the idea of a religious presence is lightly mocked by the forces of “Good” and accepted and adapted for their own purposes by demons and vampires. Buffy’s cross is never related to Christ, but a vampire says, “this is the most fun I’ve had since the crucifixion” (“School Hard”), and a church is used by a vampire in a mock crucifixion

²¹ See A. Susan Owen’s “Vampires, Postmodernity, and Post Feminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.”

²² See, for example, Wendy Anderson’s “Prophecy Girl and The Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse” (South 212-226), Gregory J. Sakal’s “No Big Win: Themes of Sacrifice, Salvation, and Redemption” (South 254-267) and Gregory Erickson’s “‘Sometimes You Need a Story’: American Christianity, Vampires, and *Buffy*” (Wilcox and Lavery (108-119), as well as more popular examples like “Pastor Steve’s Buffy Page”.

ritual to restore his evil, mad, vampire lover back to health: “From the blood of this site she will rise again. . .” (“What’s My Line” Part II).

Christ, then, shadows both human and vampire consciousness, and if the show suggests a transcendent good, we might look for it inhabiting the ubiquitous cross. But what does the cross signify? It is constantly present—in the opening credits, around Buffy’s neck (until the later years of the series), and in her bag of weapons along with holy water, a crossbow, and a collection of wooden stakes, knives, and axes—but it has no privileged status. The cross is no more of a weapon than a broken pool cue or a well-placed karate kick, and can be effectively used by Christian, Jew, or agnostic. The ambiguity of the cross is emphasized by Buffy’s first great nemesis, the Master, who defiantly calls it “two pieces of wood,” even as it sizzles under his touch. By contrast, in Stoker’s *Dracula*, we have the same combination of physical and Christian weapons, but the Christianity is always emphasized. A prayer always accompanies the stake. Yet Buffy’s cross echoes the syncretic and symbiotic relationship between superstition and religion that underlies *Dracula*. The cross on *Buffy* exemplifies the vague role religion plays. Equally literal, mystical, and atheistic, Buffy’s cross is a simulacrum—a copy with no original—a sacred and powerful sign, signifying nothing.

Buffy’s Vampires: Angel and Spike

What are the vampires on *Buffy*? They are not the bad smelling darkly dressed aristocrat of Bram Stoker’s novel, nor the pale Bela Lugosi of Tod Browning’s film version. Neither are they the society outcasts of 1980’s Hollywood, the existential millionaires and rock musicians of Anne Rice, or the futuristic genetically altered

warriors of *Blade*. According to Montague Summers, vampires have done something in life to deserve their undead fate: “The Vampire is one who has led a life of more than ordinary immorality and unbridled wickedness.” What makes *Buffy*’s vampires unique is that they are random, formed outside of any determining moral or social system. Anyone, rich, poor, old, young, beautiful, or ugly can become a vampire. Other than their superficial revulsion to the Christian cross and Holy Water they do not seem particularly opposed to any religious essence. On the one hand, the established “otherness” of vampires is completely dissolved by the time we get to *Buffy*, who even has more or less conventional human sex with a vampire. Yet, on the other hand, the fundamental nature of a vampire is left mysterious and unexplained; they are both familiar and absolutely other.

Vampires killed on *Buffy* explode neatly into powder, leaving no corpse, no trace of death or salvation. Missing is the horror, spurting blood, and Christian angst in Stoker’s *Dracula*, as Lucy Westenra’s fiancé Arthur Holmwood pounds the stake into her heart, while the others pray, giving her soul eternal life.²³ The hateful revenge of most recent films, such as *From Dusk Until Dawn* or *Blade*, is gone. In *Buffy*, a vampire is produced easily, and a characteristic vampire face emerges and disappears instantly. In contrast, the transformation from human to vampire in Stoker is excruciatingly slow. We see both Lucy and Mina get sicker and paler; their gums draw back, their teeth slowly extend over days and weeks, as characters endlessly record and re-record the process. We are never allowed to forget the constant battle between Christ and Satan. In contrast,

²³ Van Helsing, urging Arthur on, encourages him to “strike in God’s name, that so all may be well with the dead that we love, and the Un-Dead pass away” (236).

the vampires on *Buffy* are not participants in a cosmic war, not chosen or damned, they just *are*.

If their evil is ambiguous, what is the essence of the *Buffy* vampire? What makes a vampire a vampire? In *Dracula*, the vampire is a “foul Thing” that takes a human’s “shape without her soul” (234; XV). For Montague Summers, a vampire needs the “permission” of God, and the vampire’s essence belongs more to the person that had inhabited the body than to the demonic force that animates it after death. In *Buffy*, a vampire is initially described as being “pure evil,” and while having the memories and personality of the person who had lived in the body, as now either having the “soul of a demon” or no soul at all. The obvious difficulty with this definition—are memory and personality completely separate from “soul?”—is a boundary that is explored as a primary theme of the series. When a vampire is described as having no essence of the previous human occupant, the vampire-with-a-soul, Angel, responds “well, actually...” Much of the rest of the series is devoted to exploring that unfinished and ambiguous “well, actually.” There *is* no pure evil or pure good, but neither is the vampire a biological being, as it was often portrayed in the late 20th century.²⁴ Ultimately, the vampire is both demon and person, and not unquestionably evil. It belongs to forces beyond and outside of our understanding.

On *Buffy*, the two main vampire characters are Angel, formerly the worst vampire in Europe and now a brooding good hearted avenger with a soul, and Spike, a trash talking punk rocker, somehow both likable and evil, and ultimately the focus of the

²⁴ The vampires in Strieber’s novel *The Hunger* and Katherine Bigelow’s film *Near Dark* are biological entities rendered vampires through natural means. The Vampires in *The Hunger*, although they do live by sucking the blood of humans, pass on their immortality through blood transfusion. In *Near Dark* vampirism can be reversed through a blood transfusion of human blood.

series' deepest exploration of humanness, the existence of a soul, and an understanding of the Other. The characters of Angel and Spike problematize what it means to claim to have a "soul" and how that possession or claim can be used to differentiate humans from monsters. At various times throughout the series, Buffy befriends or loves them, and at other times she must attempt to kill each of them.

In a dark ironic parody of the staking of Lucy in *Dracula*, Buffy kills Angel (who has lost his "soul" and reverted to being evil) in order to save the world. But far from putting his soul at rest, she must kill him just after his soul has been restored, and he has reverted to the "good" Angel. In an exact reversal of the staking of Lucy in *Dracula*, Buffy *first* kisses him and *then* thrusts the sword into him, sending him not to eternal salvation, but to suffer in a Hell dimension ("Becoming"). In this scene, revenge and salvation and good and evil are subverted, not clearly defined. If God has a presence in *Buffy* (and if not, where does Angel's soul originate and who creates the hell he is sent to?), it appears Buffy acts *against* the divine order. Like Jonathan's determination to join Mina as a vampire rather than kill her, Buffy makes the choice not to accept the damning of the vampire or his restoration to "grace," but to act outside of received theological boundaries.

It is only through Angel and Spike that we see the Christian cross represent anything approaching the sacred or theological. The truest cross, in the traditional sense of representing sacrifice and suffering, in the whole of *Buffy*, is the burned image of the cross pressed into Angel's skin when he embraces Buffy. Angel, the eternal soul, has given the gift of sacrifice, and the cross represents his suffering. In the final season, when Buffy is no longer even visibly wearing a crucifix, Spike, suffering and insane

because of a newly obtained “soul,” stumbles into an empty church and drapes his naked torso over a cross as his skin smokes at the touch. Only in the negative image of a symbol burned into the skin of a tormented and damned vampire with a soul, and in Spike’s need to literally suffer on the cross, does a cross stand for something sacred or sacrificial.

What seems to separate vampires from humans is not the *lack* of a soul (Angel is a vampire *with* a soul), but it is the lack of a soul that makes them essentially evil. The soul, like the cross, is a symbol of good without a source. Where do souls come from? Angel receives his soul in the form of a gypsy curse intended to make him suffer for the whole of his immortal existence. When Spike is ultimately “ensouled” at the end of the sixth season it is through a process of bloody combat tests put to him by a demon. The soul, then, while it appears to be opposed to evil, does not come from a place of any transcendent Good, but is just a mystical commodity. Just as a non-Catholic can throw Holy Water on a vampire, a demon can dispense a “soul.” Religious symbols are pure simulacra; faith and the “real presence” of God are beside the point.

In season four Spike is captured by a secret government agency and has a chip installed in his brain that prevents him from harming humans. Although at first the neutered Spike continues to insist on his essentially evil nature, ultimately he expresses compassion, kindness, and love, all without the presence of a soul. Spike is a variation on the cyborg fantasy in postmodern science fiction, with an ironic twist in that the microchip makes him *more* “human.”²⁵ Buffy’s younger sister Dawn encapsulates the

²⁵ There is a precedent to this technological humanization in the character of Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, an android who is made more “human” by an “emotion chip” and an “ethical chip.” We can see *Star Trek*, however, within the humanistic modernist mold, while a novelist like William Gibson

theological issues involved in the field of cyborgs and the “posthuman” with her profoundly postmodern statement, “Chip...soul, same diff” (“Crush”). The character of Spike, as part vampire and part cyborg, is a creature challenging the idea of the human from the point of view of both ancient superstition and of futuristic science.

The body, as Spike says, is “just the tip of the theological.” Joan Copjec says that “rather than making us more at home in our bodies, rather than anchoring us to bodies conceived as the agents of our intelligence, the makers of sense, vampirism presents us with a bodily double that we can neither make sense of nor recognize as our own” (33). As in *Dracula*, the vampires on *Buffy* fulfill the role of what Derrida called the supplement (*ce dangereux supplément*). The supplement forces us to abandon our either/or logic and accept something closer to and/or. The world of *Buffy* is a world where evil and good cannot be defined, cannot even exist, and yet a world where we need such absolute concepts. *Buffy*, like Levinas, portrays a world existing “after the end of theodicy.” Good and Evil cannot be justified or understood; a being is not either evil or good, not either human or vampire, but good and/or evil, human and monster.

* * * * *

Buffy creates a world of absence/presence, immortality/mortality, and sacred/secular, where the experience is always on the edge or in the gaps of perception. It is an ironic world just this side of literal belief, but one that is also close to the spiritual experience—praised by medieval Christian mystics and contemporary theologians—of gazing upon a space where God isn’t. *Buffy* implies a divine presence and seeks a transcendent Go(o)d at the same time that it denies this existence. In its final two

provides the truly postmodern cyborg fiction. In Gibson’s novels, the cyborg is not presented in contrast to humans, but is the necessary and inevitable (and not ethical inferior) path of the future.

seasons the show began exploring these issues, beginning with Buffy returning from the dead and struggling with her return to what seems a pointless existence. Buffy's existential questions: "Why am I here?" and "What is my purpose?" are never answered, and in fact are established as unanswerable questions. After returning from the dead, Buffy sees herself as monstrous, a thing that has "come back wrong," and she throws herself into an obsessive and violent sexual relationship with Spike.

Buffy's friend Willow, who brought her back from the grave, sums up the nihilism of the later episodes, when she confronts Buffy.

You're trying to sell me on the world? The one where you lie to your friends when you're not trying to kill them and you screw a vampire just to feel and insane asylums are the comfy alternative? This world? . . . I know you were happier when you were in the ground. The only time you were ever at peace in your whole life is when you were dead. ("Two to Go")

Ultimately Buffy sees the world, if not as ordered or moral, as at least capable of beauty and worth saving. In the last episode, facing one more apocalypse, Buffy and Willow's final act together is to perform a ritual that destroys the line of power passed on from slayer to slayer, therefore giving every potential slayer the power of the chosen one. In doing so, they defy a rule that a "bunch of men who died thousands of years ago" ("Chosen") created, an action which can be read as a dismissal of traditional religion, and a releasing of chaos upon a cosmic order. In this final act, Buffy attacks the socially constructed roots of her own mythology and religion and rids her power of any sense of essence. Although Buffy survives the apocalyptic final battle, the world is saved because of a Christ-like sacrifice by Spike, the vampire. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a remix of

Frankenstein and *Dracula* as well as Summer's *The Vampire* and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, developed the existential questions that those works suggested, continually questioned the philosophical ground on which it stood, and ends by taking that ground away all together.

Part III: Reading in the Dark

What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backward, sideways, forward, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker?

Nietzsche (Gay 125)

If all reading is reading in the dark how can we even begin to discern between holy and unholy spirits, between bringers of peace and bringers of destruction?

Richard Kearney (*Strangers* 71)

Chaos Approaches

We are afraid of silence and afraid of the dark. Out of darkness and silence, out of confusion and fear and disorientation, comes the monster. From Grendel to Dracula, from Jacob's adversary to Mina's pillar of cloud, they return again and again in the blackness of sleep and the quiet of night. Yet while the experiences of silence and darkness metaphorically represent an inability to understand, they also are recognized as necessary preconditions for a religious experience. While darkness and silence conceal the monster, they also breed our gods.

Monotheism encourages us to associate God with ourselves; Evil, then, becomes other. But as we instill our anthropomorphic God with our own prejudices, weaknesses, and fears, these two ethical opposites blur together. God becomes monstrous; Evil becomes a fluid concept. Western literature historically creates competing sets of supernatural personalities—Baal and YHWH, Beowulf and Grendel, Mina and Dracula, Buffy and Spike—whose courses of battle both define and complicate the grounds of Good and Evil and Sacred and Profane. The two opposing forces need each other and often merge together in identity.

René Girard writes that the monster is never created *ex nihilo* but through a process of fragmentation and recombination (the same process that Apollinaire pointed to in cubism). Monsters, for Girard, are made out of elements extracted from “various forms” and then assembled into an “independent identity” (*Scapegoat* 33). Monsters, like literature, are a force for both fragmentation and unification; they exist in the tension between chaos and order that defines a crisis in 20th century art. Girard writes more of the social construction of metaphorical monsters, but all monsters, while they exist as something liminal, impossible and unbelievable, are *always* made out of fragments. Like Dr. Frankenstein’s monster who is literally made out of human parts, or Dracula who is constructed out of death, sexuality, Christianity, racial identity, and Freudian repression, the monster *is* the space between fragmentation and unity.

The monster, even more than the figures of the divine, exists in the liminal space between fact and fiction. The monster can only exist in this space; it can be neither factual nor can it be pure fiction. Written at the dawn of the twentieth century, *Dracula* exhibits this liminality; the novel and the vampire provide a trope of reading the hidden and subversive theological subtexts of modernist literature. The idea and existence of monsters is inseparable from the narrative that creates them. Monster narratives are created out of darkness, read in darkness, and create even darker pockets of negation. Like Stoker’s *Dracula*, these narratives are multi-directional texts of instability.

Dracula, as much as Nietzsche, marked the futility of religion and the absence or death of God—a futility that many modernist works tried to address and an absence they tried to fill. Dr. Van Helsing’s comment that “[t]he old centuries had and have power of their own which mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill,” can be taken as a comment on God as

well. Modernism could not so easily “kill” the powers of the “old centuries.” Rather than replace religion or mark God’s absence, modernism borrowed and relied upon theological foundations to “make” its own theology; but this process of “making” is necessarily one of negativity, of reading in the dark. The return of the monster and of religion within the postmodernism of Mark Taylor, Derrida, Kearney, and Buffy creator Joss Whedon introduces a lens that can help us to see modernism’s inability to be Godless, to operate without a theological net.

The monster, as a representation of the determinate and indeterminate God, haunts modernism, and the monster’s return creates a literary trope for twentieth century writing. Like God, the idea of the monster provides insight into unintended complexities in modernist art and literature. The contradictory theology of *Dracula*, the strange juxtaposition of faith and fantasy in *The Vampire*, and the anti-myth of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* all point to literary attempts to resolve the death of God in a 20th century that could not replace him.

By returning to the point in *Dracula* where Mina writes of the vampire entering her bedroom, we can see themes and images of negative theology that we have previously located in high modernist texts. Mina’s locating of the monsters as both light within dark and dark within light recalls Proust’s descriptions of the church interiors where the light through the stained glass shimmers like the “brilliance of a peacock’s tail,” but also streams “from the groin of the dark and strong vault down the moist walls, as though it were along the bed of some grotto” (I. 65). Mina, like Proust’s narrator, finds “writing” within the in-between spaces of dreaming and waking. She too sits up in

bed and finds herself inaugurated into a confusing world of sexual, textural, and theological mystery.

The vampire's in-between status is created *as* a text by the interaction of a group of people's relationship to it. Much like the bowl in James' novel, we are not sure to what extent the vampire is created *by* them. The monster of *Moses und Aron*, the Golden Calf, like a vampire, by its existence helps to define both the human and the divine, but also reveals that part of the God that defies categorization. God's ineffability ultimately becomes the monster, and like Dracula, the Golden Calf is taking part in, not opposing, the divine character. Superstition and religion are inseparable; Moses' God does not exist without the Golden Calf, Van Helsing's "Good" is only a part of the vampire's effect, both the wounds on Mina's body and the wound in the side of Christ. Mina's body is marked in two ways, her forehead by the Host and her neck by the vampire. Christ, as well as Dracula, is a figure of dream-visions, and Mina's acceptance of the penetration of the Vampire also resonates with a nun's acceptance of Christ. The vampire is a wound or a crack in Christ, an opening in the flesh that reveals the inside and outside, the darkness and light, the negative and the positive. If part of the vampire's identity is Christ-like, part of Christ's identity is vampire-like.

* * * * *

The universe is expanding. The further out from the center, the more space between empty particles and atoms. At the very edges of the expanding universe the distance between atoms is enormous; space is almost empty, nothingness, a vacuum. And then we reach the edge. Then what? What is the point *beyond* nothingness? The only way our limited mind can comprehend the edges of an expanding space is to

surround it with something. Can we imagine the end, the edge of *nothing*? What happens when we reach out beyond it? What is space expanding into? Reading the sky is an exercise in critical theory. We can search for patterns, origins, and influences, or we can acknowledge chaos, indeterminacy, and complexity.

The force that is pushing the universe apart is what physicists call “dark energy.” This force, which stems from the creation of the universe, and, most scientists predict, will cause its end, is the closest thing to a god or monster in modern science. But is it a force for order or for chaos? Einstein theorized about the existence of such a force as one of order, calling it the “cosmological constant.” Others see it as a force that will ultimately tear the entire universe apart in what they call “the big rip.” Speculative science creates a similar narrative to many ancient religious legends: in both cases the indeterminate god/monster of chaos and the determinate god of order and unity are locked in a battle until the end of the universe.

To look far into space, like reading a text or imagining a god or monster, is to look back in time. “We have seen the end of the beginning” remarked an astronomer recently (qtd. in Glanz), and we are, in a sense, literally surrounded at the extreme edges of the universe by the time of our cosmic birth. This space—unimaginable, unreachable—is the postmodern, post-Einsteinian version of the margins of medieval sailing maps where the monsters resided. It is our return to a version of Plato’s *Khora*, the non-space that functions as the primordial origin of the world; a nothingness before anything that, Plato suggested, can only be imagined through a sort of dream state. Julia Kristeva also interprets *Khora* as a dream state, as a matrix of the unconscious, a “strange space,” and as we have seen before, Derrida and John Caputo use *Khora* as a space of

negative theology and of deconstructing God: “something that is neither a being nor a nothingness” (“How to Avoid” 105-106).

The edges of our universe and Plato’s *khora* are paradigms for the empty spaces and vessels examined throughout this work. They are the absolute emptiness of James’ empty bowl, of Schoenberg’s endless desert, and of the vampire’s undead body. Out of this *Khora*, this nothingness that threatens the stability of everything, this “strange space,” emerge both gods and monsters. These experiences of strange space—Proust’s narrator opening his eyes to a dark room, Mina Harker squinting into the fog, or Schoenberg’s Moses falling to the stage, finally out of words and music—are moments of reading in the dark. Faced with the simultaneous existence and non-existence of God, the “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” and the impossibility of distinguishing one nothing from another, our reading of modernism ends where it began.

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

(Eliot *CP* 221)

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