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Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow

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Katherine L. Walter, Co-Director
UNL Center for Digital Research in the Humanities
319 Love Library
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, NE 68588-410

Dear Professor Walter:

I write to apply for a position in the 2009 Nebraska Digital Workshop. I am a Mellon Foundation postdoctoral fellow at Rice University, where I work on computationally assisted literary criticism. Included below is a summary of the work I would like to present in Lincoln this fall, as well as a copy of my CV, a handful of supplementary materials, and links to some of my current research.

If you have any questions or require additional materials, please don't hesitate to let me know. Thank you for organizing the workshop and for your time in reviewing my application. I hope you can find a place for my work and look forward to meeting you.

Yours warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Wilkens', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Matthew Wilkens

PRESENTATION ABSTRACT: “REVOLUTIONS AND LARGE LITERARY CORPORA, OR WHAT IS A PERIOD?”

Synopsis: Computational methods in literary history and theory, with particular emphasis on practical issues in data mining related to genre classification.

The problem of periodization has long occupied literary studies. Our ability to distinguish the cultural and aesthetic production of one era from that of another is a basic assumption of our historicizing critical method. Moreover, there exists a broad consensus concerning the general arc of literary history and its major moments. As a practical matter, however, we often find such periods to be both less mutually distinct and less internally uniform than we have been lead to believe. When, for instance, does modernism begin and end? And what, exactly, do Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and Hemingway have in common, to say nothing of mass-market detective and shop-girl fiction from the same era?

Such uncertainty is neither insurmountable nor even especially problematic, but it does emphasize the centrality and the limitations of both close reading and theorization as the working methods of literary study. Because we can read only a finite (and quite small) number of texts, the specific texts that we *do* manage to read will have a disproportionate influence on our understanding of the larger field of cultural production we understand them to represent. Theorization is then frequently dedicated to working back out or up from this restricted corpus of widely read material to the larger set of social and economic arrangements that must have been in place so that work of just such a type could have been produced.

There's nothing wrong with this approach, but it would be useful to have relative measures of the extent to which the periods and associated genres we now commonly identify in literary history apply to the full field of literary production over the last several centuries. That is, we would like to be able to answer questions about the coherence of literary periods and genres, their internal variation, their distinction from one another, the sharpness of the breaks between them, and the mechanics of the transitions between them, and we would like to be able to do all this with reference not just to a restricted corpus or canon, but to the broadest possible survey of texts. We would also like to know whether or not there exist discernibly coherent periods, genres, or geographic regions that we have not yet identified, or if our current historical/geographic/generic boundaries are the best possible ones.

The work I will present at the workshop describes the early steps and initial results of a long-term project designed to address these issues. Building on insights and tools pioneered in corpus linguistics (see especially the work of Mark Davies at BYU), but aiming squarely at questions of literary history and theory, this work begins with the construction of a significant corpus of public-domain literary texts spanning the sixteenth to twentieth centuries from the Gutenberg archive. Guten-

berg, of course, is not a typical scholarly resource, but it has the advantage of being large and unencumbered by intellectual property restrictions; one of the intermediate products of the work presented here is an evaluation of its relative merits and suitability in comparison to the smaller but fully curated Wright American fiction and Chadwyck-Healy nineteenth-century fiction collections from the MONK Project. The presentation will describe the techniques used to construct and to characterize this corpus, as well as the quantitative results of this analysis. It is thus the first full, computationally assisted description and evaluation of the Gutenberg English-language fiction holdings as a resource for digital literary studies.

I will also advance a set of conclusions based on these results and in dialogue with existing theoretical work on literary-cultural periodization. There is reason to believe that the comparatively brief periods of rapid change between more stable literary eras should be marked by increased incidence of allegorical and tropological language use (this fact of course superimposed on long-term baseline changes in, for example, metaphor generally). Although it is as yet difficult to measure such features directly (but see interestingly related attempts such as John Burrows' classic work on genre clustering; Pasanek and Sculley, "Mining millions of metaphors," *LLC* 23 [2008]: 345-60; Bei Yu's 2006 dissertation on literary text mining; and Matthew Jockers and Franco Moretti's as-yet unpublished work on automatic genre classification), the present analysis suggests that texts drawn from such transitional periods are relatively poor in adjectives and adverbs, a fact that may correspond to their increased reliance on tropes (the expressive ability of which is diminished by increased specificity). By examining the historical variations of such features, we may begin to reshape our understanding of periodization and its mechanisms.

REFERENCES

For the theoretical link between revolutionary events and allegory, see my "Toward a Benjaminian Theory of Dialectical Allegory" in *New Literary History* (attached).

There is more information about my current computational work on my blog, "Work Product," at <http://workproduct.wordpress.com>, from which the attached plot of part of speech frequency as a function of historical time in the MONK corpus is drawn.

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PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Rice University, Humanities Research Center, Houston, TX

Andrew Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, 2008–2010

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Department of English

Visiting Assistant Professor, 2007–2008

Macalester College, Department of English, Saint Paul, MN

Visiting Assistant Professor, 2006–2007

EDUCATION

Duke University, Program in Literature, Durham, NC

PhD Literature, December 2006

Dissertation: "Points and Lines: Allegory, Event, and the End of American Modernism"

Committee: Fredric Jameson (chair), Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Michael Hardt, Matt Cohen

University of Wisconsin, Madison, Department of English

MA English, 2000

Degree conferred by comprehensive examination

University of California, Berkeley, College of Chemistry

MS Physical Chemistry, 1998

Thesis: "Time Resolved Studies of Bond Activation by Organometallic Complexes"

Director: Charles Harris

College of William and Mary, Department of Chemistry, Williamsburg, VA

BS Chemistry, summa cum laude, 1996. Second major in Philosophy.

Thesis, highest honors: "Magnetic Studies of $\text{Co}_{1-x}\text{Mn}_y\text{Fe}_{x-y}\text{Cl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ and $\text{Co}_{1-x}\text{Ni}_x\text{Cl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ "

FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS

Andrew Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship (2008–2010)

Bass Advanced Instructorship (2005–2006)

Price Endowed Research and Dissertation Fellowships (2004–2005)

Vienna International Summer University Fellowship (2003)

Foreign Exchange Fellowship, University of Potsdam, Germany (2002)

James B. Duke Fellowship (2000–2004)

PUBLICATIONS

Book Manuscript

Revolution: A Theory of the Event

Edited Volumes

The Philosophy of Alain Badiou. Volume 17 of *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics* (2005).

Journal Articles

"Corpus Analysis for Literary History." In preparation for *Literary and Linguistic Computing*.

"Coetzee without Debt." Submitted to *Modern Fiction Studies*.

"'Nothing as He Thought It Would Be': William Gaddis and the Becoming-Contemporary of American Fiction." Under revision for *Contemporary Literature*.

"Narrating the Sublime Event." *Theory@buffalo* 11 (2007): 143–66.

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"Events as Dual and Narrative Entities in Deleuze and Badiou." *Subject Matters* 2 (2005): 25–34.

"Introduction: The Philosophy of Alain Badiou." *Polygraph* 17 (2005): 1–9.

Scientific Publications

G.C. DeFotis, **M.J. Wilkens**, A.C. Beveridge, A.A. Narducci, M.H. Welch, H.A. King, J.S. Bergman, M.E. Cox, and R.B. Jeffers. "Composition Induced Lowering of Metamagnetic Critical Field and Static Magnetic Properties of $\text{Co}_{1-x}\text{Ni}_x\text{Cl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$." *Physical Review B* 62 (2000): 6421–28.

G.C. DeFotis, A.C. Beveridge, **M.J. Wilkens**, Z.J. Fuller, J.G. McMahon, and C.D. Wallo. "Insulating Ternary Magnetic $\text{Co}_{1-x}\text{Mn}_y\text{Fe}_{x-y}\text{Cl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$." *Journal of Applied Physics* 87 (2000): 6540–42.

H. Yang, K.T. Kotz, M.C. Asplund, **M.J. Wilkens**, and C.B. Harris. "Ultrafast Infrared Studies of Bond Activation in Organometallic Complexes." *Accounts of Chemical Research* 32 (1999): 551–60.

M.C. Asplund, H. Yang, K.T. Kotz, S.E. Bromberg, **M.J. Wilkens**, and C.B. Harris. "Femtosecond Infrared Studies of Chemical Bond Activation." *Laser Chemistry* 19 (1999): 253–62.

H. Yang, M.C. Asplund, K.T. Kotz, **M.J. Wilkens**, C.B. Harris, and H. Frei. "Reaction Mechanism of Silicon-Hydrogen Bond Activation Studied Using Femtosecond to Nanosecond IR Spectroscopy and *Ab Initio* Methods." *Journal of the American Chemical Society* 120 (1998): 10154–65.

S.E. Bromberg, H. Yang, M.C. Asplund, T. Lian, B.K. McNamara, K.T. Kotz, J.S. Yeston, **M.J. Wilkens**, H. Frei, R.G. Bergman, and C.B. Harris. "The Mechanism of a C–H Bond Activation Reaction in Room-Temperature Alkane Solution." *Science* 278 (1997): 260–63. (Cover article.)

PRESENTATIONS AND CONFERENCES

Conferences Organized

Singularity and Multiplicity: Recent Developments in Philosophy and Political Theory.
Duke University, Durham, NC, 26 March 2005.

Invited Papers and Presentations

- "Parts of Speech and Kinds of Fiction: Statistics and Literature." Northwestern University. 27 April 2009.
- "The Types and Futures of Digital Humanities." Rice University. 25 March 2009.
- "Events, Electrons, and Electronic Texts: On the Theory and Practice of Becoming New." Virginia Commonwealth University. 31 March 2008.
- "Categories and Revolution in *Logiques des Mondes*." University of California, Los Angeles. 9 February 2007.

Conference Papers

- "Corpus Analysis and Literary History." Digital Humanities. University of Maryland, 22–25 June 2009.
- Participant. THATcamp 2009. George Mason University. 27–28 June 2009.
- "Periodization and the Narrative of Late Modernity." Modernist Studies Association Conference. Nashville, TN, 13–16 November 2008.
- "Historical Narrative, Literary and Otherwise: Rancière and Badiou." Narrative: An International Conference. Austin, TX, 1–4 May 2008.
- "Materiality and the Name: Badiou and Rancière on the Mechanisms of History." American Comparative Literature Association Conference. Long Beach, CA, 24–27 April 2008.
- "Secrets and Lies: Media, Capital, and the Body in *Carpenter's Gothic*." Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture since 1900. Louisville, KY, 21–23 February 2008.
- "Event, Revolution, Modernity." Modernist Studies Association Conference. Long Beach, CA, 1–4 November 2007.
- "Fragment and Encyclopedic Narrative: A Theoretical Account." Fragment: Cultural Histories and Vocabularies of the Fragment in Text and Image. Aberystwyth, UK, 29 June–1 July 2007.
- "Rhetoric and Contagion in *The Cattle Killing*." American Literature Association Conference. Boston, MA, 24–27 May 2007.
- "William Gaddis and the Allegory of Modernism's Fall." Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference. Louisville, KY, 22–24 February 2007.
- "On Political Art." Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference. Louisville, KY, 23–25 February 2006.
- "Doris Lessing and the Problems of Encyclopedism." Narrative: An International Conference. Louisville, KY, 7–10 April 2005.
- "The Event of Narrative in Deleuze and Badiou." Narrative: An International Conference. Burlington, VT, 22–25 April 2004.
- "Collectivity and Event: A Response to Phillip Wegner." Anticipated Utopias: The Ethics and Politics of Collectivity. Durham, NC, 16–17 April 2004.
- "Whither the Real: A Note on the Uses of Allegory and Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." NEMLA Convention. Hartford, CT, 31 March 2001.

Toward a Benjaminian Theory of Dialectical Allegory

Matthew Wilkens

Because the earliest rude world was too crude and uncivilized and people could not therefore correctly grasp and understand the teachings of wisdom and heavenly things, wise men had to conceal and bury what they had discovered for the cultivation of the fear of God, morality, and good conduct, in rhymes and fables, to which the common people were disposed to listen.

—Martin Opitz

OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, the narrative and philosophical problems posed by allegory have become increasingly central to literary studies. In spite of this fact, and in spite of the general recognition that Walter Benjamin's writings on allegory provide much of the foundation for contemporary work in the field, existing critiques of Benjamin's theory of allegory are largely unsatisfactory. This is the case less because they are mistaken in their understanding of Benjamin himself than because they have tended to limit themselves to discussing his work in light of Paul de Man's writings on the same topic.¹ The difficulty in this approach is that de Man rarely engages Benjamin's theories of allegory in any direct way, leaving his commentators to construct a de Manian reading of Benjamin's work and vice versa.² While there is no reason to believe that this approach cannot work, there exists an evident strain in most of the attempts to put it into practice due to the difficulty of reconciling Benjamin's dialectical and historical approach to the problem with de Man's rhetorical and temporal emphasis.

Among those studies of allegory that have chosen to remain focused on Benjamin alone, most have drawn either on the second part of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*) or on his assorted later writings on Charles Baudelaire.³ In doing so, they have generally failed to remark upon, or have sought to minimize, the significant shift in material and theoretical emphasis between Benjamin's earlier and later work.⁴ This has resulted in an underemphasis of Benjamin's

concern for the social context from which allegory emerges, as well as a misidentification of the methodology that does underlie the two sets of texts. It is possible, however, to connect the early and late work without flattening the objects of their respective studies and without creating an ahistorical theory of allegory. To do so requires, in addition to an awareness of the historical moments from which the *Trauerspiele* and Baudelaire emerged, an examination of the link between allegory and dialectics.

The Baroque Era

Benjamin's theory of Baroque allegory, developed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, begins with an examination of the symbol, which he argues was misconstrued by the Romantics. The problem, he claims, is that the Romantic conception of the symbol treated it as the manifestation of an idea. In doing so, the Romantics consigned the symbol to a position of mediation between the subject who perceives it and the disembodied essence it represents. This is in marked contrast to what Benjamin calls the "genuine," theological conception of the symbol as a "unity of the material and the transcendental object."⁵ The distinction is an important one; in the former case, the symbol is only incidental to an experience that involves fundamentally subject and object, and that does not manage to collapse fully the distinction between them. In fact it seems possible that it will reinforce their disjunction insofar as it (the symbol) may in practice function imperfectly, that is, fail to vanish transparently, with the result that the subject will establish a relationship with the representation of the object as provided by the symbol rather than with the symbolized object itself. Benjamin's theological symbol, on the other hand, is a dialectical synthesis of physical and immaterial objects. As such, it eliminates the need for representation, and with it the rigorous separation of perceiving subject and represented object. The canonical example of the theological symbol is Christ, who is not a physical representation of God, but *is* God, made material but remaining nevertheless transcendent. Christ's death can then redeem the sins of man not because He is the synecdochal representative of mankind but because, as the unity of transcendence and materiality, He *is also* mankind, which makes his death also man's death.

Whether or not this theological conception of the symbol can function outside a religious context seems an open question, since it is not clear by what power other than divine intervention in metaphysics the interchangeability or interpenetration of immanent and transcendent objects can be achieved. So long as the prevailing worldview is essentially Christian, however, it is possible that this uncertainty will not arise or will

not be considered pressing, because the distinction between religious and secular literature (or between soul and intellect) will not be seen as an importantly ambiguous one.⁶ Likewise in a fully secularized period, this problem is unlikely to give general pause, having been consigned to the consideration of specialists in theology. In a secularizing (but not yet fully secularized) age, however, it may cause substantial difficulty for those who produce and consume literature and literary knowledge. This seems to be a plausible description of both the Baroque and the Romantic periods, though of course in quite different ways, not the least of which follow from their relative historical positions with respect to the Enlightenment.

The Romantics inherited from the Enlightenment a world in which the mystical connection of material and immaterial objects in the theological symbol was not regarded as an adequate explanation of symbolic effectiveness, but in which some form of unmediated symbolic effect was nevertheless considered both plausible and desirable. This is the conviction underlying Samuel Taylor Coleridge's description of, and preference for, the symbolic in poetry, as well as the basis of William Wordsworth's conception of the poetic relationship between man and nature. Coleridge writes:

[A]n Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol (ὁ ἕστιν ἄει παυτηγόριον)⁷ is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it annunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of the Unity, of which it is the representative.⁸

This conception effectively reverses an earlier, fully Christian relationship between the symbol and theology. It proceeds from the assumption that it is the symbol that is epistemologically valid because it (the symbol) is not estranged or abstracted from the "Reality" and the "Unity" that are its substance. We may therefore, argues Coleridge, depend upon our knowledge of symbols to derive knowledge of the entities or ideas they (literally) embody, a principle that extends even to theological cases. Allegory, because it is insubstantial, can provide no such assurance of knowledge; it merely represents by substituting one abstraction (its "picture-language" vehicle) for another (the abstract "notion" that is its tenor), never coming nearer to the substantiality that he insists is a necessary component of true knowledge.

Coleridge's continued emphasis on materiality as the basis of knowledge is an intermediate formation in the larger movement, then in progress, away from a Christian worldview. It continues to privilege incarnation (now in the generic symbol rather than necessarily in Christ) even as it offers a new, tropological basis for the theology that spawned the original preference for material manifestation. It does not, however, represent a dialectical response to a situation that seems to require one, in which sacred and secular or technological orientations are contending for interpretive hegemony. Instead it forces the two alternatives together without resolving the tension between them, arguing for the possibility (even the inevitability) of empirical support through the symbol for the transcendence that remains the final object of knowledge. Or at least this is what Coleridge claims to have done; as de Man observes, his conception of the symbol as fundamentally material is rendered doubtful by his use of "translucence," which suggests little in the way of solid materiality and is indeed difficult to distinguish rigorously from the disparaged "reflection" held to be characteristic of allegory.⁹

This slippage in Coleridge's—and by extension in Romanticism's—treatment of the symbol may not have carried so far as Benjamin's critique of it would suggest, but it remains an important difficulty. The problem is in essence one of representation. The ideal Romantic symbol does not represent at all, because it collapses idea into experience. But this position is either empiricist, in which case we may reasonably ask in what way it is related to poetic (rather than scientific or historical) expression, or it is mystical, in which case it is a matter of direct revelatory experience rather than of second-hand poetic account. The problem in both cases, however, is the same, namely that experience must be made available at second hand. When there exists an accepted guarantor of the fidelity of representation, whether it is God or nature or the market, representation can pass as presentation, that is, it can stand in lieu of direct experience. Coleridge's suggestion is that the material world can play the role of this guarantor, in fact that it has displaced God in becoming the way to Him rather than vice versa, a position that only seems plausible on a wide scale after the Enlightenment.

In the seventeenth century, however, one encounters at most a premonition of this reversal, not its attainment. The secular and divine worlds remain antithetical, though the clear consensus of the former's subservience to, rather than independence from, the latter suggests a relationship between them. As Benjamin explains, allegory helps to elucidate the nature of this link. The shifting relationships between symbols and their referents in heraldry and emblems, he writes, had already shown that "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else":

With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. But . . . all of the [profane] things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which . . . can sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression. For allegory is both: convention *and* expression; and both are inherently contradictory. (*OG* 175)

Baroque allegory is thus an attempt to mediate between the divine and the secular. It does so not, as was the case with the Romantic or theological symbol, by conflating them (regardless of which one takes precedence over the other), but by establishing them within a narrative context.

This has several important consequences for allegory as it existed in the Baroque period, as well as for a general understanding of its forms. The first and most readily apparent to us today is derived from Benjamin's insistence that context influences interpretation through the dialectic of convention and expression. This fact, combined with the arbitrariness of reference observed in emblematics, might suggest a perpetually allegorical world, one in which each representational expression points beyond itself to another, equally arbitrary or conventional version of itself, *ad infinitum*. But as a practical matter this is not what we observe in the historically specific examples considered by Benjamin. In the case of the emblem books, he points out that there was a time when they functioned unproblematically, that is, when each element of an emblem could be read as the logical condensation of a clear, readily apparent idea. These emblems constituted a form of shorthand notation, which meant that they were not, strictly speaking, necessary, because the information they conveyed could have been communicated directly (as was indeed the case when it was collected into books of heraldry, for example). The particular epistemological paradigm of the historical period in which emblemata functioned unproblematically need not be known to us—it is enough to have evidence that it did indeed exist.¹⁰ As Benjamin observes, however, this transparency of emblematic meaning was becoming recognized as unreliable in the seventeenth century, in part due to conflicting schemes of contemporary codification and in part due to the persistence of “meanings handed down from the ancients” that were no longer felt to be compatible with any of their modern counterparts.¹¹

Once such unreliability was introduced, the “destructive, but just verdict” against the profane world derived from its lack of semantic specificity could quickly follow. The terms in which it was to be leveled, however, could not have been entirely clear, since the problem itself stemmed from a difficulty or instability of representation. In this case, a critique or evaluation of the new situation would need to be made

indirectly, or would in any event become indirect insofar as the old mode of representation and interpretation had been eroded without its successor having yet emerged. It is allegory that does exactly this: it communicates a meaning that, for whatever reason, cannot (or will not) be stated directly.¹² Thus it is allegory that became the preferred literary mode of the Baroque era as its authors attempted to map out a new relationship between the sacred and the profane.

As already suggested, the relationship between these two terms needs to be considered in a way that is historically specific. Baroque allegory responded not to a general, ahistorical dialectic between the religious and the secular—an ahistorical dialectic is probably a contradiction in terms—but to the matter as it stood at the threshold of the Enlightenment and to that moment's specific problems of representation. Where the earlier prevalence of allegory in the medieval period may have been accurately explained by Martin Opitz as a necessary response to a "crude and uncivilized" world in need of religious instruction,¹³ the authors of the Baroque era faced a different obstacle in the decay of an existing sacred paradigm. Their response to this problem was to rely on a form that was itself a kind of "ruin" (Benjamin's term, of course), one that was fragmented rather than unified and that shared with ruins a manifestation of the antagonistic relationship between nature (as a force of decay) and history (as a constructive impulse). The ruin is a man-made object stripped of its details and ornamentation by an extended confrontation with the natural elements; it retains parts of its original design, but it is altered in ways not foreseen by its creators. These alterations are, moreover, shocking in the way they defamiliarize objects even as those objects remain recognizable as the understructure of what they once were.

All of these points mapped onto the principal features of Baroque allegory and the epistemological situation to which it responded. Unlike the symbol, the effectiveness of which was based on the unifiability of vehicle and tenor (and of author and reader), Baroque allegory maintained the divisions between them without displacing entirely the idea of their relationship as supplied by the formal dialectic between convention and expression, itself allegorized for the Baroque through the interplay of history and nature in the ruin. Convention, the reified form of historical consciousness, found its form in the unified and orthodox object of human agency, whereas expression, its necessarily fragmentary and heterodox antithesis, consisted in the uniquely determined, individual disintegration of that object.

When the contradictions of religious belief were beginning to be perceived, but could not yet be addressed directly, tragedy offered to the Baroque allegorists an ideal historical formation on which to perform the expressive, particularizing work of transformation through decay.

Trauerspiel altered the conventional metanarratives of tragedy—the inevitable triumph of divine will over human agency, say—into something no longer obviously explicable—unmotivated suffering or repetition in place of progress toward resolution and catharsis, for example. These inexplicable narrative objects were then to be collected and stored as the raw material for a new schematization and as the basis of a new knowledge that would make sense of them, but which the age was not yet ready to produce. In creating these objects, Trauerspiel pointed toward the crisis in representation that underlay it by demonstrating both the failure of an established form (tragedy) to stabilize meaning in the way it once had done and the necessary contradiction of using a language “heavy with material display” (*OG* 200) to explicate an immaterial theology. It did these things, however, without proposing a solution to the crisis. A return to the pre-Christian pantheon was clearly unworkable, as the transformation of tragedy into Trauerspiel showed, while the turn to empirical science that would eventually authorize the Romantic reversal of immanent and transcendent priority in the symbol was still a century off. Thus Baroque allegory, even as it worked on themes derived from tragedy, served primarily as a marker or symptom of the changing dialectical relationship between theology and nature.

Baudelaire, the Arcades, and the Commodity Form

There are a number of possible explanations for the fact that this view of Baroque allegory has not generally been tied to Benjamin’s later work on Baudelaire and allegory in the *Passagen-Werk*. In addition to mundane issues—the *Arcades* was not translated into English until 1999 (though many of the Baudelaire writings derived from it were available earlier); there exists little other work linking the German Baroque to the French nineteenth century; the periods themselves are sufficiently removed from one another as to discourage unified treatment—the more fundamental factor inhibiting study of Benjamin’s theory of allegory as a singular object is the presence of what appear to be several important contradictions or incompatibilities between his views in the two texts. In the *Ursprung*, for example, Benjamin maintains an apparently neutral stance toward progress and teleology as they apply to the process of allegorical interpretation, while in the *Arcades* progressivist historiography is explicitly shunned. On this basis, myth is much more rigorously differentiated from allegory in the *Arcades* than in the Trauerspiel book. A Marxian analysis of commodity production is also a prominent feature of the latter work, but is entirely absent from the *Ursprung*.

Although it is conceivable that Benjamin modified substantially his understanding of allegory after he wrote the *Ursprung* (and doubtless there were changes), it is also possible that the continuity between the early and late work is more substantial than is usually recognized. One of the things that makes this continuity difficult to perceive is the historical specificity of the allegorical impulse. If the argument offered in the preceding pages is correct, it is likely both that some eras will produce more and better allegorical writing than will others (they will be “allegorical” ages in a way that others are not) and that allegories produced during different eras will have divergent emphases and techniques. In this case the actual allegorical production of one period may look markedly different from that of another, a situation likely to obfuscate whatever is common to them both. Studies like Benjamin’s, which develop a theory of allegory only incidentally to a broader examination of a particular period, are bound to appear even more divergent or inconsistent in this regard. On the other hand, the breadth and diversity of Benjamin’s subject material can help to produce a theory of allegory that does not mistake the particularities of any one period for fundamental features of the form itself.

The claim to this point has been that allegory is a response to a crisis in representation, a crisis that was brought on in the Baroque era by the waning of Christian hermeneutic hegemony prior to the clear emergence of an alternative worldview. This set of circumstances produced an awareness of the dialectical relationship between the divine and the secular without providing the terms (or concepts) through which their synthesis could be thought. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided these terms, which were, in extreme shorthand, experimental science and its technological derivatives, empire, and commodification. Of these it is clearly the commodity that most interests Benjamin in the *Arcades*, especially in connection with allegory. The commodity, he argues, had appeared to solve, through the mechanism of monetary exchange, the problem of relating objects that have no natural connection to one another. This fact, coupled with commodity fetishism—which replaced “the mutual relations of the producers . . . [with] a social relation between the products”¹⁴—allowed any relationship, whether between objects or between abstractions (such as social relationships, ideas, and so on) to be expressed in objectified (monetary) terms. With this “solution,” the widespread motivation for allegory essentially disappeared; any object could be represented by the value embodied in its monetary equivalent and any abstraction or relationship between ideas could be cast as involving only objects. If any two things could be set in relation to one another in a way that was stable and widely recognizable, there was no broad crisis of representation. This was true even if, as Marx and Benja-

min both observe, it is not possible to determine in advance the exact relationship between value and price in any individual transaction; it is enough that the market provides a mechanism for transforming the value crystallized in commodities into its visible and universal equivalent—the money commodity—that is taken as reliable by its participants.¹⁵

The nineteenth century was for this reason an anti-allegorical era. This is not to say, however, that allegory was entirely unavailable to it, but merely that the conditions were not such that allegory would become its dominant aesthetic form. Baudelaire was one of the few writers of his time to work against the grain of transparency established through the commodity. Benjamin explains the relationship between commodity and allegory, and Baudelaire's place in it, by referring to the difference between the Baroque era and Baudelaire's own. In the former, he argues:

[T]he fetish character of the commodity was still relatively undeveloped. And the commodity had not yet so deeply engraved its stigma—the proletarianization of the producers—on the process of production. Allegorical perception could thus constitute a style in the seventeenth century, in a way that it no longer could in the nineteenth. Baudelaire as an allegorist was entirely isolated. He sought to recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience. (AP 347/J67,2)

This formulation regards the Baroque from an angle different than the one adopted in the *Ursprung* (and followed above), but not fundamentally at odds with it. In the *Arcades*, Benjamin looks back to the Baroque as an era contributing (however indirectly) to the formation of the nineteenth century, which remains his primary object of study, hence his reading of the relationship between the two is performed primarily in the terms of the latter. Thus what is clear in retrospect—namely, that the commodity and the technological, industrial, and mass processes associated with it eventually provided the solution to the Baroque's crisis of representation—is here named as a lack in the earlier period allowing it to develop an allegorical "style." The affirmative conditions of the Baroque, which are equally necessary for this development, are left implicit in this formulation, but they are not contradicted by it.

More important, however, is the central homology that allows Benjamin to link Baudelaire, as allegorist, to the Baroque. His claims that the poet attempted to "recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience" and that for Baudelaire the "allegorical experience was primary" (rather than following from a conflict between the divine and the secular [AP 324/J53a,1]) are instructive. The centrality to Baudelaire's work of his attempt to allegorize the experience of the commodity suggests both that he (like Marx and Benjamin) identified it as a

fundamental feature of his age and that this experience was unsettled or unsatisfactory in a way that called for a specifically allegorical response. This situation might be explained by the way in which the commodity appeared to provide a solution to the problem of the divine and natural worlds as their dialectical synthesis. The commodity was able to provide a mapping between them, becoming in the process the new master narrative of its age. Unlike the situation of the Baroque, however, there was no general perception that this master narrative was inadequate, but this fact obviously did not preclude individual nineteenth century authors (Baudelaire among them) from distrusting the reliability of representations mediated by the commodity form, even when they could not command a compelling alternative with which to oppose it.

This difficulty was of course not an individual failing of the nineteenth century allegorist, since a critique of the prevailing interpretive schema is always illogical or incomplete insofar as it fails to make use of that schema's categories and methods. The implication is that allegory in Baudelaire's time had the structure and function of prophesy; it pointed toward a changed condition, but appealed only to those who already held what was by definition an irrational belief in the inadequacy of their current system. The claim that Baudelaire's allegory made, visible to us today if not to his contemporaries, was that the rule of the commodity as interpretant contained within itself a lack or contradiction that would eventually render it untenable as the guarantor of meaning, just as had Christian theology. As was suggested in the case of the Baroque, allegory was the appropriate—and perhaps the only—vehicle for this critique. It allowed the problem (the arbitrariness of price formation and the fetishization of the commodity that covered it over) to be framed without suggesting that there was an available answer to it. To do otherwise, to insist that allegory had or could arrive at a superior method by which to communicate a determinate meaning, would be merely to repeat the issue in new terms. It was better, then, to demonstrate the possibility of looseness in meaning without going beyond it to suggest that it could yet be eliminated in a new way.¹⁶

What Baudelaire shared with the Baroque, then, was neither subject matter, nor worldview, nor technique in any normal sense. It was instead an intuition both that their ages understood themselves in terms that failed to cohere stably and that the response they could offer to the problem was itself necessarily tentative, that it would undo itself as well. Baudelaire's meta-allegorical "Allégorie,"¹⁷ a text surprisingly rarely cited in connection with Benjamin and the *Arcades*, demonstrates this problem in the stubborn obscurity and ambiguity with which it glosses its title and in the connection it draws between allegory and the prostitute, who is the idealized incarnation of her age's interpretive scheme (replacing as

she does a relation between humans with a relation between things). Baudelaire's characterization of allegory as a woman removed from the world while welcoming it with open arms is an apt figuration of Benjamin's views in the *Ursprung* and the *Arcades*. In both cases, allegory is open to the situation that produces it even as it draws away into mystery and contradiction. To the charge that this explanation is a kind of obfuscation, Benjamin seems content to agree, subject to the proviso that the case could not really be otherwise resolved.

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NOTES

1 See, for instance, Jan Rosiek, "Apocalyptic and Secular Allegory, or, How to Avoid Getting Excited: Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man," *Orbis Literarum* 48 (1993): 145–60; Bernd Witte, "Allegorien des Schreibens," *Merkur* 46 (1992): 125–36; and Bettine Menke, "Rhetorik und Referentialität bei de Man und Benjamin," in *Flaschenpost und Postkarte: Korrespondenzen zwischen Kritischer Theorie und Poststrukturalismus*, ed. Sigrid Weigel (Cologne: Bohlau, 1995), 49–70. Doris Sommer's "Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance," *Boundary 2* 18 (1991): 60–82, recognizes the importance of dialectics in Benjamin's conception of allegory, and so in a sense anticipates the work of this essay, but Sommer remains concerned primarily with a comparison between the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* and de Man's "Rhetoric of Temporality" rather than with a detailed study of Benjamin's work. More recent accounts, such as Susanne Knaller's "A Theory of Allegory beyond Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man," *The Germanic Review* 77 (2002): 83–101, are aware of the problem, but fail to supply a satisfactory alternative formulation.

2 This is not to say that de Man is ignorant of Benjamin's work or that he avoids it systematically. Benjamin is mentioned only in passing, however, in de Man's two texts most applicable to the problem of allegory, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979) and "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (originally published in 1969, but first collected only in the 1983 second edition of *Blindness and Insight* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press], 187–228). His most direct engagement with Benjamin is his lecture on "The Task of the Translator," but that piece has at best an allegorical connection to a theory of allegory, with "translation" or "interpretation" standing in, à la Northrop Frye, for allegory itself. "Conclusions": Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 25–46. See also Jim Hansen's recent article "Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the Function of Allegory," *New Literary History* 35 (2005): 663–83, which points to a brief discussion of allegory (although not of the Trauerspiel book itself) in de Man's 1982 introduction to Hans Robert Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and touches in passing on a connection between "The Task of the Translator" and allegory.

3 For instances of the former, see Bernard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 109–22; and Samuel Weber, "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*," *MLN* 106 (1991): 465–500; for the latter, see Romano Lupérini, "Benjamin's 'Baudelaire,' Allegory, Interpretation," *Quanderni d'Italianistica* 12 (1991): 103–11.

4 Even comprehensive treatments of Benjamin's work on the topic, such as Timothy Bahti's commendable *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography After Hegel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)—discussed in more detail below—often read his analysis of allegory as fully uniform across time. There are two notable exceptions to this

tendency. The first is Harald Steinhagen's 1979 essay "Zu Walter Benjamins Begriff der Allegorie," in *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie*, ed. Walter Haug (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979), 666–85, which perceives clearly the link between allegory and the commodity form without equating Baroque and nineteenth-century allegorical practice. Steinhagen does not, however, propose an integrated theory of allegory based on his observations, which he intends primarily as a "presentation" of Benjamin's work on the subject. The second is Susan Buck-Morss's monumental *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), of which the sixth chapter is devoted to allegory via an analysis of history and the ruin. Buck-Morss treats the relationship between Benjamin's early and late work with subtlety and authority, and *Dialectics of Seeing* remains the central piece of English-language scholarship on the *Arcades*. Her interest in allegory, however, is subordinate to her explication of the *Passagen-Werk* as a whole, a fact that tends to minimize the discontinuities in Benjamin's thought and that produces divergences both in emphasis and in certain technical details (mostly relating to montage and "allegorical" images) from the analysis presented here.

5 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 160 (hereafter cited in text as *OG*). The German original, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, is found in volume 1 of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989), 1:203–430.

6 That is, the subordination of the material to the transcendent will remain always clear.

7 "Which is always tautegorical" (Coleridge's Greek in original). *Tautegory* is defined in contradistinction to allegory as same-speaking (rather than other-speaking).

8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*, vol. 6, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972–), 30. Coleridge's theory of the symbol is stated succinctly on page 79 of the same text and more elaborately in chapters 14 and 17 of his *Biographia Literaria* (*Collected Works*, vol. 7, parts 1 and 2). De Man glosses Coleridge's theory in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," 191–94. Wordsworth's famously ambiguous theory of poetry as both "the image of man and nature" and "the most philosophic of all writing" is found in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (in *Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974], 1:139). Theresa Kelley treats both poets in the fifth chapter of her *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), stressing the importance of Coleridge's religious principles in shaping his conception of the symbol.

Although Benjamin chose, unsurprisingly perhaps, to focus on the views of the German Romantics, I have used Coleridge as the representative Romantic critic of allegory. Two factors led to this decision: first, Coleridge is by far the most familiar figure in English-language allegory studies, and as such there exists a larger and more fully developed body of secondary work concerning his theories available to readers working in that language; second, Coleridge expresses concisely and with particular emphasis a view of allegory that was shared by (and often derived in part from) a large number of his contemporaries, English and German alike. To the passage from *The Statesman's Manual* quoted here, compare, for instance, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's claim that "there is a great difference whether a poet is looking for the particular that goes with the general, or sees the general in the particular. The first gives rise to allegory where the particular only counts as an example, an illustration of the general; but the latter in fact constitutes the nature of poetry, expressing something particular without any thought of the general, and without indicating it. Now whoever has this living grasp of the particular is at the same time in possession of the general, without realizing it, or else only realizing it later on" (*Maxims and Reflections*, ed. Peter Hutchinson, trans. Elisabeth Stoff [London: Penguin, 1998], 33–34, #279/750). See also Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling's description of the symbol as that which

is “as concrete and self-identical as the image, and yet as universal and significant as the concept” (*Philosophy of Art*, trans. and ed. Douglas W. Stott [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989], 49); Arthur Schopenhauer’s dismissal of allegory as “foreign” to art in *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. W. Payne, (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:237 (quoted at length by Benjamin in *Origin*, 161–62); and Friedrich Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry*, trans. and ed. Ernst Behler and Roman Stuc (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968).

9 See de Man, “Rhetoric,” 192–93.

10 See, for example, the passages from the *Acta eruditorum* quoted by Benjamin (*Origin*, 173). This is a general point not confined to the Baroque and its antecedents.

11 Benjamin, *Origin*, 174, quoting Karl Giehlow, *Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance, besonders der Ehrenpforte Kaisers Maximilian I* (Vienna: Tempsky, 1915), 36.

12 For a particularly illuminating consideration of the link between allegory and the difficulties or impasses of representation, see Fredric Jameson, “From Metaphor to Allegory,” in *Anything*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 24–36.

13 The full text of Opitz’s statement in English translation is given as the epigraph to this article. The original source is Martin Opitz, *Prosodia Germanica, Oder Buch von der deutschen Poeterey* (Frankfurt am Main, n.d. [ca. 1650]), 2; quoted in Benjamin, *Origin*, 172. Even if Opitz is correct in his (now conventional) assessment, medieval allegory may still have responded to a crisis of representation associated with a dialectical relationship between opposed terms; for example, between acquired and revealed knowledge, or between human and divine authority. See, for instance, the *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 324/J53a,1 (hereafter cited in text as *AP* with page and section number; German original is volume 5 of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*), which quotes *Origin*, 226, on the relationship between antiquity and Christianity in the High Middle Ages. This is a matter, however, for a separate project.

14 The quotation is from the oft-cited fourth section (“The Fetishism of the Commodities”) of volume 1, chapter 1 of *Capital*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967). Benjamin refers to this section at J80,2/J80a,1 of the *Arcades* (368–69), a passage that offers one of his most explicit links between allegory and the commodity. See also J67,2, quoted below in the main text. The context of Marx’s well-known remark is the following discussion of commodity formation and the creation of exchange value, a process Benjamin likens to the fixation of meaning in allegory: “The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values; the measure of the expenditure of labour-power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally, the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products. A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (77).

15 We are not, after all, in search of any fundamental guarantor of meaning or interpretability. The particular, historically contingent conditions of past guarantors are of interest here.

The nature of the relationship between commodities, value, money, and price is a complex and historically fraught problem. Chapter 3 of the first volume of *Capital*—the first extended discussion of money in that text and the principal source for the present

discussion—calls money “the universal measure of value,” declaring that its purpose “is to supply commodities with the material for the expression of their values” (97). On the more difficult problem of price, see *Capital* volume 3, chapter 9, which introduces the “transformation problem” concerning the link between commodity values and prices of production. Contemporary criticism of Marx’s approach has generally been neo-Ricardian, as formulated by Ladislaus von Bortkiewicz, “Value and Price in the Marxian System,” *International Economic Papers* 2 (1952): 5–60, and elaborated by Piero Sraffa, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). For a more recent reevaluation, see the essays collected in Ricardo Bellofiore, ed., *Marxian Economics: A Reappraisal*, 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), especially vol. 2, “Profits, Price, and Dynamics.” Note that from Marx onward, there is general agreement that prices and values in an equilibrium economy are equivalent in aggregate, though not necessarily in any individual transaction nor in any actually existing non-equilibrium state.

16 Bahti makes a similar point in his *Allegories of History*, in which he concludes that Benjamin’s theory of allegory turns finally on “the passage across the line demarcating the signifier from the signified” (278), a passage that in Baudelaire, at least, is mediated through the commodity, which “(re)introduces the allegorical structure ‘within the thingly or material world itself’” (211, quoting Benjamin, “Zentralpark,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:660). This is impeccable as far as it goes, but Bahti is at pains to read Benjamin as having produced a theory of unvarying allegory—one perfected in the *Ursprung* and devoted to the problem of the *Immergleiche*, the eternal same—and so insists on maintaining the role of death and decay as central loci of determination even in the later work on Baudelaire. (In a symptom of this anti-developmental position, his study is organized in reverse-chronological order, beginning with the theses “On the Concept of History” and concluding with the *Ursprung*.) The result is a theory of allegory that, while subtle and forcefully developed, turns every allegorical text into the retelling of an impossible relationship to a single imagined original (for Bahti, this is always Homer). This is an interesting but (ironically, given the title and purpose of Bahti’s book) fundamentally ahistorical reading of both allegory in general and Benjamin in particular, one that understands Baudelaire not as the descendent or inheritor of the Baroque allegorists, but as their reincarnation or repetition.

17 Poem 114 or 118, depending on the edition, of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. For the French, see Claude Pichois’s edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 161; for English, Richard Howard’s translation (Boston: Godine, 1982), 132.