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The Imperfect Librarians:
Myth and Resistance in Marcel Proust, Johannes V. Jensen,
Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges

by

Erik C. Christensen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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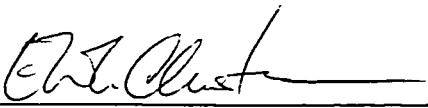
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Doctoral Dissertation

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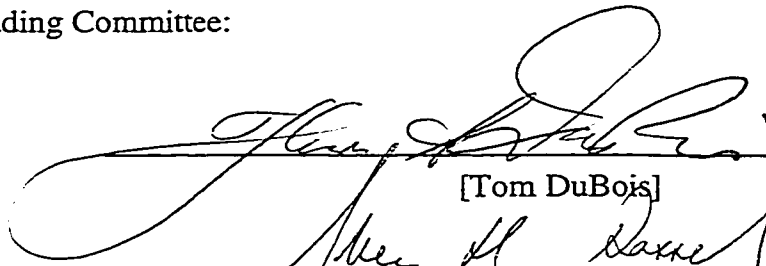
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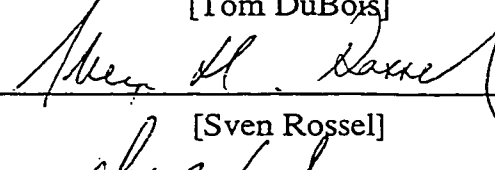


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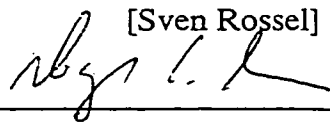
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Abstract

The Imperfect Librarians:
Myth and Resistance in Marcel Proust, Johannes V. Jensen,
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by Erik C. Christensen

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Gary Handwerk
Department of Comparative Literature

In Jorge Luis Borges's "The Library of Babel," a library containing all possible combinations of letters in 410-page books, man is the "imperfect librarian." In this parable of the failed human quest for meaning, the librarians become phantoms: they have acquired too clear a view of the chaos and unknowability of existence, and they remain helpless, incapable of even deciphering a single letter.

This hyperbole provides an apt prism through which to understand Modernist mythopoesis. My central aim is to produce a comparative theoretical assessment of Modernist mythmaking by using, as primary examples, Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Johannes V. Jensen's *Myths*, Virginia Woolf's novels *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and the work of Jorge Luis Borges. My dissertation focuses neither on uncovering mythical allusions, which would entail what T.S. Eliot called a "mythical method" in Joyce, nor on dispersing myth into an endless cascade of signs in the manner of Barthes or Baudrillard.

Instead, I want to tread a kind of middle ground by showing how Modernist mythopoesis operates as a paradoxical double-movement. Each author's work is metaphysically speculative: it breaks temporal boundaries, fragments "reality" into an infinite multiplicity of events, and meditates on higher forms of awareness, all in the

hopes of evoking transcendent truths, of recovering shards of memory, of giving emotional meaning to the present. At the same time, however, in order not to fall prey to the chaos made accessible, each author's work incorporates certain features that actually resist their mythic momentum, such that the full extent of the transcendence reached by consciousness remains attenuated.

To achieve this renunciation or dispersion, Proust uses thousands of metaphors that resist their own figuration; Jensen explodes the genre of "myth" by including a great number of journalistic and biographical sketches in his myth collections; and Woolf and Borges metafictionally highlight the arbitrariness of cognitive ordering, they disperse their characters' subjectivity, and focus their attention on miniscule, "unimportant" fragments.

I conclude by exploring Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as the postmodern exemplar and successor to this kind of Modernist mythopoesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: Myth and Modernism.....	1
A. Introduction: Borges, Myth and Modernism.....	1
B. Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges	7
1. The Mythic	7
2. Resistance: The Escape Clause	14
3. Author Summaries	19
C. Myth, Metaphor and the Sublime	23
D. Modernism and the Explosion of Certainty	35
E. Existing Theories of Modernist Mythicity	38
CHAPTER 2: Marcel Proust	45
A. The Paradox of Proust's Figuration	45
B. Metaphor Theory	55
C. Marcel's Mythic Quest	64
D. Resisting Figuration to Preserve Mythic Unattainability	75
E. Conclusion	96
CHAPTER 3: Johannes V. Jensen	101
A. The 160 Myths	101
B. Critical Responses to the Problem	108
C. Aesthetic Self-Management: The Creative/Decreative	111
D. Traditional and Modernist Mythicity in Jensen	118

CHAPTER 4: Virginia Woolf and Jorge Luis Borges	138
A. Woolf's Atomism Viewed Through a Borgesian Perspective	139
B. Cycles, Timelessness, and the Dissolving Subject	146
C. Atomism, Ordering, and Relativism	168
CHAPTER 5: Conclusion: Italo Calvino	186
A. Modernist Mythopoesis	186
B. Italo Calvino: Towards a Postmodern Mythopoesis	191
C. Invisible Cities	194
BIBLIOGRAPHY	203

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Nina and Ib

CHAPTER 1: MYTH AND MODERNISM

Admixed with art's own concept is the ferment of its own abolition.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Wall and the Books"

A. INTRODUCTION: BORGES, MYTH AND MODERNISM

The myth of King Minos's labyrinth comes to us from Virgil and Ovid, but thanks in part to Jorge Luis Borges, its image haunts us still. The Minotaur, offspring of Pasiphae and a Cretan bull, was a magical, tangible creature; although powerful, it could be confronted and combated. But the ancient labyrinth, with its entrance, center, and exit, has today become a maze (or a rhizome) symbolizing the mind and its relation to the universe. The monster can no longer be located or "read": it is nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Theseus's pacing down the endless corridors, sword at the ready, is now the mad emblem of our quest for meaning, only we no longer have clear direction, nor can we find a definitive center. Without a tangible enemy, the frustrating architectural –

and hence cognitive – riddle seems to have no solution. "A maze requires no Minotaur; it is its own Minotaur. In other words, the attempt of the visitor to find the way is the Minotaur."¹

Jorge Luis Borges's most famous collection of works in English² aptly receives its title from this structural wonder, for labyrinths appear in some form, usually either metaphorically or stylistically, in every one of these fictions, parables, and essays. The opening story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," establishes Borges's symbolism by imagining the idealist reality of an imaginary planet (Tlön) as usurping and overtaking our material reality. Tlön's new reality is built according to laws whose mysteries and idiosyncracies highlight those of our own history. The order underlying any reality, Borges observes, is divine and hence inhuman, and we can therefore "never quite grasp" the labyrinth of Tlön, though we are "destined" to decipher it (17-8). The well-known labyrinth of books in "The Library of Babel"³ crystallizes the idea of the human search for meaning as an eternal and doomed mission through an infinite set of galleries and rooms. Though the structure itself may be unimaginably complex – known only to God – its features are as infuriatingly homogeneous as the white marble of the labyrinth in Crete. Borges's library consists of 410-page books of identical format, using twenty-two letters of the alphabet, the space, the comma, and the period. Though the symbols are recognizable, the library is unmanageable owing simply to its excess: a library containing all possible combinations of letters yields far more volumes than there are particles in the known universe.⁴ Any word (Borges offers the example *dhcmrlchtdj*) can therefore mean anything in one of the millions of languages the library must theoretically contain. The story's narrator admits the eternity of the library, and muses:

Man, the imperfect librarian ("el imperfecto bibliotecario"), may be the product of chance or of malevolent demiurgi; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes...can only be the work of a god. To perceive the

¹Umberto Eco, *In the Labyrinth of Reason* (Leipzig 1990) 105, qtd. in Helmut Jaskolski, *The Labyrinth, Symbol of Fear, Rebirth and Liberation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997) 89.

²Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

³Borges, "The Library of Babel". *Labyrinths* 51-8.

⁴Borges's setup yields 1,312,000 character spaces per book, i.e. $25^{1,312,000}$ (or approximately $10^{1,845,281}$) volumes. Stephen Hawking estimates that the universe contains 10^{80} particles. See Chapter 4.

distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical. (52-3)

Here Borges synthesizes the well-known and fundamental limitations of language, its status as a conventional but arbitrary system of signs, with which the librarians hope to express – and perhaps possess – divinity. But this passage enacts a double estrangement: our language is to the divine as the narrator's own "crude" and "wavering" handwritten symbols are to the printed "organic letters" of the library's volumes. Human limitation derives not only from differences in languages (English, Spanish, Hebrew) but also from the poverty of our physicality. Despite being nothing but an endless sea of signs, the crisp perfection of endless printed volumes, "inimitably symmetrical" ("inimitablemente simétricas"), are associated with God; to reach the divine, i.e. to read the library, man must therefore be immortal. A little later, we are indeed told that "the possibility of a man's finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero" (55). It would seem, here and elsewhere in Borges's oeuvre, that we are doomed to roam the labyrinth in vain. This elegant mythical construction meets our inquiring gaze with the impassive and unredeeming terror of uninterpretability. We must seek solace in interpreting as best we can the few volumes within reach during our lifetime.

I shall return to Borges's story in Chapter 4, but it here provides us with a useful departing metaphor. In calling the Modernist authors I am examining "imperfect librarians," I seek to highlight not merely their humanity, but to suggest that each author – Marcel Proust, Johannes V. Jensen, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges himself – presents characters searching for a transcendent view of life in the sense of being fully aware of their cognitive confrontation with the chaos of existence. These four authors (many others, of course, could qualify) engage in a mode of writing which seeks to endow their characters with a privileged access to the dizzying depth of life's infinite permutations. In each case, the narrative pushes the characters into a realm of heightened awareness, and depicts their struggle with trying to encompass the richness that now seems available – and as overwhelming as Borges's library. Lily Briscoe in Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, for instance, observes the many images of her own thought dancing "up and down, like a company of gnats," until they explode "of [their] own intensity." Later, she wishes she had "fifty pairs of eyes to see with" in order to fully encompass her

thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay.⁵ In Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, Marcel seeks to savor the scent of hawthorns and observes that the flowers offer their charm "indéfiniment" ("indefinitely"), in "une profusion inépuisable" ("an inexhaustible profusion"), but that they do not allow him to "approfondir davantage" ("further deepen") his experience. Their scent remains as elusive as "ces mélodies qu'on rejoue cent fois de suite sans descendre plus avant dans leur secret" ("those melodies one replays a hundred times without coming any closer to their secret").⁶ Jensen, in his short myth "Fusijama," expresses an awareness of the gulf separating our existence from another purer reality, and that at any given moment we are blind to "den højere Verden vi stunder imod" ("the higher world we yearn for"). What we need, he says, is "en Fjærnhed og Fremmedhed, en sublim Overraskelse til for at gengive Jorden dens Friskhed" ("a distance and estrangement, a sublime surprise to restore freshness to the earth").⁷

Modernists⁸ follow in a long tradition of struggle with the chaos of existence and the search for transcendent vision or order. "The history of Western art might from one point of view be seen as the history of our gradual coming to terms with the degree of chaos which – within the total meaningfulness of life as a whole – reality 'really' comprises."⁹ While philosophers since Plato have argued for the inaccessibility of the realm of ideas – what Kant calls the noumenal – artists have self-consciously sought to heighten their vision in an attempt to examine life's complexities with sublime insight and feeling. In the Romantic era, German philosophers called for a return to myth owing to its spiritual and poetic powers. Myth, which had been characterized during the Enlightenment as a "defective understanding of scientific causes,"¹⁰ was seen by the Romantics as a special mode of the imagination, and mythopoesis could fully unleash our

⁵Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927) 25, 198.

⁶Marcel Proust. *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) 136. All translations of Proust from the French are my own.

⁷Johannes V. Jensen, *Myter*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1960) 78. All translations of Jensen from the Danish are my own.

⁸The precise dates to be affixed to the label "Modernism" is a matter of much debate. For my purposes, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's generous interval of 1890 to 1930 seems most appropriate.

⁹Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature* (Cambridge UP, 1994) 73.

¹⁰J.W. Rogerson. "Slippery Words: Myth." *Sacred Narrative*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984) 64.

creative potential. In 1800, Friedrich Schlegel deplored the lack of focus in contemporary poetry, and called for a "new mythology" that would arise "from the deepest depths of the spirit." Like Johann Gottfried Herder before him, Schlegel boldly declared the indivisible unity of all human experience: "Everything interpenetrates everything else, and everywhere there is one and the same spirit, only expressed differently." Mythology is the "hieroglyphic expression of surrounding nature in this transfigured form of imagination and love," and "what usually escapes our consciousness" can therefore be "perceived and held fast through the senses and spirit." Through its symbiosis with nature, the texture of mythology invites feelings of the sublime, for not only is it "a single, indivisible, and perfect poem," but it is also a "work of art created by nature. In its texture the sublime is really formed; everything is relation and metamorphosis, conformed and transformed." We should nurture the sublime by intentionally creating it, by "reawakening" old mythology and creating a new one to release man's "divining power." How does Schlegel account for the chaos that may ensue? By claiming that "the highest beauty, indeed the highest order is yet only that of chaos, namely of such a one that waits only for the touch of love to unfold as a harmonious world, of such a chaos as the ancient mythology and poetry were."¹¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, myth appears to have gradually become, in the mind of European artists and philosophers, more than an independent set of archetypes and stories inherited from Greek and Roman antiquity. Instead, myth was increasingly seen as a heightened state of creativity, a spiritual mode of experience that many communities around the world have expressed through sacred narrative and ritual for thousands of years. With better insight into nature and the universal order, myth could allow modern man to experience the sublime artistically, and perhaps even "restor[e] him to his early simplicity – his original and primeval union with God and nature."¹² This view was particularly supported by a dramatic increase in anthropological and ethnographic research, including the tremendous influence of Sir John Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

This faith in myth's capacity to link the artist with nature provided a bridge between myth and the sublime, particularly in terms of literary expression. This link

¹¹Friedrich Schlegel. "Talk on Mythology," *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860*, eds. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (Indiana UP, 1972) 309-14.

¹²Feldman and Richardson 297.

carried over into the work of many Modernist authors who also sought a "mythic" symbolic mode of thought and artistic creativity, a heightened state of mind that, in a variety of ways, tried to mirror an ancient and purer "originary" perspective. As Michael Bell has recently indicated, myth was also attractive in its ability to provide a challenge to religious and scientific hegemonies

because of its own transformation into an aesthetic category, rather than a social, philosophical or anthropological, one. Its truth value...increasingly incorporated the claims of poetry, religion and even science, while such a metaphysically transformed, aestheticized conception of myth affected in turn the idea of history.¹³

A great number of Modernist authors, like their Romantic counterparts, explore ancient myths, adapt or rewrite these myths in a modern context, and seek to experience an artistic sensibility that borrows and redirects those traditional energies. But for Modernists, the mythic is also a form of transcendent thinking, an attempt to reach an inspired and heightened level of aesthetic insight, either into ordinary objects, or into more universal patterns of meaning. This "mythic" reaching beyond most frequently operates on the level of a private consciousness experiencing an ongoing tug-of-war between chaos and order, between fragments and unities. Modernists are acutely aware (perhaps even more than the Romantics) of the dramatic explosion of all categories of thought, and of the resulting chaos of uncertainty, relativity and arbitrariness in virtually every academic discipline and artistic medium. When these currents of chaos and order collide, there results, as I hope to show, both greater clarity of perception as well as a structural and emotional resistance to that deeper vision. A heightened "mythic" insight may have seemed desirable, perhaps even inevitable, but it also seems to have revealed universal chaos more richly and terrifyingly than ever before. This realization paradoxically results in the need to disperse, diminish, or even undermine the very transcendence these authors have enabled.

¹³Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge UP, 1997) 12.

B. PROUST, JENSEN, WOOLF AND BORGES:

1. THE MYTHIC

A central characteristic of Modernist authors, particularly those I am examining here, is an acute desire to deconstruct both external and experienced reality, and attain a transcendent level of insight that can be compared to the sublime. But in what sense is such a vision "mythic"? Generally speaking, myths are considered sacred narratives telling stories of gods, the creation, maintenance and destruction of the world, and the cosmic status of humanity. But if we ask ourselves whether such sacredness is present, or even possible, in Modernist mythmaking (an era that regarded "primitive" mythologies with scientific and ethnographic detachment, and whose religious skepticism was in no small measure influenced by Nietzsche's denial of God), we must also remember the distinction between ancient myth (and its associations with ritual and communal belief systems), and Western mythopoesis. Mythopoesis (from the Greek *poiein*, to create or make) actually *re-creates* ancient myths, usually in periods of cultural transition or crisis, and "separates itself from religion to the extent that it does not acknowledge a supernatural authority to which man must surrender." In fact, mythopoesis traditionally carries with it a revolutionary element quite in keeping with a Modernist sensibility, for while it is deeply rooted in history, it also espouses a fundamental ethic of freedom. Where mythology often depicts the creation of the world and universe, the heroic quest, and the final outcome (or destiny) of that quest, mythopoesis retains creation only as memory, and focuses on the hero's mythic crime, his or her journey into "darkness," and possibly a rebirth. Moreover, the mythopoeic hero's final outcome depends on the extent to which he or she evaluates their own transgression, making their victory one of "consciousness and of social morality."¹⁴

The Modernist brand of mythopoesis, then, is *metaphysically and philosophically speculative*, manifesting itself as a radically experimental, artistic, and investigative mode of insight seeking to reexamine and reassess the nature of human existence, the ways in which we perceive experience, and the manner in which our

¹⁴Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1970) 14-5, 22-6.

consciousness organizes and produces meaning from those perceptions. Suzanne K. Langer has in this regard called myth the indispensable forerunner of metaphysical thought.¹⁵ The Modernist era accelerated the radical fragmentation and dispersal of established hierarchies of meaning and belief, even in the sciences, and artists expressed this intellectual crisis through an atomized, atemporal and highly destabilized perception of experience, one that required new forms of order and understanding. The common goal among the four authors of the present study is precisely to embark on a narrative quest that seeks to achieve a new version of mythic and "transcendent" insight into the human condition. They achieve this by challenging preestablished hierarchies of narrative technique and textual meaning, primarily, to name four main strategies they all have in common,

by breaking boundaries of time and narrative order;
 by fragmenting "reality" into an infinite multiplicity of events, images and states;
 by meditating on the nature of a new, more "pure" consciousness of the world;

by challenging traditional parameters of genre and figurative language.

Such aesthetic-philosophical approaches can justifiably be likened to their more ancient mythopoetic counterparts, though the Modernist approach is of course far more skeptical, complex, and self-aware. Where traditional mythopoesis tells stories of origins while paying allegiance to certain communal belief systems, their Modernist counterparts are engaged in a far-reaching search for meaning in the universe, for the structure of our perceptions and of our sense of "reality" within that universe, and this search necessarily requires, as we shall see, breaking apart many basic and inherited parameters of thought and experience.

As a counterpart to traditional mythic beliefs, to the mythically "sacred," Proust's Marcel seeks out, for example, the atemporal "essence" of experience, while Jensen explores the transcendental and transhistorical properties of every facet of nature and human behavior, and Woolf's characters apprehend their experience and their own subjectivity in atomized form. Borges, the last author in this series, is already quite close to traditional myth, in the sense that his fictions investigate the nature of infinity, parallel

¹⁵Susanne K. Langer. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1942).

universes, and cyclical time in a highly stylized fashion that makes his characters archetypal figures. Borges confirms to a significant extent Northrop Frye's theory of the historical circularity of literary modes, whereby the ironic mode of the 20th century loops around to join the mythic once again.¹⁶ A primary feature of Proust's, Jensen's, Woolf's and Borges's narrative, therefore, is that of an "indirect" mythicity, that is, a mode of discourse that is mythic, not because it transposes or reimagines specific myths (like Knut Hamsun's *Pan*, or André Gide's *Thésée*), but because it splits open every aspect of the way we apprehend and understand the universe. "Myth is not just a subjective projection, or an 'internal coherence theory', it is a way of getting truly to see the world."¹⁷ Their works are permeated with stylistic, structural, and thematic features that not only delve radically into basic metaphysical speculations, but can even be traced back to traditional forms of mythic discourse.

As John Vickery has noted, myth "may not be a system of symbolic thought but it may be a symbolizing activity," and therefore has affinities with all art forms from poetry to painting. "Myth emerges less as something that does or does not 'contain' abstract thought or symbolic referents, whether explicit or tacit, than as something susceptible to and eliciting conceptual interpretation, which itself is couched in expressive terms."¹⁸ While such a characterization seems to encompass all literature, Vickery does point towards the useful distinction between myths as containing set stories, and myth as a type of symbolic expression. It is the latter form that concerns us here. The works of Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges have many traits in common with traditional mythopoesis (and with each other), most significantly atemporality, symbolic structures and highly figurative language, the notion of *pars pro toto* (also expressed by the Transcendentalists), patterns of cyclical repetition, descriptions of (or quests for) origins (both universal and private), and the presence of archetypal figures or patterns. Their mythicity permeates the very fiber of their discourse at multiple levels and in various ways, from the linguistic and structural, to the specifically thematic and genre-based. While each author does occasionally suggest or even allude to specific figures from Classical mythology, the mythic element to their work, as the summary below indicates,

¹⁶Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton UP. 1957) ch. 1.

¹⁷Bell 38.

¹⁸Vickery. "Anglo-American Critics" 221.

is driven more forcefully by an astonishing breadth and depth of narrative strategies that seek transcendent insight in remarkably similar ways despite different nationalities and artistic agendas. Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* provides an interesting borderline case in this regard, for this novella is mythical both in that it explicitly refers to figures such as Narcissus and Dionysus, and in the sense that Mann occasionally interweaves Homeric hexameters into his prose style to enhance the archetypal and symbolic nature of Gustav von Aschenbach's journey to Venice.¹⁹ It is the latter, more infiltrative (in this case, stylistic) form of mythicity that will be the primary concern of the present study. My focus therefore will not be on mythic allusions but on ways in which discourse leaps beyond given epistemological, chronological, lexical, and even ontological borders, primarily by looking at Proust's metaphors, Jensen's atemporality, and Woolf's and Borges's atomization of meaning.

Of the four abovementioned strategies that link Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges, the first three, their manipulation of linear temporality, their fascination with the surprising meaning of a tiny object, and their attempts to reach a more pure level of insight into life, deserve brief comment at this point. All four authors split temporally lived experience into thinner and thinner slices, and attempt to reconfigure these time-fragments into newly comprehensible patterns that might yield greater aesthetic and even spiritual meaning. In Proust's *Recherche*, Marcel experiences the phenomenon of involuntary memory, and sees the dialectical reverberations across time as an opportunity to search for essence and truth. Jensen, we have seen, speaks of the need for a "sublime surprise" to see the world anew. His *Myths* closely examine daily reality to the point of deconstructing experience into an immense panoply of fragments which he can then reorder across history into meaningful and revelatory patterns. In Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Lily Briscoe's and Bernard's special sensibilities reveal life to them as an atemporal flood of fragments which they then struggle – in texts that are themselves non-chronological – to comprehend and encapsulate artistically. Finally, Borges's archetypal characters invariably become overwhelmed when they realize they are but miniscule cogs caught in infinitely vast and timeless paradigms, from Ts'ui Pên's garden of forking paths to Funes's infinite memory.²⁰ Their desperation over the

¹⁹Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. Clayton Koelb (New York: Norton 1994).

²⁰Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," and "Funes the Memorious," *Labyrinths* 19-29, 59-66.

impossibility of their situations and their minuteness in the face of eternal patterns leaves them little hope for spiritual or metaphysical salvation.

A second striking parallel is the paradoxical role of humble objects. Each author's characters' struggles with mythic insight are frequently revealed through their confronting small, hitherto insignificant details, or private, modest events and memories, and suddenly seeing them as extremely important and meaningful. As we shall see, in Proust's mechanics of involuntary memory, the vast richness of the past opens up thanks to the modest sensory keyhole of a *madeleine* or an uneven cobblestone in the present; Jensen not only has such Proustian patterns of recollection, but he also adopts the transcendentalist position of seeing every element in nature as a microcosm of the universe; Woolf's characters will often seize upon a single quotidian object – most famously Mrs. Ramsay and the elements of her banquet in *To The Lighthouse* – as being of extreme significance; and Borges's fictions often involve single objects, including most notably the Zahir, that acquire symbolic meaning in that they encapsulate a single trajectory through the infinity of human history. In each case, small fragments unsuspectedly open up an arena of apprehension that proves to be indomitable. What had appeared as a simple, stable, comprehensible iota of the universe actually reestablishes a universe of endless permutations. This moment can be described using the metaphor of a grain of sand in an otherwise empty hourglass: the grain spins in ever-dimishing circles until it seems to be immobile, only to fall through into the emptiness below. I shall return to this image in Chapter 5.

The appeal of the fragment to these and other Modernist authors is manifold. First, and most obviously, fragments provide Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges with stepping-off points into timelessness. Each author makes it clear in their work that their attentiveness to particular fragments indicates an atomized and atemporal view of reality. Our experience of life is not a matter of absorbing external, pre-existing and fixed categories and imposing them on a linear grid, but of receiving a colossal quantity of internal apprehensions (what Woolf calls "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms"²¹) which we must interpret and organize according to our personal instincts. This view offers authors and their characters a chance to rearrange reality into new wholes, to create highly personal and emotionally meaningful interpretations of life, which, in turn, invite a

²¹Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953) 154.

wide variety of narrative experimentation. A focus on fragments also allows an author to demonstrate that they are deliberately redirecting their scrutiny away from traditionally "important" people and events, and towards the ordinary minutiae of daily life. Such scrutiny inherently signals a challenge to pre-established hierarchies of value, a challenge Woolf directed, for instance, against the Victorian "materialists" in her famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," saying that "we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments."²² Fragments are also useful figurative tools, with the tiny able to evoke the universal, but Modernists seem to regard figuration ironically by contrasting symbolic value of epic proportions with the unassuming smallness of the source of that symbolism. Such a contrast allows Modernist authors to undercut the notion of symbolism itself, teasing the reader with an obvious symbol while calling attention to the very arbitrariness and slipperiness of such a reading. This leads us to the inherent element of chance to fragments: an author who uses a fragment to make broad mythic or transcendental claims can avoid being accused of rigorous and advantaged selection of an already charged, value-laden object. The modesty and endless permutability of the fragment makes it attractive as a gateway to universal meaning while letting the author question and escape old exclusivizing forms of narrative and knowledge.

Finally, a third parallel is the goal of enhancing the various characters' capacity to see their lives more fully, with greater depth and meaning. The supposedly fortuitous nature of the fragment, whether it is Proust's *madeleine*, Jensen's old clock, Woolf's dish of fruit, or Borges's coin, is of course intended to split apart experience and subjectivity through the fleeting aesthetic enhancement of a detail. Reality becomes defamiliarized and over-determined, the myriad sensory stimuli of life appear more sharply chaotic, and chronological time is overcome. Such astonishing clarity of vision not only subverts traditional ways of seeing and interpreting experience, but also suggests the perspective of the earliest humans. As a consequence of this mounting pressure, characters seem propelled into a condition of an "originary observation," and this is underscored particularly by portraying returns to childhood perceptions which seem to function symbolically in terms of humanity's "childhood." Jensen is the most explicit in this regard, continually seeking out significance behind the present by connecting it to

²²Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950) 117.

human behavior from thousands of years ago. Many of his myths can be thematically connected to his epic work *Den Lange Rejse (The Long Journey)*, which follows human evolution from the Ice Age to Christopher Columbus. Through her six characters in *The Waves*, Woolf also presents a new way of conceiving of existence by following their interior thoughts from early childhood to middle age. The reader follows the growth of their consciousness, and is encouraged to understand them as symbolic of more nature-bound and more ancient humans, most particularly by the way in which each stage in their lives is interwoven with the descriptions of a beach scene at corresponding times of the day. Although his scope is more private, Proust's Marcel is on a quest that affects us all: to unshackle his mind from the blindness of habit, and to "see into the life of things," to borrow Wordsworth's phrase. Here too, his return to his own childhood suggests the reacquisition of a more basic, more fundamental insight into life, one whose universal availability speaks to its significance as an important new mode of insight into the nature of lived experience. Borges, finally, is of such far-reaching allusiveness that every moment in his fictions resonates with their historical echoes. Emerson, one of Borges's favorite authors, characterized language as "fossil poetry," and in Borges, every character is also merely the midpoint in an infinite branching network of past and future events. When his characters catch a glimpse of those eternal life-trajectories, they acquire insight – often an unbearable one – into the vast possibilities and impossibilities of consciousness. The "originary consciousness" in Borges is therefore often a state of such lucidity that it becomes a metaphysical trap.

In these various works, then, human experience acquires Babel-like vastness, and imposes humility in the character (and, by extension, the artist). Reality suddenly appears infinitely meaningful down to the smallest iota, and each character struggles to negotiate and absorb this sea of awareness. Modernist mythmakers may be capable of initiating a vision approaching the sublime, even the metaphysically transcendent, but they also know that even the smallest fragment is unknowable, since it redirects one's gaze back toward the universe. From these authors' point of view, the risk with using an aesthetic strategy that questions the very fabric of experience and how it is perceived by consciousness is that the privileged insight that confronts his or her various characters casts them into the limbo of undecidability, relativism and arbitrariness. Through these four authors, we will discover that *Modernist mythopoesis is a fragmenting state of artistic lucidity that reveals a deeper – and more dangerous – level*

of experiential chaos than is ordinarily visible. Moreover, the chaos uncovered is so vast and unsettling to the various characters that not only must they each respond cognitively and emotionally, but each author must invest their text with a self-controlling tactic intended, paradoxically, to temper the effect wrought. The retrograde motion necessary to dampen, forestall, or reorder a chaos made all too visible occurs, as we shall see, by using controlling mechanisms at the level of figurative language, genre, character development, and meaning. In this sense, their brand of mythopoesis is true to the Modernist movement in the sense that it operates metafictionally at the level of language, meaning and textuality, and is at the same time self-conscious and self-managing.

2. RESISTANCE: THE ESCAPE CLAUSE

When characters are given privileged vision into the dizzyingly complex workings of the universe and of their interpretations of that universe, and when reason fails them (as in the moment of Kantian sublimity which we shall examine) in trying to find order and definitive answers, their immediate response is one of an emotional, and often artistic, compensation. When Proust's Marcel is greatly disappointed to discover that the Duchesse de Guermantes, a person he idolizes and mythicizes, is but a mere mortal sitting in church along with everyone else, he tries to reapply the idea "It is Mme de Guermantes" to her image. For an instant, that phrase hovers above the image of her, and then suddenly Marcel experiences a release: the power of her presence once again reigns over him, and his mind is flooded anew with images rendering her beautiful – and inaccessible – to him.²³ In Jensen's "Kondignogen," (a story I examine in detail in Chapter 3), the narrator's physical hunger, which stands for his aesthetic yearning for mythic vision, causes him to be transformed into a dragon-like creature, and his terrifying experience of primal instincts represents a warning against such "monstrous" artistic desires. After a desperate search through the countryside, the narrator encounters a poor and hungry child, and the sight of her releases his spell.²⁴ In *To The Lighthouse*, as Mrs. Ramsay witnesses her banquet begin to unravel and to meld with the "fluidity" outside

²³Proust, *Swann* 172-4.

²⁴Jensen, *Myter I* 18-26.

the window, she finds serenity in focusing on a single object, the dish of fruit; she "guards" it, hoping it will retain its textured wholeness, detach itself from and resist the flux of existence (97, 108-9). Even in Borges, where emotional complexity and development seems brief and stylized, characters will respond to their predicaments with simple human frailty, or with self-conscious irony. Even the narrator at the close of "Babel" tries helplessly to see the hypothetical repeatability of the universe of books as an "Order": "My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope" (58).

Beyond such emotional appeals to the fixity of patterns on behalf of the characters within these stories, there seems also to be, at the level of narrative, structural and thematic strategies of self-control in the face of an unsettling "mythic" chaos made all too clear. In their first Excursus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno use *The Odyssey* as the pioneering illustration of a self-managing element in modern culture. They demonstrate how Odysseus, during his voyage, attains self-consciousness through cunning, by simultaneously submitting to and deceiving the mythic powers he encounters during his homeward journey. In the most significant instance of this, when faced with the bewitching power of the Sirens, he finds "an escape clause in the contract" and has himself bound to the mast of his ship. In this fashion, Odysseus adapts to and masters the mythic and primitive powers of fate and nature, and most importantly achieves self-consciousness, not through defiance and battle, but by renouncing his own strength and individuality:

In myth each moment of the cycle discharges the previous one, and thereby helps to install the context of guilt as law. Odysseus opposes this situation. The self represents rational universality against the inevitability of fate...He satisfies the sentence of the law so that it loses power over him, by conceding it this very power.

This act of cunning amounts to a calculated sacrifice of the subject's identity, one which "effectively negates the power to whom the sacrifice is made. In this way he redeems the life he had forfeited." The example of Odysseus is crucial to Horkheimer and Adorno, as it stands for a larger pattern of renunciation and dispersion in the modern age: "The history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice," they claim, and Odysseus, the prototype of modern bourgeois society, through his "dominative renunciation" and his "struggle with myth, represents a society that no longer needs

renunciation and domination, which gains mastery over itself not in order to coerce itself and others, but in expiation."²⁵

A less ambitious reading of this example, however, identifies it simply as a characteristic pattern in the journey of the mythopoeic hero who, as Slochower asserts, "must learn to curb his rebelliousness," and can remain a hero "only if he does *not* completely submit" (22). Mythopoesis depicts the degree to which conflicting relations have been tempered; the heroic quest, in other words, is assimilated, rather than eliminated.

This is connected with the *immanent* character of the myth, which distinguishes it from those religions which emphasize the transcendental nature of salvation. Because the mythic hero never fully surrenders or recants, he cannot achieve complete redemption and his problem cannot be resolved by heavenly grace. (25)

The salvation must therefore be solved through a careful balancing act at the personal level, in the hero's consciousness. In the example of Odysseus, he decides to weaken himself in order to survive the Sirens' song; he becomes helpless, yet he retains his heroism for the ingeniousness of his evasive maneuver, for overcoming yet another in a long array of perils, and for teasing the Sirens, that is, for being able to enjoy the rapture of a sacred and deadly song without succumbing to its godly rules. Odysseus therefore confronts the gods and wins, but only by resorting to a stance that literally and figuratively binds and controls him. Compared to the bravery and physical strength he exhibited against other foes, this is certainly an anticlimactic, if not paradoxical "victory." Although Odysseus's heroism proves to remain untainted by the self-diminishing trickery in this scene, this moment does indeed represent the introversion of quests in mythopoesis. Conflict resolution becomes something that must be negotiated in the protagonist's mind, and the mythic journey can in this sense become, in its Modernist incarnations, a complex aesthetic, philosophical, and metaphysical exploration of human existence.

While this pattern of self-management concerns fictional characters, it also surfaces in modified form and under many different guises at the level of artistic creation in Modernist works, particularly in those to be discussed here. Historically, the attempt at

²⁵Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 58, 50, 55-6

artistic redemption has manifested itself most apparently as explicit self-deprecation in blatantly metafictional works such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Sterne, by not merely admitting but actually *foregrounding* his own faults and buffoonery, and by lifting the veil that ordinarily conceals authorial artifice, managed to pioneer the craft of metafiction that became so popular 150 years later. Calling attention to the text's own means of production enfold the author into the reader's interpretive process, thereby diminishing the traditional authority of texts, and opening up for scrutiny both the fictional realm and the manner in which the author has chosen (and struggled) to represent it. This overt problematization of the task of representing reality artistically can also be understood as an act of anticipatory self-humbling. The author admits, in the text itself, to their struggle with idea, craft and execution, thereby highlighting the difficulty of the interpretive act itself, for any human faced with any aspect of "reality." But this admission also excuses the author from various forms of experimentation or discursive boldness, from instances of overt ignorance or impossibility, even from what might be seen as erroneous or sacrilegious. More broadly, this self-diminishment may also act as a shield against their own themes.

Despite its elitism, Modernist literature emerged in – and ultimately promoted – an era of unprecedented democratization of art, and this flux, in conjunction with an overwhelming panoply of technological, social and philosophical changes, was accompanied by a greater need for salutary (and ironic) self-deprecatory tactics. In the literary domain, this was particularly true because of the new-found license to experiment with old forms ("the tools of one generation are useless for the next"²⁶), a desire to break free from the tremendous weight of the literary and artistic heritage. When an author therefore decided to modernize and adapt an established literary tradition, style, or text, he or she often felt the need to include some form of self-humbling defense mechanism as a counterbalance to the boldness of their experiments. As Irving Howe has expressed it, "Modernism must always struggle but never quite triumph, and then, after a time, must struggle in order not to triumph."²⁷ Of course, the various incarnations of artistic redemption were far more subtle than Sterne's, so subtle, in fact, that at times they even seemed to have been perpetrated unconsciously, almost *à l'insu* of the author him or

²⁶Woolf. *Captain* 111.

²⁷Irving Howe. "The Idea of the Modern," *Literary Modernism* (New York: Fawcett, 1967) 13.

herself. Thus, (to borrow just one example from each) where Sterne grotesquely satirizes literary convention by drawing four spiraling lines at the end of Volume VI to indicate the circuitousness of his narrative (359-60), Woolf's novels frequently fall back on narrative lacunae that suggest the author's own admission of the inexpressibility of her subject. Woolf's narrator may not be saying "This is beyond my ability," but the reader needs no Shandyesque declaration to sense an implicit admission of the limitations of her own craft.

In one way or another, Modernist mythopoesis is both creative and self-defeating, simultaneously an act of allegiance and an act of self-denial, of "expiation". Artists have always turned to myth for inspiration; Modernists were particularly avid in this regard, appropriating and experimenting with classical symbols, biblical stories, and mythic modes of writing. But these works invariably contain self-controlling elements – built-in weaknesses, dispersions of one kind or another – which provide a kind of aesthetic escape valve that mitigates the implied grandeur of their enterprise, and forestalls the modesty of their position. These mythic recastings are therefore governed by the paradox of engaging the highest literary traditions while simultaneously carrying the seeds of their own negation, self-consciously (i.e. metafictionally) refraining from rising to the absolute heights of their models. When Joyce adopts the Homeric structure to render the contemporary reality of Dublin, he reduces the nobility of such an artistic premise through a dizzyingly multireferential, irreverent, and extremely ironic compositional style. Joyce is simultaneously forthright and devious, continually and brilliantly proving himself to be both eminently qualified *and* disqualifiable vis-à-vis his rich mythical intertextuality.²⁸ This duplicity, I hope to show, is in part an effort to dampen the terror of an artistic condition that has revealed the full extent of universal chaos.

The four authors of the present study reveal that not only can mythicity in discourse manifest itself through a combination of different types of features, but that the self-diminishment described above can occur at the level of language, of genre, of emotion, or of meaning. In Eric Gould's brilliant linguistic analysis of Modernist mythicity, he argues that myth necessarily involves

²⁸ See in particular Leo Bersani, "Against Ulysses," *Raritan* 8.2 (1988): 1-32.

an ontological gap between event and meaning. A myth intends to be an adequate symbolic representation by closing that gap, by aiming to be a tautology...Its meaning is perpetually open and universal only because once the absence of a final meaning is recognized, the gap itself demands interpretation which, in turn, must go on and on, for language is nothing if it is not a system of open meaning.

This gap, Gould argues, can also be found at the smallest incremental level of language; it is the "perpetual tension" between signifier and signified in any sign.²⁹ Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges all sought a mythic mode of writing that could confront this gap, this chaos of fragmentation, dispersal, and randomness, hoping for greater understanding of "reality." As we shall see, their distinct artistic motivations led to similar narrative strategies both to examine life in a "transcendent" fashion, and to resist that very transcendence. Their works also complement one another because of the astonishing range of parallels in the themes and patterns they choose to achieve a "mythic" gaze, and because they each use a different form of resistance to the chaos that their literary explorations have suddenly revealed. As the present summary shows, Proust resisted his own mythicity principally at the level of metaphor, Jensen at the level of genre, and Woolf and Borges at the level of hierarchies of meaning. What is fascinating in the interplay between these authors is that each form of resistance can be carried over to the others through a combined reading. I explore a few such "cross-readings" in Chapter 5.

3. AUTHOR SUMMARIES

Marcel Proust

Proust's novel has affinities with mythopoesis principally due to its famous excursions outside present time, its return-to-origins structure, its cyclical patterning, its heavy use of figurative language, and its portrayal of an idealizing sensibility that frequently refers to existing myths. Proust's mythicity, however, is also characteristically Modernist not only because of its extreme aesthetic self-consciousness, its constant demythologization and its ironic attitude towards the miniscule and vain affairs of upper-class *salons*, but also in a problematic metaphoricity.

²⁹Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981) 6-7.

The main reason for this is that Proust's metaphors actually *resist* figuration, as has been observed by critics such as Paul de Man, Jean Ricardou, Margaret Gray, and David Ellison. This resistance manifests itself in a number of different ways. Rather than stating with discursive force – and with all the conviction of mythical narrative – that one thing *was* something else, the narrator more often attenuates his imagery by using simile as a substitute for metaphoric thought. Thus, the majority of Proust's "metaphors" are in fact long-winded excursions into analogous moments that he hopes can highlight a particular sensation; their expansive and digressive character makes them appear tentative and weak. Moreover, Proust often strings together so many similes to heighten a single idea that not only do they become indistinguishable in terms of their rhetorical weight, but they lose their figurative coherence, and at times actually overturn the original sensation. In addition, his comparisons are frequently rooted in imagery that suggests weakness and lack, including analogies drawn from medical conditions.

These various forms of figurative resistance must be read, I argue, in the context of metaphor theory's assessment of the relative value of metaphor over analogy and simile (I here examine the work of I.A. Richards, Max Black, and Earl MacCormac, among others). More importantly, this resistance must also be understood as part of a larger attempt at demythologization. Marcel ostensibly seeks to recover lost time, but, as is made eminently clear throughout the *Recherche*, desires must remain unattained, or at least, must remain in a continual state of cyclicity in order to retain their allure and power. Marcel's language therefore resists reaching its own various aestheticizing and idealizing goals, and this in turn allows him to discover, at the end of the novel, his need to write the very work we have just finished reading. The cycle, it seems, is to be repeated in a kind of endless ecstasy of cyclical desire.

Johannes V. Jensen

Amid Jensen's considerable and varied oeuvre, we find approximately 160 short stories which he published as *Myths* in nine volumes between 1907 and 1944. Many of them are indeed "mythical" in the sense that they reveal Jensen's struggle with acquiring "originary" or transcendent insight into present-day life by drawing connections to the distant (sometimes even prehistoric) past. His myths are often allegorical and

surreal, often situated outside time, and often deal with issues of universal and metaphysical importance.

The most important de-creative element in his work, however, arises through the question of genre: a great number – the majority, in fact – of his *Myths* include short pieces which he himself has admitted have very little (if anything) to do with myth, as they are mere autobiographical sketches, travel essays and/or journalistic observations. I examine Jensen's own problematic and fragmentary definitions of what he understood by "myth," and assess existing critical efforts at reconciling inconsistencies between the body of myths and these various definitions. I observe that Jensen critics have until now incorrectly attempted to solve the problem through various attempts at re-categorizing or redefining Jensen's *Myths* from a genre-based standpoint.

What must instead be recognized is that Jensen's deliberate dispersal of the genre "myth" marks it as fundamentally Modernist in the way that it attempts both to attain a transcendent vision of the natural and human worlds, and to disperse the mythic genre to the logical breaking point by including every facet of his own – and thus all of our – daily experience. The bold claim, therefore, that every one of these pieces is a "myth" is therefore excused by anticipation through a complete dissolution of genre, and allows for a more generous reading of Jensen's apparently transcendentalist aims.

Virginia Woolf and Jorge Luis Borges

Woolf is extremely particular about language and the fictional rendition of "reality" in a way that moves her novels towards an exploration of how we derive meaning from experience. Woolf's characters and novels are most often intensely preoccupied with the birth and development of consciousness, and its means of apprehending and making sense of reality. Woolf defamiliarizes reality often by deconstructing traditional hierarchies of meaning, such that her characters often seem to have a capacity for wonder that precludes categorization into established parameters of thought and language. This feature, in addition to the fact that many of her novels break temporal restrictions, and are either structured like a journey, or operate around a cyclical and universal metaphor, in particular *To The Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, help suggest a "mythic" sensibility.

Borges provides unique and very useful insight into Modernist mythicity. He can be read as an extreme Modernist mythmaker in the sense that he provides highly allegorical fictions about the human search for meaning, but very often winds up emphasizing the central Modernist themes of atemporality, meaninglessness, and dissolution of subjectivity. He achieves a metaphysical erasure of distinction between authors and texts, dreamers and dreamed, one identity and another, through notions of cyclical time and repeated events, explorations of the relation between imagination, dream and reality, complex structures containing the infinity of event-possibilities, and various forms of labyrinthine systems of classification. Among the many themes Borges explores, his treatment of atemporality and impersonality in particular resonates importantly with other Modernist authors, including Jensen, Proust, and Woolf, and represents a valuable illustration of the hypothetical end-point of Modernist mythmaking.

In order to encompass the great variety of themes these features open up, I read Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves* through the theoretical framework of Borges's approach to similar themes, in particular his short stories "The Circular Ruins" and "The Library of Babel." This chapter is organized into two sections: in the first, a close reading of "The Circular Ruins" leads to an analysis of the themes of cyclicity, timelessness and dissolving subjectivity in Woolf; in the second section, a close reading of "The Library of Babel" leads to an examination of the themes of fragmentation, ordering and relativism in Woolf.

The conjunction of these two authors produces many interesting cross-revelations. Borges, for instance, clarifies and intensifies our view of Woolf's main characters' sense of dissolving selfhood, including Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and Bernard. Woolf, on the other hand, adds an important emotional dimension to Borges's relentless constructions, including the fragile but important hope with which he leaves his characters. Both Woolf's and Borges's characters have gained mythic insight into the terrifying chaos of existence and how naturally resistant that chaos is to any ordering system. Woolf's narratives attempt to resist that chaos by placing great emotional value on small, incidental objects, by reducing the importance of great events, and by emphasizing the redeeming value of natural cycles and images. Borges's texts appear to resist their own mythicity through various kinds of self-distancing, self-questioning and self-ironizing textual strategies.

C. MYTH, METAPHOR AND THE SUBLIME

Despite a wide variety of scholarly approaches,³⁰ myth is traditionally understood as a sacred narrative explaining the creation of the world and the origins of mankind. Myths also have an ordering function: they usually involve communal rituals, providing spiritual shape to human experience, and they frequently tell stories about nature and the order of the universe. The great metaphorical richness of mythic narratives owes much to the natural limits of ancient languages. A relative dearth of denotative vocabulary inherently produces, at least from a modern perspective, greater semantic (and hence interpretive) leverage: without the term *volcano*, for instance, a substitute phrase such as *fire mountain* has great figurative richness. What may have seemed a natural and fully "real" linguistic sign in early stages of language now appears as "poetic" indirection. The intimate link between metaphor and myth has been widely acknowledged and discussed in many fields from anthropology to linguistics. Vico, for instance, argued that tropes "were necessary modes of expression of all the first poetic nations," and that metaphor was "the most luminous and therefore the most necessary" of the "first tropes." He underscored the tendency in all languages to give life to inanimate things using metaphors from the human body, senses, and passions, and that it is only later, as language acquired the capacity for greater abstraction, that these metaphors became "figurative."³¹ Although theories of metaphoricity since Vico have greatly extended the range of its causal logic beyond these few basic parameters, he provides an insightful model for the way our language incorporates external reality in simple "blocks" of sensory and cognitive awareness, whose linguistic sparseness appears, in later times, suggestive, i.e. metaphoric. As Fiumara has recently put it, "the deeper and earliest semantic levels in our ontogeny may not entail a clear distinction between literal and metaphoric language."³²

Northrop Frye has, in several essays, also argued that metaphor and myth are intimately intertwined with one another. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, for instance, he

³⁰For a useful survey of modern theories of myth, see Lauri Honko, "The Problem of Defining Myth," *Dundes* 41-52.

³¹Gambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1968) 129-31.

³²Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Metaphoric Process: Connections Between Language and Life* (London: Routledge, 1995) 52.

calls myth an "art of implicit metaphorical identity," describing the myth-metaphor symbiosis in terms of a cosmic interconnectivity between all things: "The world of mythical imagery is...a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body."³³ Metaphor, he says in another essay, is "primary language", is "inseparable" from myth; it is an "ecstatic identification" with something in the natural world. Literary metaphor, he notes, is "purely hypothetical" and grows out of an "existential type of metaphor" characteristic of a more ancient experience of subject-object identification.³⁴ But as Frye notes later, "[t]he subject can never reach the object, the Other, as the Other, but can only encounter it in the intermediate realm of language, to which both subject and object are assimilated."³⁵ Ernst Cassirer's postulates in *Language and Myth* intensify this issue, positing that "myth and language play similar roles in the evolution of thought from momentary experience to enduring conceptions, from sense impression to formulation." For this reason, "[l]anguage and myth stand in an original and indissoluble correlation with one another," and Cassirer locates this in metaphor because, like mythic thinking, it operates under the principle of *pars pro toto*. Just as preindustrial societies will take a fragment of a person or animal as having all the presence and reality of the original owner, so metaphor – in mythic thinking – intends a complete identification of an analogy with the thing described. Cassirer concludes that in mythic-metaphoric thought, "every word is immediately transformed into a concrete mythical figure, a god, or a daemon. Any sense impression, no matter how vague, if it be fixed and held in language, may thus become a starting point for the conception and denotation of a god."³⁶ In a more recent study of the mythic mode of discourse in modern poetry, Lynda McNeil explains the role of both myth and metaphor as attempting to overcome traditional dualities: "Dialectical tension exists in the symbol (or metaphor) both in the Idealist and mythic modes, because both try to achieve unity – oneness with a transcendent or expansive concept of being." The kind of creative, poetic thinking that continually establishes

³³Frye, *Anatomy* 136.

³⁴Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974–1988* (Charlottesville, UP of Virginia, 1990) 226, 7, 112.

³⁵Frye 254.

³⁶Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth* (New York: Dover, 1946) 43, 83-99.

connections between surprising pairs of images, i.e. metaphoric thought, "is like mythic thinking in its tendency to condense and to forge identities."³⁷

The Romantic perception of myth as narrative tradition and as heightened, symbolic mode of consciousness manifests itself in a parallel shift in the role that metaphor plays in relation to theories of the sublime. Metaphor, the basic rhetorical vehicle for myth, seems to have become gradually internalized like myth itself. What was once one of many poetic devices for reaching sublimity has become an integral part of the cognitive functions associated with our sensory apprehensions, our imagination, and our experience of the sublime. Prior to the Romantics, the artistic search for transcendence seemed possible through the perfect application of specific poetic devices. In *On the Sublime*, Longinus argues that the more refined and carefully tailored the poet's discourse, the better he or she will be able to express idealized, transcendent truths. Of all the figures Longinus surveys,³⁸ metaphor most resembles, in the way it functions, the process of transcendence he equates with the sublime. One of the five criteria for "elevated language," metaphors can contribute to the sublime by producing "noble diction," and although any passage should not contain more than three, metaphors can exert "natural power" by being grouped in quick succession. Interestingly, Longinus describes this effect with natural imagery: "The proper time for using metaphors is when the passions roll like a torrent and sweep a multitude of them down their resistless flood." We want "that which transcends the human" in discourse, and sublimity can raise writers "near the majesty of God." The sublime for Longinus depends on the conjunction of art and nature, and approaching the genius of Homer and Euripides depends on the judicious application of particular rhetorical vehicles.³⁹ It is perhaps not surprising that metaphor should be such an important ingredient in producing transcendence, since the sublimity Longinus describes is not unlike the basic functioning of metaphor itself. According to Aristotle, "by far the most important thing" for poetic style "is to be good at metaphor...it

³⁷Lynda D. McNeil, *Recreating the World/Word: The Mythic Mode as Symbolic Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 60, 68.

³⁸These include apostrophe, interrogation, asyndeton (omission of a conjunction), anaphora (repetition of word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses), diatyposis (vivid description), hyperbata (inversion in the order of ideas), polyptota (accumulations), and periphrasis (circumlocution).

³⁹Longinus, "On the Sublime," *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971) 80, 94-5, 97.

is a token of high native gifts."⁴⁰ In every metaphor, we depart from a fixed point in language and cast out towards one or several other images or semantic fields, hoping that epistemologically, cognitively, aesthetically, and perhaps even spiritually, our discourse might become "elevated," enriched by an interaction or fusion with other terms. "A poet's mind is constantly amalgamating disparate experience...always forming new wholes."⁴¹ Metaphoric pairs seek to transcend the literal by making unusual combinations, inviting a reading of one term through the other by equating what I.A. Richards called the *tenor* and the *vehicle*. The new meaning that emerges is, it is hoped, poetic, specially meaningful or provocative, somehow greater than the sum of its parts. Such semantic fusions hope to enhance or transform the value and meaning of its constituents, a meaning that seems to be located neither in one term nor in the other but in an epistemological space in between or beyond the terms in question.⁴² As Eliot has put it, a poet seeks to "force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."⁴³ Through metaphor, language seeks to enact its own transcendence at the level of rhetoric, and this in turn, in Longinus's model, will extend its influence into the writer and his or her audience.

The shift in emphasis in theories of the sublime from issues of production to issues of the psychology of reception occur preeminently in Burke and Kant. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* lays the foundations for shifting the mechanics of the sublime inside the mind in terms of the power not only of nature but of language. Burke devotes most of his time in the *Enquiry* to formulating the manner in which sublime feelings are evoked by particular forms in nature. Astonishment in nature "suspends" the soul "with some degree of horror," and traits such as vastness, infinity and depth all produce the sublime, since pain and danger, "at certain distances, and with certain modifications are delightful." Interestingly, however, Burke goes on to argue in Part V that words do not necessarily need to produce pictures in our minds, to "raise sensible images," in order to exert their power. The

⁴⁰Aristotle. *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1967) 60-61.

⁴¹T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975) 64.

⁴²This view of metaphor is contradicted by theorists adhering to the *substitution theory*, the claim that every metaphor has a literal equivalent that can be restated in plain language. Metaphor theory is discussed at some length in Chapter 2.

⁴³Eliot, "Metaphysical" 65.

business of words, in fact, "is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves." Since words do not resemble the ideas for which they stand, "*descriptive* poetry operates chiefly by *substitution* ; by the means or sounds, which by custom have the effect of realities." Moreover, one of the three ways whereby words influence the passions is through "combinations," a strategy which other artforms such as painting do not allow as freely. Combinations, according to Burke, can, "by the addition of well-chosen circumstances...give a new life and force to the simple object."⁴⁴

Although Burke does not explicitly use the term, "combination" is clearly the realm of metaphor. Prose that is uncomplicatedly descriptive is not likely to stir our passions. However, "strong expressions" create ideas which are "presentable but by language" through combinations of words which make those ideas "great and amazing beyond conception." The fundamental structure and property of metaphor is precisely the ability to make new and hitherto unimagined combinations of words, a dynamic which to modern linguists is the fundamental mode of human cognition,⁴⁵ and which to Burke can "influence our passions." Burke defends therefore the transcendent properties of metaphor, arguing that words in these special combinations can affect us "as strongly as the things they represent, *and sometimes much more strongly*" (my emphasis).⁴⁶ This brief discussion of the power of words comes at the very end of an enquiry weighted heavily toward our relation to the natural world. This suggests that although Burke may consider the power of nature as the primordial agent of the sublime, he feels he must end his investigation with a *coup de chapeau* to Longinus and the tradition of rhetorical analysis of sublime forms of poetic diction. One is surprised, however, by the subversive impact of this final line. After a long exposition of the sublime power in various forms of nature, Burke ends by saying, almost as an afterthought, that language can evoke human passions as much as, and often much more strongly than, those forms it denotes. Metaphor thus seems to have been set aside, until at the final moment it enfolds the *Enquiry* and reveals its power to dominate human passions. What the sublime used to

⁴⁴Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford UP, 1990) 53, 37, 157-8.

⁴⁵See, for instance, Richards, Fiumara, Todorov, and Lakoff & Johnson.

⁴⁶Burke 159, 161.

contain as a tool to be honed and perfected seems to have expanded and revealed itself as a more fully realized and central source of sublimity. Metaphor, through its capacity to move from literal terms to greater meaning, has become a figure of transcendence epitomizing the process of the sublime.

In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant takes the next step in this sequence by expanding and intensifying the complex internal functioning of the sublime within each individual. Where the source of sublimity was external in Longinus and Burke, it is now, according to Kant, produced internally as a compensatory impulse in the mind. Kant defines the mathematical sublime as a state of "emotional satisfaction" when, after being overwhelmed by an aspect of nature's limitlessness and power, our imagination reaches "its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself." It is thanks to reason and its ability to even think of this infinity as a whole that "indicates a faculty of mind which surpasses every standard of sense." The moment of sublime feeling is first one of pain "arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination and the estimation of the same formed by reason." At the same time, however, pleasure arises from a "correspondence with rational ideas of this very judgment of the inadequacy of our greatest faculty of sense." We come to feel our "supersensible destination, according to which it is purposive and therefore pleasurable to find every standard of sensibility inadequate to the ideas of understanding." As a consequence, that which once overwhelmed us is, by natural law, estimated as "small in comparison with ideas of reason."⁴⁷ The paradox is striking: we maintain superiority over nature despite – indeed because of – a limited imagination. The source of the sublime is now human reason itself. In the context of the present analysis – the relation between Modernist authors and their desire to depict the vast dispersal of experience – Kant's dynamic suggests the familiar crisis of such an artistic process. Artists, overwhelmed by their subject matter, attempt to bring the richness of "reality" under aesthetic control; anxiety arises, however, when the artistic imagination reaches a maximum point (as we saw in Lily Briscoe and Marcel), leaving the artist to find bittersweet satisfaction through craft and artistic form. Words or paint may provide an artist with temporary stability, but these methods, like Kant's reason, bear the mark of their own incapacity to enclose the infinity they seek to describe.

⁴⁷Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H.Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951) 91, 93, 96-7.

A number of parallels suggest themselves between Kant's sublime and the functioning of metaphor, most explicitly in his section on genius in which he cites the lines "The sun arose / As calm from virtue springs." Kant's commentary on this analogy (a simile functioning as metaphor) reveals the effect of metaphor on the reader: "The consciousness of virtue, if we substitute it in our thoughts for a virtuous man, diffuses in the mind a multitude of sublime and restful feelings...which no expression that is measured by a definite concept completely attains." There follows a passage which deserves to be cited in full, for it is the closest Kant comes to linking figurative language to the sublime:

In a word, the aesthetical idea is a representation of the imagination associated with a given concept, which is bound up with such a multiplicity of partial representations in its free employment that for it no expression marking a definite concept can be found; and such a representation, therefore, adds to a concept much ineffable thought, the feeling of which quickens the cognitive faculties, and with language, which is the mere letter, binds up spirit also.⁴⁸

The inherent openness of metaphor, its suggestiveness, the fact that its meaning cannot be pinned down to the literal terms of which it is composed, charges the mind and spirit with associations to the point where it seems to perceive something ineffable. When faced with a metaphor, the imagination reads terms it knows and expects to understand the meaning. But the fusion of terms produces a semantic dynamism that "checks" the imagination because of a lack of a "definite concept." Like the sublime, this provokes an even stronger outflow of imaginative energy. Paul Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is remarkably similar to this: in the metaphoric process, "the movement toward the genus is arrested by the resistance of the difference and, as it were, intercepted by the figure of rhetoric."⁴⁹ It is precisely because metaphor, through what Proust calls "the miracle of analogy," points from simple, descriptive terms to a transcendent meaning that the mind moves from the "restful contemplation" of the beautiful to an emotional response associated with the sublime.

⁴⁸Kant, *Judgment* 159-60.

⁴⁹Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986) 428.

Kant associates the beautiful with definite boundaries, the sublime with boundlessness. Continuing our analogy with language, we might characterize this as a contrast between the descriptive and the suggestive, the label and the metaphor. On the one hand, we have literal, strictly realistic language, and on the other, language that evokes feelings and ideas which go beyond the literal meaning. The parameters of the beautiful can be applied to the nature of language in its fundamentally descriptive mode: the word at its most basic, like Kant's beautiful, seems "preadapted to our judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction." By contrast, tropes, and in particular strong metaphors, appear like the sublime "to violate purpose in respect of the judgment" and seem "unsuited to our presentative faculty." Comparing the way the mind experiences the sublime in nature with the way aesthetical judgments of the beautiful take place in restful contemplation, Kant argues that a sublime object causes a "vibration," a "quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same object."⁵⁰ This is not unlike the interplay between terms in a metaphor, what Max Black calls "interaction," reading one term through the other, understanding one term and its associations in terms of the other.⁵¹ In transformative theories of metaphor in particular, there seems always to be an oscillation between terms during the interpretive/creative process. We make an aesthetical judgment about the tenor in a restful state of mind because it is simple, familiar, and stands alone. When the vehicle is introduced, it clashes with the tenor, and the imagination is in a sense overcome by the tension this juxtaposition produces. In trying to grasp the meaning of the metaphor, our minds oscillate between the pleasure of familiarity with the tenor, and the "pain" engendered by the force of the vehicle with its consequent semantic transcendence.

Ultimately, there is no clear-cut way to locate exact meaning in metaphor. Linguists generally support the view that the mechanism of human cognition is in many ways metaphorical, but this speaks only to structural dynamics, not exact meaning. Part of the strength of metaphor is precisely its suggestiveness, its elusiveness. Even though we may be paradoxically satisfied by metaphor, and may even feel we understand the interplay between terms, we must simultaneously acknowledge that our imagination is inadequate in defining exactly the ideas evoked. Metaphor seems therefore to illustrate

⁵⁰Kant, *Judgment* 83, 97.

⁵¹Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962) 39.

the functioning of transcendence rather than provide concrete solutions to such a quest. This relates back to the sublime according to Lucien Goldmann's characterization of Kant's sublime as fundamentally symbolic. Kant's aesthetic, he says, "is a *consolation*, an *alleviation*, but certainly not a way of *overcoming* man's limitation and its tragic implications. For the unconditioned, the totality which man can attain in aesthetics is subjective; it is merely a form or a *symbolic expression*, not an objective and material reality encompassing the whole man."⁵²

The sublime and metaphor both speak to the limitations of language and the consequent struggles of all forms of human expression exemplified in the craft of poetry. This notion of the interchangeability of terms for fundamentally similar modes of operation arises early in Weiskel. The sublime, he notes, is "one of those terms like *inspiration*, *vision*...and, of course, *transcendence*... whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible by enabling us to grasp experience in terms sanctioned by the past—the essential critical gesture, already sophisticated in antiquity." Longinus's *hypsos* he calls a "metaphor presiding over the illusions endemic to reading: we are uplifted as if instinctively, and our proud flight exalts our soul *as though we had created* what we merely heard." In keeping with Kant's validation of mental experience, Weiskel notes that the "affective aggrandizement of the sublime moment supports an illusion, a metaphorical union with the creator which suppresses the inferiority of our status as listeners" (4). Kant does not promise any material form of redemption, since "reality" will remain fundamentally inaccessible to us. He does, however, transform the external aesthetic struggle with expression into an internal psychological, and ultimately metaphysical dialectic between the known and the unknown.

The implosion of metaphor from trope to mode of cognition signals a more profound shift than merely one of terminology. It represents the culmination of a gradual universalizing and democratizing of our confrontation with the inexpressible. Longinus represents an old-order hierarchy of access to the transcendent, an exclusivizing aesthetic to which only those with sufficient talent and dedication have access. Burke in a sense naturalizes the sublime, declaring in true Romantic spirit that certain awe-inspiring forms in nature to which we all have access can produce sublime feelings in us. Yet after providing a rigorous catalogue of natural forms and attributes capable of evoking these

⁵²qtd. in Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 45.

feelings, even he feels the need to leave a window open in defense of poetry, concluding that language too can lead to the sublime. With Kant, then, comes the decisive act of dispersion whereby everyone, through the predisposition of judgment, experiences the sublime from within their own minds when provoked by natural forms. (This is what Goldmann calls his universalist humanism.⁵³)

There are, in fact, important parallels between Kant's theories of human reason and the workings of metaphor. Ricoeur has astutely pointed out the parallel between the metaphorical moment in general and Kant's *schemata*, the interface between category and appearance as outlined in *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, schemata are "mediating representations" that satisfy the need for homogeneity between our representations of objects and their concepts: "the concept must contain something which is represented in the object that is to be subsumed under it." Schema are a fundamental process of the imagination, and while their exact "mode of activity" cannot be known to us, they allow phenomena to agree with their category, subordinating appearances to universal rules of synthesis.⁵⁴ Kant's model brings to mind Black's metaphor for the moment of interpretation:

Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen's structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen and the system of "associated commonplaces" of the focal word as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principal subject is "seen through" the metaphorical expression – or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is "projected upon" the field of the subsidiary subject.⁵⁵

Black's screen here provides a similar function for different semantic fields as Kant's schemata do to synthesize phenomena and their respective categories. Interestingly, both the screen and the schemata are themselves metaphors for a cognitive process, and therefore cannot be fully and exactly known. Nevertheless, the parallel between the schemata and metaphoricity in general does provide useful inroads into understanding the

⁵³Weiskel 45.

⁵⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929) 180-7.

⁵⁵Black 41.

way the mind negotiates difference. Against the context of Kant's synthesis of phenomenon and category, Ricoeur describes a "schematism of metaphorical attribution" where different categories are in conflict owing to the established meaning in each element of the metaphor: "the paradoxical character of the predicative assimilation" in the metaphorical moment "consists in presenting facts pertaining to one category in terms appropriate to another. All new rapprochement runs against a previous categorization which resists, or rather which yields while resisting." This tension between sameness and difference, which Ricoeur calls "semantic impertinence," causes the imagination to operate *through* differences, rather than above them. "Imagination is this stage in the production of genres where generic kinship has not reached the level of conceptual peace and rest but remains caught in the war between distance and proximity."⁵⁶

Kant's schemata and his model for the sublime would seem, therefore, to present models of psychological response that in many ways resemble the process of interpreting metaphor, of assimilating difference and the unknowable, the hitherto uncategorized. This three-way parallel between the schemata, the sublime, and metaphor suggests that, according to a Kantian framework, a metaphoric diction may provide a way of recovering the kind of mental process and perhaps even transcendence traditionally associated with a mythic sensibility. Metaphor is a central feature of mythic discourse, operating not only as an evocative figure of speech, but also as an order-giving feature of discourse. In the context of the historical progression of metaphor's relation to theories of the sublime, we might even conjecture that metaphor encapsulates the sublime moment in miniature. Longinus is correct in thinking that metaphor can create sublime feelings, but he imposes upon it the condition of an external aesthetic judgment. Burke in a sense over-generalizes the issue by claiming that metaphor has potentially limitless power over us, not as rhetorical tool, but by virtue of its linguistic operation. Kant takes the final necessary step by showing both the concept of understanding and the process of the sublime as interactions of disparate elements whose combination resembles the metaphorical moment. In the former case, the imagination produces schemata that fuse phenomena with categories; in the latter, the imagination is overwhelmed, producing feelings of sublimity. These two aspects may lead the way to distinguishing between the "intellectual" and the "emotional" components of metaphor, the attempt to merge

⁵⁶Ricoeur 427-8.

semantic meaning on the one hand, and the feelings of confusion and perhaps even transcendence on the other. Ricoeur, in fact, argues for the need to understand metaphor's pictorial and imaginative elements, in addition to the "suspension" or "moment of negativity."⁵⁷

As we shall see, this appropriation of metaphor by the sublime, and the consequent symbiosis between metaphor, myth and the sublime, invites new readings of recent use of metaphor and myth among Modernist authors. The gradual internalization of the process whereby transcendence might be pursued suggested for Modernist writers that transcendence could now be self-generated through particular narrative forms as expressing particular states of consciousness. Just as metaphor and rhetorical beauty was less an aspect of style in narrative, and more a mode of expression and thinking, so the mythic was now not only a set of archetypal figures and patterns that could be found in ancient narratives, but a heightened consciousness involving a high degree of fragmenting self-scrutiny. The mind was now both the canvas and the battleground where the unthinkable scatter of life was to be witnessed and negotiated. What mattered was understanding the thousands of impressions and feelings received by the mind each minute, and how they fused, interacted or contradicted one another in thought. Externally imposed hierarchies of what was important or trivial, meaningful or chaotic, could no longer dominate the ingredients of fiction: every feature of life was now worthy of artistic attention, because everything affected consciousness and could potentially be salutary. As the transcendentalists had shown, even the smallest, most mundane of objects or events could open up an entire universe of significance, for it was connected to an infinite number of other points in space and time. In this superior "spiritual" state of observation, any fragment of the world could thereby lay bare the manner in which the mind functioned in making those connections, and how it sought to control that chaos of possibility.

⁵⁷Ricoeur 429.

D. MODERNISM AND THE EXPLOSION OF CERTAINTY

Paul Valéry once noted that "une époque littéraire est avant tout une réaction" ("a literary epoch is above all a reaction"),⁵⁸ a definition certainly true of Modernism. A great number of studies describe the literature and art from this period as a violent response to changes wrought by a modernity too tumultuous and far-reaching in its upheavals. Although of critical importance in its own right, the industrial revolution had been a "comparatively remote affair" until the machine fully invaded the city by the turn of the century;⁵⁹ modernity became, in Marshall Berman's words, a force that "pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish."⁶⁰ But looking beyond the issue of becoming overwhelmed by technological innovation, we find an inherent and perhaps unsuspected interdisciplinarity to modernity, as William Everdell's recent survey has shown, manifesting itself as a force of discontinuity in fields ranging from number theory to pointillism, from relativity theory to psychoanalysis, from free verse to probability theory.⁶¹ Attentiveness to human consciousness and self-consciousness became a central concern during the Modernist era, as this was the new age of solipsism, of psychological chaos and our sudden awareness of the infinite fragmentability (or relative status) of any discipline, any approach to understanding the universe. Such a diffraction is aptly described by Woolf who, in her famous essay "Modern Fiction," characterizes the mind's impressions as "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old."⁶² Woolf's radical suggestion is that complex speculation must be directed not only at abstract concepts or theoretical discussions of philosophy or physics, but at all aspects of our daily reality. Even the quotidian as experienced by each individual depends, it seems, on the manner in which we organize these atoms.

⁵⁸Paul Valéry in a letter of 19 December 1932, qtd. in Fokkema and Ibsch 24.

⁵⁹Hugh Kenner, "Notes toward an anatomy of 'modernism.'" *A Starchamber Quiry* (London: Methuen 1982) 5.

⁶⁰Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (London: Penguin, 1982) 15.

⁶¹William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns* (New York: U Chicago Press, 1997).

⁶²Woolf, *Common* 154.

In addition to engaging in highly experimental forms of narrative, including innovative modes of aesthetic ordering (allusions, motifs, archetypes), ambiguous beginnings and endings, and broken chronology, Modernist artists and thinkers became increasingly suspicious of history – Georg Lukacs speaks at length of the consequences of the Modernist *negation* of history⁶³ – and of the ways in which we had hitherto ordered life's fragments. The modern became, in Stephen Spender's words, "the realized consciousness of suffering, sensibility and awareness of the past."⁶⁴ Works of art and literature were increasingly self-aware, ironic and metafictional; "[t]he Modernist interpretation of the world [in art and literature] is provisional, fragmentary," always "screened by conscious deliberation."⁶⁵ Ford Madox Ford complained that James and Conrad paid "too great attention to their Art. Their defects, in short, are those of over-consciousness."⁶⁶ In the collision of the past and present, Modernists were engaged in what has been called a "creative devolution,"⁶⁷ a "metamorphic impetus" and "systematic deformation,"⁶⁸ rejecting old forms of thought, while paradoxically depending on those very forms to express that rejection. As Spender has said of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, these great works were an "attempt to envisage the past as a whole complexity enclosed within a consciousness conditioned by circumstances that are entirely of today."⁶⁹

In the context of this discussion, two famous essays brilliantly synthesize this fragmentation and dispersal of "reality" as an attack on established norms of thought and language: Friedrich Nietzsche's "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense," and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "The Letter of Lord Chandos." Nietzsche, who came to international prominence thanks to a series of lectures by Georg Brandes in Copenhagen in 1888, was certainly one of the leading influences in the challenge to old norms of

⁶³Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963) 20-45.

⁶⁴Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1963) 72.

⁶⁵Fokkema and Ibsch 4, 29.

⁶⁶Ford Madox Ford, "The Critical Attitude," *A Modernist Reader*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: Batsford, 1986) 37.

⁶⁷Clement Greenberg, "Beginnings of Modernism," *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*, Ricardo Quinones et al., eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986) 17-24.

⁶⁸Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?" in *Refractions* (Oxford UP, 1966) 271-95.

⁶⁹Spender, 82.

thought. One of his most overarching critiques of anthropomorphism comes in this remarkable essay in which he relegates truth to the status of a "mobile army of metaphors...illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions." Nietzsche attacks our foundations of truth, arguing that language imposes an artificial grid upon reality, that the invention and gradual solidifying of terminology legislates laws of truth. The error, according to Nietzsche, lies in a procedure that holds man up "as the measure of all things," thereby forgetting that the "original metaphors of perception *are* indeed metaphors," not things in themselves. Mankind has imposed order upon the world by "forgetting that primitive world of metaphors, only by the congelation and coagulation of an original mass of similes and percepts pouring forth as fiery liquid out of the primal faculty of human fancy...only by the fact that man forgets himself as...an *artistically creating* subject."⁷⁰ As I hope to show, this forgotten realm seems to be precisely the one Modernist mythmakers try to reveal in all its primal chaos. They seek to undo the cognitive cementing Nietzsche deplors by returning, in a variety of ways, to a "primitive world of metaphors"; they are acutely aware of themselves as creative makers of meaning of the surrounding world, of being actively engaged in responding to and interpreting the stimuli of experience.

In a similar challenge to the arbitrary limits language imposes on reality, von Hofmannsthal's fictional Lord Chandos deplors his inability "to think or speak of anything coherently." Everything disintegrates around him, and ideas can no longer circumscribe the diffusion of thoughts and impressions he perceives. Consequently, everything strikes him as having meaning, as being allegory, and every creature appears a microcosm of all other creatures: the whole of existence seems to him "as one great unit," without any contrast between the physical and the spiritual. This resembles the mythic condition expressed in Nietzsche's nostalgia for a forgotten "primitive metaphor-world." Lord Chandos's peculiar vision and angst also echo those of Borges's librarians in several important ways. Where the librarians face a universe of letters, some of which they are deluded into seeing as divine, Lord Chandos feels that even the most trivial objects (a tree, a pitcher, a beetle) manifest "the Infinite." His body consists "of nought but ciphers

⁷⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense," *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Ft. Worth: Harcourt Brace College Pubs., 1992) 637.

which give me the key to everything," and he declares finally that he could never write another book, for

the language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish, but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.⁷¹

This closely parallels Borges's critique of our assignation of meaning to one particular language through the hyperbole of a library in which any group of letters can mean anything in one of its "secret tongues." The devious corollary of such a vision comes near the close of "Babel," when the narrator muses, "You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?"(57-8). A combined reading of Borges, Nietzsche and von Hoffmannsthal here epitomizes the dilemma of the Modernist critique of linguistic and epistemological norms: once every cognitive and systemic foundation has been questioned and undercut, the characters and authors are left spinning in a chaotic void in which nothing has definitive meaning, and any artistic or intellectual formation must necessarily seem both arbitrary and relative to any other formation. The will to mythicize, to behold the originary chaos of forms, allowed Modernist artists a privileged vision, but it also cast them into a dangerously uncontrollable realm. The deadly Minotaur could prove to be not merely at the center, but at every turn in the labyrinth of reality.

E. EXISTING THEORIES OF MODERNIST MYTHICITY

In one of his parables, Borges observes that for Cervantes and Don Quixote, "the dreamer and the dreamed, the tissue of that whole plot consisted in the contraposition of two worlds: the unreal world of the books of chivalry and the common everyday world of the seventeenth century. Little did they suspect that the years would end by wearing away the disharmony." Long after an author has created a fiction, in other words, that imaginary world becomes "no less poetic" – and, in Borges's universe, no less unknowable – than the present actual world. "For myth," Borges concludes, "is at the

⁷¹Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," *Selected Prose* (New York: Pantheon, 1952) 129-41.

beginning of literature, and also at its end."⁷² Since we apprehend the world through our senses and imagination, Borges seems to argue, we must wonder what barriers – if any – separate our physical from our conceptual existence, whether we consider a seventeenth-century author or our own life. Borges has of course chosen his example very carefully: the Don's delusion is both extreme and literary, thereby highlighting our own difficulties in separating fiction from objective "reality," and suggesting that literary texts can play an equivalent role to objectively observable experience in shaping meaning. Characterizing the beginning and end of literature as "myth" suggests that imagined (artistic) and "real" (quotidian) experiences are on equal footing in acquiring universal and timeless significance; it also implies that even our most vivid present experiences are no less dream-like and unknowable than the ancient landscapes of history. In such a model, every idea and object can carry meaning, everything possesses all the poetic wonder and archetypal importance we typically associate with "mythic" narrative. Such extreme metaphysical dispersion derives in part from Berkeley, Schopenhauer and Emerson, among others, who have inspired Borges's monistic models of the universe as infinite collections of different but homogeneous possibilities that each person may imagine, interpret, or live.

The historical progression of literature does indeed seem framed by conditions of mythic ubiquitousness, but the source of that mythicity is radically different. Preindustrial societies, as we learn from Cassirer, Vico and Eliade, made meaning of their world through a sensibility in which every element of external apprehension was cast into a timeless and sacred metaphoric narrative we have come to name "myth." When we say ancient societies express themselves "mythically," we tend to see this as synonymous with "poetically," with a rarefied language that acquires special power and beauty precisely because of its relative simplicity and hence suggestiveness. Today, however, the notion of myth has been totally dispersed, as Borges shows above. In the Western world, the imaginative array of distant and awesome figures that once ruled over our aesthetic and cultural sensibilities have now been absorbed by popular culture and placed alongside the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. At the same time, what was once a traditional mythic sensibility reserved for certain communal rituals

⁷²Jorge Luis Borges. "Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote," *Dreamtigers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964) 42.

is now applied to the most infinitesimal fragments of quotidian life, bestowing upon the mundane an ironically exalted designation. We have witnessed a democratization of aesthetic hierarchization so complete that, as Art Berman observes, "modern life is itself an adequate myth."⁷³

Just as Keats and Shelley reworked the myths of Endymion or Prometheus, many of the greatest High Modernists turned to myth as a source of artistic inspiration. Myth could provide a gateway into the primal in the human psyche, it could illuminate the nature of our origins, both social and developmental, and could inspire new ways of depicting the ineffable. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* exerted tremendous influence in this regard, providing a wide range of authors with a rich compendium of ethnographic material recalling a primal and more pure human condition. As John Vickery has shown,⁷⁴ themes such as the dying god and the sacrificial victim appear in works ranging from Richard Aldington's poetry to Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. T.S. Eliot acknowledges Frazer's influence in his notes to *The Waste Land*, and in his essay on poetry and criticism states that "[p]oetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating of a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm; hyperbolically one might say that the poet is *older* than other human beings."⁷⁵ Elements from Frazer appear in W.B. Yeats, who also spent considerable time researching, retelling and incorporating Irish mythology into his work.⁷⁶ Many Modernist authors have also borrowed from Greek myths, adapting narrative patterns and figures to a modern context, including D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Knut Hamsun, and Jean Cocteau.

Joyce's *Ulysses*, no doubt the most famous instance of Modernist mythicity, borrows patterns from Homer's *Odyssey* with varying degrees of point-by-point correspondences from chapter to chapter. In this interweaving of our most ancient text and its modern "translation," Joyce compresses the decade of Odysseus's travels into a single day in Dublin. When a gaze accustomed to ten years must bear upon twenty-four fairly ordinary hours, the result is the micro-scrutiny of modern mythicity. In "'Ulysses', Order and Myth," one of the most important essays of the Modernist era, T.S. Eliot calls

⁷³Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Urbana, IL: Univ.Illinois Press, 1994) 102.

⁷⁴John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton UP, 1973).

⁷⁵T.S. Eliot, "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," *Selected Prose* 95.

⁷⁶W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (New York: Collier, 1969).

Joyce's strategy a "mythical method," praises it as an important discovery, and identifies it as an ordering device: "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."⁷⁷ William Righter has astutely observed that Eliot's identification of such order may be overstated: since the *Odyssey* is itself an artistic reworking of mythical materials; any order it reflects derives from the artist's own creativity. Righter prefers to think of the role of the *Odyssey* less as a form of ordering, and more as an "opening for the imagination." Interestingly, Eliot's own use of myth is more integrative than the Joycean parallel narrative, in that *The Waste Land* incorporates mythical characters into the *déroulement* and spiritual meaning of the poem.⁷⁸

If we are to identify two main and opposing currents in myth criticism, the first would be the tendency to analyze literary characters and plots in order to uncover their archetypal significance, to give coherence and clarity to what seems fragmentary. Righter's qualification notwithstanding, the first critical tradition has echoed Eliot's example and used myth as a system of interpretive order: "the mythic method [of literary criticism] is concerned with comparative structures, functions, and individual complexes of traits or qualities."⁷⁹ In a representative example of such an approach, Joseph Blotner finds resemblances between Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse* and Rhea, child of Gaea (Mother Earth) and Ouranos (Father Heaven), and calls her "almost an incarnation of Demeter," Goddess of the Corn, owing to the images of fruitfulness that surround her. Despite his caveat that "the mythic approach will not be urged as a Rosetta Stone for fathoming all the meanings of the novel," Blotner's ordering approach comes through rather forcefully:

the myths of Oedipus and the Kore, superimposed momentarily upon the novel, provide a framework within whose boundaries and by virtue of whose spatial ordering the symbolic people, passages, and phrases of [*To The Lighthouse*] can

⁷⁷T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses', Order and Myth." *Selected Prose* 177.

⁷⁸William Righter, *Myth in Literature* (London: Routledge, 1975) 34-5.

⁷⁹John B. Vickery, "Literary Criticism and Myth: Anglo-American Critics," *Literary Criticism and Myth*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (Pennsylvania State UP, 1980) 215. See also *Myth and Literature*, ed. John B. Vickery (University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

be seen to assume a relationship to each other which illuminates their reciprocal functions and meanings.⁸⁰

Much critical energy has been devoted to finding these kinds of correspondences between works of literature and the compendium of archetypal symbols in Greek mythology, *The Golden Bough*, or Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols*.⁸¹ The various typologies of Northrop Frye have of course also been tremendously influential in guiding systemic readings of myth.

Opposing such principles of ordering, the postmodern approach to myth has, as might be expected, been radically dispersive to the point of erasure. For Roland Barthes, myth is the transformation of meaning into form. In *Empire of Signs*, he explicitly understands Japan not as a real country but as a collection of signs that thereby allow for free interpretation, manipulation and deconstruction: "the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation – whose invented interplay – allows me to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own."⁸² In similar fashion, Barthes' collection of *Mythologies*, which includes the more theoretical essay "Le mythe, aujourd'hui" ("Myth Today"), splits myth into a cascading model of signification, thereby dispersing it like a deck of cards. Barthes fractures traditional notions of myth by examining the mythic attributes of a diverse range of elements from popular culture, including the new Citroën, professional wrestling (*catch*), Greta Garbo, and French cuisine.⁸³ Myth, for Barthes, is no longer a question of a density of meaning, of preserving content, but of form, of image: "myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea: it is a mode of signification, a form...Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message." Everything, therefore, can be a myth, for any object can, according to Barthes, "pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society." What matters is not the particular image that is used, but the

⁸⁰Joseph L. Blotner, "Mythic Patterns in 'To The Lighthouse'", *Virginia Woolf: To The Lighthouse, A Casebook*, ed. Morris Beja (London: Macmillan, 1970) 170-1.

⁸¹Carl G. Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1964).

⁸²Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 3.

⁸³Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957). Translations of citations from "Le mythe, aujourd'hui" are taken from "Myth Today" in *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 93-149.

manner in which it is transmitted. Myth operates here according to a "second-order semiological system" whereby the sign in a first system becomes "a mere signifier in the second." Myth becomes a metalanguage in this model, since "[t]he materials of mythical speech...are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth." The parasitical power of myth, for Barthes, is that it can absorb a signification, vacate it, and reassign meaning to it; there results a constant alternation – Barthes calls it a game of hide-and-seek – between meaning and form. When Barthes therefore examines various aspects of French culture through the lens of myth, he seeks particularities of form that, though they may contain the ghost of ancient myth, are now noteworthy only in terms of their idiosyncratic inflection and signifying effect.

The Scylla and Charybdis of these two directions in myth theory – myth as ordering device, as an undercurrent of ancient patterns, and myth as temporary inflection, as one of an infinite number of possible distortions – offer an assessment of myth in Modernist literature with modes of analysis that appear either too restrictive or too dispersive. On the one hand, traditional myth criticism, though it frequently recovers useful patterns of meaning in what may otherwise have seemed unclear, seems to lean towards an ethnographic impulse, one that usually results in a catalogue of interesting comparative readings across literary ages. This approach can lead to misleading conclusions:

Any attempt to attribute literal meaning to Greek myth will be shot through with ambiguity, for the tales are so deeply immersed in their own cultural context...The ready-reference to the 'Oedipal' element in whatever work is the easy post-Freudian shorthand of which we expect little more than the recognition of certain highly schematized and simplified relations within the family group.⁸⁴

On the other, myth is merely one more victim in the postmodern dispersal of cultural forms whereby the disappearance of transcendental signifiers has relegated everything, it seems, to the status of a simulacrum.⁸⁵ An artistic sensibility that employs either the figures, patterns or rhetoric of myth seems, according to the first method, to be a modern translation of older forms, and therefore whatever aims the author may have had can be reduced to such historicization. According to the second, such an author participates in

⁸⁴Righter 80.

⁸⁵See in particular Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

the ongoing propagation of signs that continually underscores the interpretive and relative nature of cognition and human existence. This lack of grounding seems in turn to propel the work and its author into the void of irremediable meaninglessness.

What appears to be lacking is some middle ground approach to myth in literature that acknowledges the traditional legacy of mythic expression, the role of inherited forms of archetypal meaning, while understanding how such a mode of discourse radically undercuts the very legacy from which it has borrowed, and scatters the parameters of "reality" into potentially irrecoverable chaos. I want to argue in particular that the Modernist use of myth needs to be assessed in a two-fold manner, first as an attempt to enter a special realm of vision whose transcendent properties have been associated with ancient myth, and secondly as a self-conscious involvement with the chaos of signification typically associated with the aesthetics of postmodernism. The heightened language of myth indicates its self-awareness as a privileged attempt at comprehending existence. It must therefore also acknowledge the vastness of the abstractions and unknowns it will encounter, and confront its own limitations. Myth is "the history of our inability to authenticate our knowledge of Being, and yet it is at the same time a history of our attempts to understand that inability."⁸⁶ In order to manage the chaos rendered visible through the deconstruction of traditional forms of thought, Modernist mythmakers need, therefore, a mechanism whereby they can remain "grounded" in order not to succumb to the very void their mythopoesis has sought to open. This double-movement is the focus of the present study.

⁸⁶Gould 10.

CHAPTER 2: MARCEL PROUST

There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

*This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

A. THE PARADOX OF PROUST'S FIGURATION

1. THE DOMINANCE OF SIMILE

Our most important task in life, according to Marcel Proust, is to make the world our own. In an interview which appeared in *Le Temps* two days before the publication of *Du côté de chez Swann*,¹ Proust declared that "ce que nous n'avons pas eu à éclaircir nous-mêmes, ce qui était clair avant nous (par exemple des idées logiques), cela

¹All references to Proust's novel are twofold: first to the individual volumes in the Gallimard edition, using the following nomenclature: CS – *Du côté de chez Swann*; AO – *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*; CGI & II – *Du côté de Guermantes I & II*; SG – *Sodome et Gomorrhe*; LP – *La Prisonnière*; AD – *Albertine Disparue*; TR – *Le Temps retrouvé*; in each case, the reference to the most recent Pléiade edition in 4 volumes is also given.

n'est pas vraiment nôtre, nous ne savons même pas si c'est le réel. C'est du possible que nous élisons arbitrairement" ("what we have not had to clarify ourselves, what was clear before us (such as logical ideas) is not really ours, we do not even know if it is real. It is the possible that we choose arbitrarily").² In order to reach the truer reality "loin de laquelle nous vivons" ("far from which we live"),³ to break through the hardening shell of habit, we must project our own subjective ideals onto our environment lest the passive reception of preestablished notions foreclose the chance of deeper vision. In the final volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel observes that reality is "un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément" ("a certain relationship between those sensations and memories that surround us at the same time"). The writer must recover this "rapport" between present sensation and past memory, "pour en enchaîner à jamais dans sa phrase les deux termes différents" ("to permanently link the two different terms in his phrase"). According to Marcel, the primary vehicle for achieving this connection is metaphor, the trope that functions the way nature does in revealing to Marcel "la beauté d'une chose...dans une autre" ("the beauty of one thing...in another"). Metaphor can help develop the images of the past into a sharper reality by subtracting two sensations "aux contingences du temps" ("from the contingencies of time").⁴

Metaphor represents a gateway to the realm of truths and essences, what in the first volume is the "Au-delà" ("Beyond") he could reach when revisiting Combray,⁵ or, in the last, "la vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue...la littérature" ("the real life, the life finally discovered and clarified, consequently the only life fully lived: literature").⁶ We each carry within us a "livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai," ("essential book, the only real book"), Marcel asserts, and a great writer needs to "translate" this book rather than invent it. But "translation" is burdened here with multiple tasks. In order to see reality not as the "déchet de l'expérience" but in its authentic form, Marcel believes our inner world must be

²Marcel Proust, "Swann Expliqué par Proust," *Essais et articles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 255.

³Proust, *TR* 202 (IV.474).

⁴Proust, *TR* 196 (IV.468).

⁵Proust, *CS* 48 (I.48).

⁶Proust, *TR* 202 (IV.474).

translated, which according to this passage seems to encompass at least four different processes: the semantic unification of two terms (metaphor), the process of making analogies (describing one thing through another), overcoming the restrictions of time (comparing a present sensation to a memory), and revealing the hidden inner world by expressing it through the craft of writing, the famous "beau style."⁷ In the abovementioned interview, Proust reiterates these issues, but explains them not through metaphor but through involuntary memory. The accidental nature of this type of memory guarantees its "griffe d'authenticité" ("claw of authenticity"). By allowing us to taste the same sensation in a new and unexpected context, involuntary memory provides an "exact dosage" of memory and forgetfulness, it liberates the new sensation from "toute contingence" ("all contingency"), and provides us with its extra-temporal essence, "celle qui est justement le contenu du beau style, cette vérité générale et nécessaire que la beauté du style seule traduit" ("that which is precisely the content of a beautiful style, that general and necessary truth that only the beauty of the style can translate").⁸ What is important here is the absence of any mention of metaphor in the interview, even though he is describing a very similar process and outcome. It would seem, therefore, that for Proust, metaphor achieves the same extra-temporal unification of sensations as involuntary memory, and so while his novel may only contain a dozen or so instances of involuntary memory, his more than two thousand metaphors serve to permeate the *Recherche* with the search for extra-temporal essence. The important difference, of course, is that metaphors are voluntary, and seem precisely to proliferate so much to try to achieve as much aesthetic impact as the far fewer and far more powerful cases of involuntary memory.

We discover already in the first volume why Marcel engages in a discourse so charged with figurative language. Early in *Swann*, for example, Marcel admires Bergotte for his digressions because they lay a veil over language; he longs for "une opinion de lui [Bergotte], une métaphore de lui, sur toutes choses" ("some opinion, some metaphor of his on all things" (94); he believes one must turn away from experience in order better to seize upon it (136-7); he asserts that memory continually builds "fac-similés" of our sensations so that we can compare and contrast them with our

⁷Proust, *TR* 196-7 (IV.468-9).

⁸Proust, "Swann Expliqué," 254-5.

present impressions (206); and he admires Swann's way of seeing life through art, particularly Italian painters. (This will inspire Marcel to invoke Poussin, for instance, when describing Gilberte late in *Swann* (387).) These various attitudes point to metaphor, a linguistic device that, as in each case above, seeks greater precision through a supplemental layer (or as Marcel's grandmother thinks of it, an extra "épaisseur d'art" ("thickness of art"))⁹ over the image in question, while leaving the overall interpretive effect in a kind of limbo, oscillating between images.

In *Swann* Marcel also describes his experience with reading books and his desire to leap into the world they describe, saying: "On cherche à retrouver dans les choses, devenues par là précieuses, le reflet que notre âme a projeté sur elles, on est déçu en constatant qu'elles semblent dépourvues dans la nature, du charme qu'elles devaient, dans notre pensée, au voisinage de certaines idées" ("We try to discover in things, which thereby become precious, the reflection of what our soul has projected onto them; we are disappointed to notice that they seem devoid in nature of the charms they owed, in our thoughts, to their proximity to certain ideas"). Here we have an outline of the overarching pattern to this enterprise: the desire to recognize projections of his own sensibilities, ideas and desires on the world around him, and the disillusionment in finding that reality does not live up to those subjective ideals. Marcel expresses this search as an effort to constantly outpace his own soul "dans la conquête de la vérité...on est comme emporté avec [notre âme] dans un perpétuel élan pour la dépasser" ("in search of the truth...we are as if taken up by our soul in a constant momentum to overtake it") (85-6). As P.-V. Zima has aptly put it, Marcel is caught up in a romantic desire for "du vague, du mystère, de l'objet sans contours précis et qui ne saurait être défini, possédé, sous peine de perdre son mystérieux charme, seule garantie de la survie du désir" ("the vague, the mysterious, the object without precise contours and which cannot be defined or possessed, lest it lose its mysterious charm, the only way of guaranteeing desire's survival").¹⁰ The famous magic lantern in Marcel's room in the opening pages of *Swann* can in this sense be understood as a symbol for his idealizing gaze, the way he continually "projects" a fantastic array of mythic figures against the contours of his ordinary life in the hopes of reaching a heightened vision of that life. In this constant "desire for myth," as Zima calls it, Marcel

⁹Proust, CS 40 (I.40).

¹⁰P.-V. Zima, *Le Désir du mythe* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1973) 76.

will describe each new facet of his experience not with Balzacian finality of detail and enumeration, but indirectly, impressionistically, as if to render only the mysterious aura of the experience and its relation to his sensibilities. Then, each time the crude and disappointing truth will shatter his dream, he will once again try to "overtake" his soul in search of another elusive ideal. As we learn in *Temps retrouvé*, this élan will ultimately take the form of a grand literary enterprise he understands he must begin. Real life lies in literature, Marcel declares; our daily life is encumbered by countless "clichés" ("pictures") that remain useless because "l'intelligence ne les a pas développés" ("our intelligence has not developed them"). Only art can allow us to "sortir de nous" ("go outside ourselves") (202/IV.474).

Proust's *Recherche* has been admired for the tremendous variety, richness and depth of the countless analogies that wind and weave their way through Marcel's mythic journey. This view has traditionally emphasized the predominance of metaphor, not only because of Marcel's various references in the *Recherche* to the power of metaphor as rhetorical vehicle, but also because of the critiques Proust leveled against other writers' use of metaphor. Echoing his abovementioned claims about metaphor's capacity to draw sensations outside time, Proust claims in "A propos du style de Flaubert" that only metaphor can give narrative style a sense of "eternity"; more importantly, he notoriously declares that "il n'y a peut être pas dans tout Flaubert une seule belle métaphore. Bien plus, ses images sont généralement si faibles qu'elles ne s'élèvent guère au-dessus de celles que pourraient trouver ses personnages les plus insignifiants" ("there is perhaps in all of Flaubert not a single beautiful metaphor. Moreover, his images are generally so weak that they scarcely elevate themselves above those his own most insignificant characters could come up with").¹¹ In another attack, this time against Théophile Gautier in *Pastiches et Mélanges*, his distaste borders on meanness when he says that "Nous ne pouvons qu'accuser la pitoyable sécheresse de son imagination quand il compare la campagne avec ses cultures variées «à ces cartes de tailleurs, où sont collés les échantillons de pantalons et de gilets»" ("[w]e can only deplore the pitiful dryness of his imagination when he compares the countryside with its varied crops 'to those cards used by tailors where samples of trousers and vests have been

¹¹Proust, *Essais et articles* 282-96.

glued“).¹² Proust's obvious implication is that unlike Gautier and Flaubert, he is eminently capable of producing metaphors that are not only beautiful, but whose imaginative content and aesthetic impact clearly bespeak an intelligence superior to his own characters'. Proust believes he possesses the gift of a "beau style."

Unfortunately for Proust, any reader can readily observe that a great number of his own metaphors are in fact no different from the example he cites from Gautier. Moreover, the question of rhetorical and aesthetic weakness can – as we shall see – also be leveled against his own figurative language. Proust does not adhere to strict notions of metaphor, and seems more keen on a *metaphoric style* devoted principally to analogy. To disseminate his metaphoric ideas throughout the *Recherche* in a variety of ways, he therefore chooses not only what I shall call *pure metaphor*, that is, *the concise and direct statement of equation between different semantic fields*, but also – and to a remarkable degree – simile. While quantitative assessments obviously provide only a limited perspective, Victor Graham's tabulations of Proustian imagery are nevertheless useful in confirming the impression that simile predominates over metaphor: by Graham's count, the *Recherche* contains approximately twenty-five hundred similes against a little less than twenty-one hundred metaphors.¹³

We are thereby continually reminded of hesitancy, as Marcel's comparative images are marked by the indirection of simile, an added nuance of inadequacy that is alien to "pure metaphor." Thus, instead of only asserting with confidence and rhetorical immediacy that something *was* something else, he often resorts to prefacing his comparisons with *comme*, *ainsi que*, or *tel*, (like, as, similar to) and follows not with a single, potent image, but more often with a lengthy explanation of a somewhat banal anecdote from common experience, an explanation that is frequently long-winded to the point of distracting the reader from the original image. Pure metaphors derive their effect from the surprise they create, their compactness and efficiency, and the way they force the reader to create new meanings by making unexpected associations between different terms. Wayne Booth, for instance, has emphasized the importance of *activity* ("lending the energy of animated things to

¹²qtd. in Jean Milly, *Proust et le style* (Paris: Minard, 1970) 94.

¹³Victor E. Graham, *The Imagery of Proust* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) Appendix I, 257.

whatever is less energetic or more abstract") and *conciseness* in good metaphor.¹⁴ Marcel's analogies may certainly surprise us by the originality of their connection, but for the most part they do not *efficiently* coerce us into making an unusual cognitive fusion between radically different terms, so much as invite us to *speculate at length* upon parallel features of analogous and fairly ordinary experiences. This crucially detracts from their discursive strength. A few examples selected at random from the beginning of *A l'ombre*:

– elle y ajoutait comme le sous-entendu d'une maîtresse de maison qui, en vous présentant à ses convives au moment d'aller à table, vous dit au milieu des noms d'invités qui ne sont que des invités, et sur le même ton qu'elle a cité les autres: M. Anatole France.

(she added the understatement of a hostess who, when introducing you to her guests about to sit down to dinner, tells you in the midst of all the names of those who are only guests, and in the same tone she has used to cite the others: Mr. Anatole France.) (14/I.434)

– [Il me causait] par ces mots une agitation aussi pénible que s'il m'avait annoncé qu'on m'embarquerait le lendemain comme mousse à bord d'un voilier.

(With these words he provoked nervousness in me as painful as if he had announced that I was to board a ship the following day as a sailor.) (25/I.445)

– je sentis que cette nouvelle amitié c'était la même, comme ne sont pas séparées des autres par un fossé les années nouvelles que notre désir, sans pouvoir les atteindre et les modifier, recouvre à leur insu d'un nom différent.

(I felt that this new friendship was the same, just as no chasm separates the new years which our desire, being unable to attain and change them, unwittingly covers over with a different name.) (59/I.479)

Proust is of course highly skilled at elegant and evocative "pure metaphor" in which the various terms fuse smoothly and seamlessly with one another. In this same passage, for instance, Marcel, strolling towards the Champs-Élysées, observes that "les maisons élégantes et roses baignaient, parce que c'était le moment de la grande vogue des Expositions d'aquarellistes, dans un ciel mobile et léger" ("the elegant pink homes bathed

¹⁴Wayne C. Booth, "Metaphor as Rhetoric" in Sheldon Sacks (ed.) *On Metaphor* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1979) 47-70.

– water-color exhibits were in fashion at the time – in a mobile and light air”) (60/I.480). He goes on to say: "Plongée dans un sommeil agité, mon adolescence enveloppait d'un même rêve tout le quartier où elle le promenait" ("plunged into a restless sleep, my adolescence enveloped in the same dream the whole district where it was leading it"). He ends this passage by describing the palace of Gabriel whose columns once seemed "dématérialisées par le clair de lune" ("deconstructed by the moonlight").

Ultimately, however, the simile structure dominates the rhetorical tone of Proust's figuration, and of the novel as a whole. Proust criticism has traditionally credited his metaphors with incomparable linguistic and epistemological power. The frequent assumption, however, particularly prior to Genette's essay "Proust palimpseste," has been that Proust's imagery is entirely metaphorical and that it succeeds fully *as metaphor*. Stephen Ullmann's famous analysis of Proust's use of synaesthesia in *Style in the French Novel* is extremely valuable, but while he does mention analogy, simile and metaphor in his later work *The Image in the Modern French Novel* (1960), his analysis here ultimately conflates them under the heading of "metaphor". He concludes simply that "metaphor lies at the very root of Proust's style since his vision is in its very essence metaphorical" (238). Views of this kind omit the important issue of grammatical form, and foreclose the problematic issue of what appears to be metaphoric self-defeat and the consequences this has on the work's ostensible aesthetic intentions. In the previously cited example, for instance, Marcel states that the deconstructed columns of the palace "avaient l'air découpées dans du carton et rappelant un décor de l'opérette *Orphée aux Enfers*, me donnaient pour la première fois une impression de beauté" ("seemed cut out of cardboard, and reminding me of the scenery for the operetta *Orpheus in Hell* gave me for the first time an impression of beauty"). The seamless and rather elegant metaphor thereby shifts (as it so often does) into an extended simile describing a separate circumstance from Marcel's past – an event which itself happens to describe theatrical artifice as a conduit to beauty! Inge Crosman confirms the resultant weakening effect this has on a broad scale, noting that the use of *être comme* conveys "the narrator's hesitancy in equating the two domains" and "attenuates the identification between sensory impression and the image illustrating the conceptual associations called forth by

this impression."¹⁵ What may seem a minor grammatical point were it the exception rather than the rule is true of the majority of Proust's many "metaphors." The issue is anything but trivial, for it self-consciously signals an insistent textual, narrativistic, and authorial lack of confidence, an aesthetic hesitancy several critics such as Paul de Man, David Ellison and Margaret Gray have recently identified. (I return to their viewpoints in Section D.) This resistance to figuration produces, as I shall argue, an important decreative and dispersive element in the mythopoetic aspects of Marcel's enterprise, the underhanded counterpart to the more flagrant demythologization that permeates the *Recherche*.

2. PERPETUATING UNATTAINABILITY

At first glance, it would appear that metaphoric ideas in any form should allow Marcel to succeed in his quest. Similes, it has been argued, are fully capable of producing the kind of cognitive fusion one finds in true metaphor, and a simile is not automatically disqualified from the field of metaphor studies. Many of Proust's images are indeed pure metaphors – that is (to repeat), they make an efficient and *seamless* equation between different semantic fields – and, in addition, many of his similes and other forms of comparison (such as metonymy, synecdoche, and synaesthesia) do seem to produce genuinely metaphoric effects. However, a tremendous number of similes in the *Recherche* prove to be purely analogical, that is, they remain two-sided with surprising equanimity, seeking not to provoke with difference, but only to present potential *similarity* between the given sensation and another hypothetical or past event. These comparisons present analogies across Marcel's experiences and imagination, but they do not force us to make surprising equations between significantly different referents, and to fuse them as aggressively as pure metaphor demands of us. They seem more the province of a meticulous, curiosity-seeking intuition. Marcel is an observer with a flair for spotting parallels and inviting his reader to notice similitudes, to hold parallel anecdotes in suspension and consider their relation. But for the most part, he does not seem eager to force upon us a semantic blending or filtering which would result from an implosion of

¹⁵ Inge Karalus Crosman, *Metaphoric Narration: The Structure and Function of Metaphors in A la recherche du temps perdu* (Chapel Hill: Univ. N. Carolina Press, 1978) 189.

terms in which differences predominate, and which might therefore produce transformative understandings of either side of the analogy.

This leads us to the central question: if Marcel wants to use analogy to break through ordinary perceptions of life and reveal a sharper, more genuine reality, why does he favor inefficient simile over concise metaphor? Precisely so that *his mythic idealization can remain unfulfilled, and therefore be kept alive*. Each object, Marcel notes, is surrounded by what he calls a "zone d'évaporation" ("evaporation zone"). Whenever he observes an object, his consciousness that he is seeing it remains between himself and the object, "le bordait d'un liséré spirituel qui m'empêchait de jamais toucher directement sa matière; elle se volatilisait en quelque sorte avant que je prisse contact avec elle" ("surrounding it with a thin spiritual border that prevented him from touching its substance directly; it would disintegrate somehow before I could make contact with it").¹⁶ This metaphor describes the frustrating impossibility of capturing "true reality" artistically, that essence fades the moment it is seized by language. But what is also at stake is the direct relationship between Proust's "essence" and the very notion of unattainability itself. The "contact" Marcel describes here also represents the disappointing truths he will so often discover in the course of the novel when he finally encounters the objects of his admiration. Marcel knows that, as he projects his soul onto his surroundings, he must keep a sufficient distance (or take compensatory measures) to leave the idealizing process unfulfilled. Marcel's aesthetic search for "real life," in other words, requires that he maintain himself in a perpetual mythic quest, an ongoing cycle of rekindling aesthetic desires that can continually rejuvenate an idealizing artistic sensibility. The prototypical example of this occurs when Marcel describes the two "ways" in *Swann*. After expounding on the Guermantes' impressive reputation, he sees Mme de Guermantes in the chapel during a mass. He is deeply disappointed: in his dreams he had imagined her in the colors of tapestry and stained glass, belonging to another century, and yet now she seems crudely mortal, part of a "certain type féminin" ("certain female type") to which the wives of doctors and merchants also belonged. Echoing the "evaporation zone" image above, Marcel's imagination feels paralyzed by the "contact" with a reality so different from what it had expected. And yet, the new truth regains mastery over him, and he weaves his present awareness of her with reminiscences

¹⁶Proust, *CS* 83 (I. 83).

of his own former idealizations, to the point where he considers her once again to be both beautiful and noble (172-4). Marcel has therefore protected his own dream, his own hopeful ideals, by restoring his imaginative and aestheticizing vision after a temporary deflation. The rhetorical counterpart to this kind of compensatory and self-protective measure can be found in his indirect and often circumlocutory figurative language. Marcel is aware of having to maintain a continual balance between aestheticizing his experience through comparative images, and not letting those comparisons "fix" the sensation described too definitively to reveal the unpleasant truth. He wants to give his comparisons Swann-like aesthetic *élan*, but because he is suspicious of landing on definitive answers to his desires, the evaporation zone must be maintained by using various kinds of indirection and hesitancy. His metaphors must therefore be *suggestive* rather than *transformative* in order to sustain the search for mythic ideals.

B. METAPHOR THEORY

I. THE FUNCTION OF METAPHOR

A brief and selective excursion into the vast and multifaceted field of metaphor theory can help elucidate the relative merits and interpretive dynamics of analogy, simile and metaphor. Aristotle, as is well known, defined metaphor with refreshing simplicity as "the application of the name of a thing to something else," and admired it for its analogical power, its ability to refine argumentative reasoning and classification. Being good at metaphor is "a token of high native gifts," he claimed, "for making good metaphors depends on perceiving the likeness of things."¹⁷ Aristotle provides four types of examples of word substitution that yield metaphoric effects, but it is of course only much more recently that metaphor theory has delved into the precise linguistic parameters of, and cognitive responses to, such a substitution. Proponents of equivalence between metaphor and simile have come to adhere to the so-called *comparison theory* which emphasizes resemblance between terms in a metaphor, and maintains that every metaphor is an implicit comparison and therefore has a

¹⁷Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967) 57-61.

corresponding simile. This view has been challenged by theories that emphasize a dynamic and creative relation between the terms of a metaphor, most notably Black's *interaction theory*¹⁸ and its derivatives, and theorists continue to debate the manner in which metaphoric terms relate, interact, or fuse, and whether the interpreter derives new meaning or is simply reminded of pre-existing relations. This debate greatly impacts the comparative worth of metaphor over simile.

Eva Kittay, pointing out that "similes are not mere comparisons any more than metaphors are," argues that the opening to T.S.Eliot's "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock" ("When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table") like any metaphor "creates a similarity rather than records an antecedent one." To this effect, Kittay cites Ortony's distinction between literal and figurative similes, the former being mere comparisons ('a wolf is like a dog'), the latter closer to metaphor ('a man is like a wolf'). She goes on to state that literal comparison "takes place within fixed, common, or given categories, for example, when hippopotami are compared to elephants...But comparisons in metaphor and simile cross categorical boundaries, for example, when a large mammal is compared to an authoritative powerful institution."¹⁹ If metaphor and simile are each capable of crossing conceptual boundaries, one must therefore take into account the particular organization of concepts and categories within the "language community" in question.

This compromise position is similarly taken up by Janet Martin Soskice and Rom Harré who, in "Metaphor in Science," see simile and metaphor as overlapping categories that simply differ in linguistic form. They argue that while there may be a significant difference between saying "like" or not saying it in simple comparisons, this is far less important when considering much more complex analogies. Citing as example Flaubert's remark that language is "like a cracked kettledrum on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity," they argue that this statement would not be improved by deleting "like". Simile can have as great an impact as metaphor, but this is a function of the metaphoric power of the comparison at hand, not of the appearance of the typical qualifiers of a simile: "metaphor and simile are overlapping categories," they conclude, "but differ in grammatical form.

¹⁸Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962).

¹⁹Eva Feder Kittay, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 18-9.

This does not denigrate the novelty of metaphor, but recognises the full capacities of simile, nor does it deny the stigma that some similes are mere comparisons."²⁰

On the side of the argument that sees a clear distinction, and favors the greater impact of metaphor, we find Stephen Daniel's *Myth and Modern Philosophy* in which he calls metaphors "myths-in-miniature" and cautions against equating metaphor with simile. When the metaphorical basis of literal expression has been lost, "the enunciation of novel meaning is replaced by an authorial intention struggling with words; and metaphor itself is reduced to a collapsed simile, parasitic to, instead of foundational for, literal discourse." For this reason, although "similes draw from elements linked in now-dead metaphors, they do not permit literal realignment of the elements related in dead metaphors. Similes presume the comparability of the terms they relate only insofar as those components are no longer open to redefinition by virtue of the comparison." Simile has therefore been relegated to a pairing of terms that no longer bespeak an originary cognitive fusion, that do not carry "the spirit of genesis within our own daily expressions", or what he later calls "figural immediacy", and metaphor therefore "appeals much more to the presuppositions underlying myths than to those underlying similes."²¹

Robert Verbrugge's "Transformations in Knowing," for example, seems to bear this out at the experimental level. In this instance, Verbrugge measures the relative effectiveness of metaphors depending on the order of the terms (AB or BA) and whether the terms are expressed as a simile or a metaphor. He concludes that

²⁰Soskice, Janet Martin, and Rom Harré, "Metaphor in Science," *From a Metaphorical Point of View: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Cognitive Content of Metaphor*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995) 303. However, they go on to note that what metaphor can perform that is beyond the purview of simile is the process of catachresis, the supplying of a term that does not yet exist in our vocabulary. One could respond to this that on the level of cognitive fusion (or Black's "interaction"), their point seems to defeat itself: while catachresis may at times produce new words, such as *quixotic* rather than "like Don Quixote," even the simplest metaphors which do not actually produce a new term engage in *implied catachresis* by virtue of the mental work – the interpretive metamorphosis – that is requested of the listener. I.A. Richards has pointed out that thought itself is metaphoric (see above), while a wide range of recent scholars extend the power of analogy and metaphor into every aspect of cognition and the way we interpret and make meaning of life and all its processes.) See, for instance, Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Andrew Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge UP, 1979); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Gemma Fiumara, *The Metaphoric Process* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²¹Stephen H. Daniel, *Myth and Modern Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) 10-12.

[s]imiles are more frequently associated with responses in which elements of the two domains retain their separate identities, and in which the two domains are treated symmetrically (by juxtaposition, back-and-forth comparison, or a focus on resemblances). Metaphors are more frequently associated with responses in which elements of one or both domains are transformed in identity...Of the two forms, metaphor makes the stronger request for a transformation of identity.

Metaphor enhances "condensed" or "fanciful, directional transformation" while simile encourages "metonymic condensation...cases in which the two domains were juxtaposed, but retained their separate identities."²² It is the latter phenomenon that concerns us with regard to Proustian figuration, for a great number of his analogies do indeed maintain the sensation compared and the images to which it is compared in a state of equivalence, one which, at best, yields a "metonymic condensation," a play of associations which does not with sufficient frequency produce what Verbrugge calls "directional transformation."

2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL REVERSIBILITY

In attempting to distinguish between analogy and metaphor, Earl MacCormac initially offers the claim that it simply "depends on the degree of difference between the two referents," meaning that metaphor can denote referents that differ substantially, while analogy can denote those that are more similar. He goes on to elaborate, however, a "conceptual theory of semantic anomaly," which concludes that "the difference between metaphor and nonmetaphor, especially analogy, rests on the conceptual recognition of the semantic anomaly of metaphor and its interpretation as meaningful." Metaphors, however, are not simply semantically anomalous constructions of any kind; rather, they are "only those semantic anomalies that we can interpret as suggesting new insights and new possible meanings." While this "newness" seems to present its own definitional problem, MacCormac makes a useful distinction between metaphor and simile in terms of the issue of portrayal of similarities and differences. Both simile and metaphor can produce a cognitive combination of referents, however MacCormac disagrees with John Middleton Murry's claim that metaphor is simply

²²Robert Verbrugge, "Transformations in Knowing" in Richard P. Honeck and Robert R. Hoffman (eds.), *Cognition and Figurative Language* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1980) 118-9.

"compressed simile," and that metaphor and simile are "essentially the same". Instead, he notes that "when confronted with a metaphor, hearers must not only consider the similarities between the referents, as they do in the presence of a simile, but also ponder the *differences*" (my emphasis). While similes do not "prohibit a consideration of differences," they certainly do not invite such mental activity as much as metaphor, which, because of its direct combination of terms, produces greater tension in the reader.²³

Christiane Schildknecht confirms that the greater cognitive impact of metaphor over analogy is related to the degree of semantic tension produced. Metaphors "reduce what Paul Ricoeur calls a 'semantic impertinence,' carry cognitive information and act like Bacon's bee:²⁴ the autonomous gathering and acquisition ('digestion') of the respective material deliberately intends [to leave] the old predication-net in favour of a new self-spun one." To Schildknecht, this implies a transfer of knowledge from one area to another, it provides insight into new connections, and opens up "new epistemic worlds" in a way that is consistent with the hypothesis-making methodology of scientific experiments. Although analogy does hope to loosen "predicative tension," metaphor intends to go further: it hopes to violate "linguistic-semantic borders." She concludes: "Reality, here, is not represented by taking recourse to analogy, but to identity and difference."²⁵

Ultimately, the issue of semantic tension, similarity and difference can also be reduced to the issue of whether or not the terms in Proust's analogies are *reversible*. In making a distinction between metaphoric and non-metaphoric analogies, Kittay argues that metaphor is not merely a far-fetched form of analogy. Analogy "may originate in one field and be carried to another, or it need not originate in any one particular field. It may simply be that our experience of the phenomena is similarly structured and that our language reflects this." In metaphor, however,

²³Earl MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) 23-36.

²⁴Bacon in his *Novum Organum* divides scientists into ants and bees, where the bee "takes the middle course: it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own." qtd. in Schildknecht. See following note.

²⁵Christiane Schildknecht, "Experiments with Metaphors," Soskice and Harré 43.

one domain will take on the role of an originating field – the field of the vehicle of the metaphor. Metaphorical analogies are asymmetrical for just this reason – that one side of the analogy has a privileged status in regard to the other. A simile based on a metaphorical analogy is not – or at best paradoxically - reversible.²⁶

Proust's analogies, however, blur this distinction. They do indeed have an originating field (a sensation or an event), but given Proust's breadth of selection, the images he chooses to invoke often seem to reach rhetorical equivalence with the original sensation, in which case it seems their status could easily be *reversed*. The metonymic linkage from image to image in Marcel's analogies does not even suggest clear directionality or different rhetorical weights given to the various terms; they do not appear to be prioritized in a way that clearly bespeaks a powerfully metaphoric "asymmetry." As Julia Kristeva has expressed it, Proust in his analogical processes "leaps from one surface to another, from one political intrigue to another, from one social cast to another...Under the influence of metaphor, the 'essence' of the spectacle crumbles into images, appearances, acts of mimesis."²⁷ In just three successive examples among countless others, Marcel, in the wake of Albertine's death in *Albertine disparue*, speaks of his "fragmentary", "intrusive", and "irregular" forgetfulness, compares it to a "brume épaisse sur l'océan...qui supprime les points de repère des choses" ("a thick fog on the ocean...that diminishes reference points of things"), and moves immediately into a description of his notion of distances in time being "dislocated," such that things appear by turns very close and very distant (174/IV.174). Lack of clarity of memory has therefore been metonymically associated with a distorted perspective of distances, but the simile – set off by hyphens – seems to arrive at an arbitrary point in a long passage devoted to this theme, such that it does not acquire the centralizing and shifting rhetorical strength of a strong metaphor. A little later, Marcel notes that this forgetfulness helps diminish his suffering, and that destiny seems to have given him "un de ces moi de rechange" ("one of those replacement me's") which destiny inserts in him "sans plus écouter nos prières qu'un médecin clairvoyant et d'autant plus autoritaire" ("without listening to his prayers any more than a clairvoyant and all the more authoritative doctor"). This gradual healing process he finally compares to the restoration of human tissue (175/IV.175). In each case, the event

²⁶Kittay 152.

²⁷Julia Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 70.

to be compared and the analogy seem to stand on similar epistemological ground, for they are both ways of depicting his spiritual and physical health, but neither side of the comparisons emerge with any rhetorical dominance over the other. It is in part *because* of the metonymic relationship between the sensation and the comparative image that we feel as though each side of the analogy has similar weight in Marcel's imagination.

It has also been observed that Proust's figurative images can at times actually *subvert* the dominance of the sensation being described. Gerald Kamber and Richard Macksey have in this regard identified "negative metaphors" in Proust, a term they use to denote a "reversal in the dynamics and the movement away from the initially posited sensation or object toward the imaginary." The examples cited are cases where Proust's figuration presents an image that opposes the thing described in the most fundamental way possible, the tolling of a bell to emphasize silence, for instance,²⁸ or an image of luminosity to highlight a shadow.²⁹ The crucial point here is that these metaphors produce a "transfer of emphasis" and "exchange of rôles" between tenor and vehicle, "just as Proust's attention characteristically seems to have shifted from the *event* he is describing to the *effect* which that event is having on his consciousness." The effect described is essentially a diffusion and recalibration of rhetorical prioritizing between the terms of Proust's metaphors:

Instead of metaphoric vehicles enhancing the immediacy of the original tenor, we have suffered a characteristically Proustian alteration of vision...The metaphoric devices, seemingly the antinomies of the original scene, increasingly divert the center of our attention and ultimately, with a climax like the peal of the bell itself, render sensible the "fullness of silence" in a moment emptied by the sound and pressure of the usurping images.

²⁸"...il faisait si beau et si tranquille que, quand sonnait l'heure, on aurait dit non qu'elle rompait le calme du jour, mais qu'elle le débarrassait de ce qu'il contenait et que le clocher...venait seulement de presser, au moment voulu, la plénitude du silence" ("it was so beautiful and calm that, when the bells rang the hour, they did not seem to break the silence of the day, but rather to empty out what the day contained; the clock tower had merely reinforced, at the desired moment, the fullness of silence") Proust, *CS*164 (I.164).

²⁹"Cette obscure fraîcheur de ma chambre était au plein soleil de la rue ce que l'ombre est au rayon, c'est-à-dire aussi lumineuse que lui et offrait à mon imagination le spectacle total de l'été..." ("That obscure freshness in my room was to the full sunlight in the street what the shadow is to the ray of light, that is, just as luminous, and offering to my imagination the total spectacle of summer...") (*CS*, 82) (I.82).

Rephrasing the issue in structuralist terms, Kamber and Macksey conclude that the "*signifiés* of the frame have become the *signifiants* of the new metaphoric focus, a new signifié of the imagination where, in writing as in life, the thing can only be conceived in its absence."³⁰

Gérard Genette appears to agree with such a position in "Proust Palimpseste." At first he declares, speaking no doubt on behalf of Proust's aspirations, that "la métaphore n'est pas un ornement, mais l'instrument nécessaire à une restitution, par le style, de la vision, des essences, parce qu'elle est l'équivalent stylistique de l'expérience psychologique de la mémoire involontaire" ("metaphor is not an ornament, but the instrument necessary for restoring vision and essences through style, because it is the stylistic equivalent of the psychological experience of involuntary memory"). When one examines these analogies between sensations past and present, however, the present becomes a mere pretext (or, as Roland Barthes appropriately calls it, "pré-texte"),³¹ an opportunity which disappears as soon as its invocatory role has been played. Thus, Genette concludes, this is not a "véritable métaphore," since one of the terms is purely accessory to the essence which in fact is the sensation that is situated in the past. This linguistic weakness needs to be greatly emphasized, for it is symptomatic of a larger pattern. Metaphor invites the promise of closure of meaning, of closer proximity to essence – that is, access to the mythic – but for the most part we are given analogies and similes which are not only metonymically evasive (Genette assigns to them a "mnemonic function") but often leave the reader caught between images *neither of which seems to dominate*. The notion of metaphor brought to the fore through Proust's and his narrator's explicit mention both in and outside the *Recherche*, seems to be a front, a cover for what really is epistemological – and, finally, artistic – undecidability. Genette portrays this as a failure of synthesis, and concludes that Marcel's multiplication of images, attempting to form a "palimpsest of time and space", produces nothing but dissociation and discordance:

³⁰Gerald Kamber and Richard Macksey, "Negative Metaphor and Proust's Rhetoric of Absence" *MLN* vol. 85.6 (1970) 862, 878, 876, 878-82.

³¹Roland Barthes, "Une idée de recherche" in Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (eds.) *Recherche de Proust* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) 34-9.

L'écriture proustienne se fait ainsi, entre ses intentions conscientes et son accomplissement réel, la proie d'un singulier renversement: partie pour dégager des essences, elle en vient à constituer, ou restituer, des mirages; destinée à rejoindre, par la profondeur substantielle du texte, la substance profonde des choses, elle aboutit à un effet de surimpression fantasmagorique où les profondeurs s'annulent l'une par l'autre, où les substances s'entre-dévorent. Elle dépasse bien le niveau «superficiel» de la description des apparences, mais non pas pour atteindre celui d'un réalisme supérieur (le réalisme des essences), puisqu'elle découvre au contraire un plan du réel où celui-ci, à force de plénitude, s'anéantit *de lui-même*.

(Proustian writing occurs in this way, between its conscious intentions and its real accomplishment, prey to a singular reversal: hoping to reveal essence, it ends up creating, or restoring, mirages; destined to reach the profound substance of things through the substantial depth of the text, it emerges with an effect of phantasmagoric superimposition where depths cancel each other out, where substances devour one another. It certainly overtakes the "superficial" level of the description of appearances, but not to attain superior realism (the realism of essences), since it discovers on the contrary a level of the real which, because of its own plenitude, is annihilated *by itself*.)³²

It is the very fact of the analogical structure of Marcel's images that causes the reader to oscillate uncertainly between terms (or rather, between sides of the metaphoric proposition) and prevents us from reaching the ultimate goal of metaphoric/mythic fusion. Marcel's comparisons send us along a chain of simulated images of the initial sensation, none of which, of course, can claim to replace or even fuse with their original. As Brée puts it, "[l]ife is a series of interrupted moments in which the human being, like Sisyphus, repeats unendingly the same meaningless gestures...The innumerable elements of the kaleidoscope are always identical; they merely combine to form different patterns."³³ And at times, the chain of figuration is even so extensive that, like the first

³²Gérard Genette, "Proust Palimpseste," *Figures* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 40, 46-7, 51-2.

³³Germaine Brée, *Marcel Proust and the Deliverance From Time* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1969) 31.

photographic print in Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction,³⁴ the position of origin is itself usurped.

C. MARCEL'S MYTHIC QUEST

1. THE SEARCH FOR ESSENCE

In the final volume of the *Recherche*, Marcel recognizes that if forgetfulness prevents our memory from linking us to our past, this allows us to suddenly "respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c'est un air qu'on a respiré autrefois, cet air plus pur que les poètes ont vainement essayé de faire régner dans le paradis" ("breathe a new air, precisely because it is an air one has breathed long ago, that air most pure which poets have hoped in vain could reign in paradise.") This air can only provide a sense of renewal owing to the conviction that we have breathed it once before. He ends this idea with the famous phrase, "les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus" ("true paradises are those we have lost").³⁵ This notion presents, in crystalline form, the overarching and deeply paradoxical premise of Proust's novel: a search that must remain perpetually unattained in order to remain fulfilling. As Stendhal once said, "Le beau n'est que la promesse du bonheur" ("the beautiful is none other than the promise of happiness"),³⁶ and Marcel's version of this is a "beau style" he hopes will perpetuate his search for happiness. The mythic "paradise" of essences and truths Marcel seeks can only remain a paradise insofar as it stays out of reach. In other words, his memories must require continual recovery and recreation, lest his aesthetic and spiritual goals bound up with those memories should be fully satisfied, and remove his will to create and desire.

In what sense can we call Marcel's journey "mythic"? Marcel's reconstructive odyssey through his consciousness, cognition, and aesthetic sensibility is infused with specific references to the existing corpus of popular and classical

³⁴Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968) 217-252.

³⁵Proust, *TR* 177 (IV.449).

³⁶qtd. in Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1987) 47.

mythology.³⁷ These allusions, however, appear largely as brief borrowings from a well-known collection of traditional imagery, and they most often serve Marcel the purpose of ironically deflating the self-importance of his entourage. (This issue will be discussed in the following section.) Instead of locating Proust's mythicity in his intertextuality – an *external* body of figures – we must assess the *internal*, mental mode of Marcel's narrative. Characterizing the *Recherche* as "mythic" relies on the twin pillars of its fundamental extra-temporality, and its far-reaching metaphoricality. Like *Death in Venice*, where Gustav von Aschenbach's journey seems alternately realistic/contemporary and ancient/archetypal, Proust's novel presents a mythic quest – or, more accurately, a mythopoetic mode of apprehension and consciousness – in a modern setting. Marcel's journey of self-discovery is inflected through a Modernist sensibility, in the sense that Proust employs an archetypal narrative structure of return-to-origins that is radically imploded into the consciousness of a single individual. Marcel's search for essence, for "les jours anciens, le temps perdu" ("ancient times, lost time"),³⁸ encompasses both youth and adulthood, a double-structure consistent with myths featuring young protagonists seeking "conquests of the outer world and a heroic mastery of the 'unconscious', whereas narratives about 'adults' basically present a quest for maturity rather than adventure, coexistence rather than victory." As Gemma Fiumara goes on to note, after mid-life, the theme of mythical writings appears to be "the inward journey,"³⁹ one which in Proust takes the form of an attempt at a retroactive transcendent awareness of selfhood and reality.

The *Recherche* is reminiscent of traditional mythopoesis in its constant leaps into an atemporal condition, both through the famous cases of involuntary memory, and, as was argued above, through the use of analogy and metaphor. As he explains in *Temps retrouvé*, his goal is to become a being who can "jouir de l'essence des choses, c'est-à-dire en dehors du temps" ("rejoice in the essence of things, that is, outside time") (178/IV.450). The idea of a willful transcendence may seem as paradoxical as planned

³⁷See in particular the extensive survey of mythic figures, structures and themes in Marie Miguet-Ollagnier, *La Mythologie de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1982).

³⁸Proust, *TR* 178 (IV.450).

³⁹Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Metaphoric Process: Connections Between Language and Life* (London: Routledge, 1995) 61.

spontaneity, and Benjamin's point that Proust's involuntary memory is "much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory"⁴⁰ reminds us of the reconstructive nature of Proust's project, and hence of its underlying artificiality. As Marcel says in the *madeleine* scene, "Chercher? pas seulement: créer" ("Seek? not only that: create").⁴¹ C.K. Scott Moncrieff's translation notwithstanding, this is not simply remembrance but an active, recreative search, a careful, artistic construction that hopes to release the joy of *Aufhebung* in a manner that echoes efforts by Romantic thinkers as well as other Modernist mythmakers to attain transcendent insight into life.

Proust's extensive and idiosyncratic use of figurative language – metaphor in its broadest sense – also effectively "charges" his text with mythicity owing to its claims to transcendent insight. Marcel explains that his many comparative analogies seek to embrace and comprehend a sensation in terms of a parallel but different experience, in the hopes of deepening the present moment and reaching towards the higher realm of truths and essences. Metaphor is for Marcel the means to achieve an overarching view of past and present, and to recombine elements into new networks of meaning. This function is not only reminiscent of the atomized view of daily events Woolf's characters explore and seek to control, but also of the fundamental role of naming in myth identified by Hans Blumenberg in *Work on Myth*, which involves

the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar...What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphors and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories. Panic and paralysis, as the two extremes of anxiety behavior, are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes.⁴²

For Marcel, these "calculable magnitudes" are analogous instances drawn from his memorial resources which can, by reflection, control and enhance every experience. There is an element of mythic repetition here, whereby the value of the present sensation is intensified – in the hopes of reaching the most meaningful level of "reality" possible – because it reenacts a similar (or hypothetical) past sensation. Frye discusses this repetition of previous forms, noting that "myth does not say so much 'this happened long

⁴⁰Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968) 202.

⁴¹Proust, *CS* 45 (I.45).

⁴²Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) 5-6.

ago' as 'what you are about to see, or have just seen, *is* what happened long ago.'" And because metaphor is one way to suggest lack of distinction between subject and object, Frye concludes that "myth does to time what the metaphor does to space."⁴³ In this fashion, Proust arrogates to metaphor the power of myth, using metaphors and similes to step outside the moment of the present sensation into "un jour ancien" ("an ancient era"),⁴⁴ thereby enabling him to "develop" the "clichés" ("snapshots") of his experience,⁴⁵ and attain timeless – and therefore, according to Proust, "essential" – truths.⁴⁶

Such a mythic reading of Proust calls attention to its cyclical structure, both at the level of the entire work, and in thousands of increments within the novel. The "return to origins" structure of both the metaphors and the cases of involuntary memory, each repeating analogous sensations from the past for epistemological and artistic support, can be read as miniature examples of the cycles of "eternal return" described by Mircea Eliade. In pre-industrial societies, a wide range of acts, both private and communal, are believed to repeat a prototypical, archetypal instance of that act which consequently gives its present reenactment a reality – a sacred dimension – it would not otherwise possess. The repeated act is therefore not just a repetition, but the original archetypal act itself.⁴⁷ Proust's metaphors and involuntary memory provide a very similar version of this model, only instead of appealing to a communal body of existing myths supporting future ritualistic repetitions, Marcel re-enacts his own *private and internal mythology*, with either an accidental return to an original sensation from his own youth (the *madeleine*, the *pavés*), or a particular moment that parallels the sensation in the present (Marcel's countless analogies). As a counterpart to the sacredness of traditional myths, Marcel appeals to the essence of reality and the privileged status of art and beauty in attaining that essence.

The mythic for Marcel is a level of experience and reality whose aesthetic depth, whose complexity and vitality, and whose emotional range we ordinarily cannot fully perceive or feel. Jean-François Lyotard has claimed that the modern aesthetic

⁴³Frye, *Myth and Metaphor* 7.

⁴⁴Proust, *TR* 178 (IV.450).

⁴⁵Proust, *TR* 202 (IV.474).

⁴⁶See note 44.

⁴⁷Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return* (New York: Princeton UP, 1954) 35.

involves a nostalgia predicated on the yearning for a sublime that remains unrepresentable,⁴⁸ and it would indeed appear that what particularly appeals to Marcel is the very unattainability of this richness to life. Absence allows for imaginative investment. Marcel's notion of transcendence, what he might call a "prise de conscience" ("seizing of consciousness"),⁴⁹ is the pursuit of an essence which is both "la racine même de l'impression" ("the very root of sensation")⁵⁰ and is synonymous with atemporality, with a position outside – absent from – present action, in the realm of immediate "jouissance."⁵¹

Most importantly, identifying the mythic nature of Marcel's search aligns Proust with other important Modernist mythmaking projects, including most significantly (as shall be elaborated) those in the present study, and serves to underscore an element in his novel that seems to have been sidelined as a matter of identifying archetypes. The mythic nature of Proust's novel is not only a question of cataloguing mythological allusions, but of understanding Marcel's desire as the yearning for a transcendent vision into the nature of existence. Marcel's experience is very similar indeed to that of Woolf's Lily Briscoe and Bernard, both struggling with the internal fragmentation of their perception of the world around them, and seeking to reconfigure those fragments across time into new, "truer," and more enduring wholes. The perception of the flow of life in Woolf as being diffracted and atomized encourages similar readings of fragmentation in Proust, also playing a philosophical, and even metaphysical, role. Marcel's impulses also parallel Jensen's naturalistic and transcendental insights into the interconnectivity of all things in nature. Jensen's *Myths* in fact highlight the universality of Marcel's aesthetic yearning for "essence," reminding us that Marcel's desire to experience life to its fullest extent is not only about social and artistic experiences in Combray or the *salons*, but encompasses *with equal importance* the natural elements all around him, the aubépines and the sea at Balbec. Jensen helps understand, in fact, the great importance of small things in Proust, for where Jensen will draw cosmic lessons by examining tiny fragments

⁴⁸Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), qtd. in Gray 1.

⁴⁹Marcel uses this term when crediting Robert de Saint-Loup in *CGII* with revealing to him what friendship means to him (82).

⁵⁰Proust, *CGII* 106 (II.712).

⁵¹Proust, *TR* 178 (IV.450).

in nature – a point of light, the flight of a bird – Marcel will incorporate a great variety of small objects and events into his vision of the multiplicity of life, and our need to find correspondences and deeper meaning through those objects and events.

Finally, Borges provides an allegorical and metaphysical framework for many of Marcel's concerns. Borges's characters, caught despite themselves in a sudden awareness of the eternal depths and infinite possibilities of existence, are similar – though extreme – versions of Marcel. The *Recherche* can very profitably be juxtaposed with "Funes the Memorious," for instance.⁵² Funes, who acquires perfect memory after a riding accident, is suddenly able to compare minute details across many years of experience:

He knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on the 30th of April, 1882, and could compare them in his memory with the mottled streaks on a book in Spanish binding he had seen only once and with the outlines of the foam raised by an oar in the Río Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising.

Such clarity of remembrance naturally becomes an overwhelming burden to Funes: reconstructing a whole day in his memory requires a whole day; he conceives of an inverse numbering scheme, whereby numbers are given individual names (7013 becomes *Máximo Perez*, 7014 becomes *The Railroad*); he is, in short, incapable of generalizing and abstracting: "it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)." Funes represents a hyperbole of Marcel: both men experience an accident (in Marcel's case, involuntary memory) that has similar effects upon their perception of their own memories. Before his accident, Funes considered himself similar to all humans, "blind, deaf, addlebrained, absent-minded," a characterization reminiscent of Marcel's warnings regarding the way habit blinds us to life. With his new awareness, Marcel makes the same kind of memorial correspondences as Funes through analogies and metaphors; he, too, struggles with his perception of multiple selves (such as the "ten Albertines"⁵³), and seeks to give aesthetic order to a newly visible mental universe. Funes' desire to reorder the countless details in his mind, including his plan to "reduce each of his past days to some seventy thousand memories, which would then be defined by means of ciphers,"

⁵²Borges, *Labyrinths* 59-66.

⁵³Proust, *CGII* 54 (II.660).

highlights Marcel's need to find a literary and artistic framework in which to reexperience the richness of his memory. Marcel's condition may not be as radical (Funes is "incapable of thought"), but his dilemma is similar: he needs to negotiate the astonishing depth of meaning that lies latent in every detail of experience. The "least important" of Funes' memories is "more minute and more vivid than our perceptions of physical pleasure or physical torment." Marcel faces such a "mythic" acuity of perception, aware that each of us carry within us a vast storehouse of memories that must be harnessed and reworked.⁵⁴ As Marcel meditates near the end of the *Recherche* upon the work he realizes he must write, he observes that "la récréation par la mémoire d'impressions qu'il fallait ensuite approfondir, éclairer, transformer en équivalents d'intelligence, n'était-elle pas une des conditions, presque l'essence même de l'oeuvre d'art...?" ("recreation through memories of impressions that then had to be deepened, clarified and transformed into the equivalents of the intelligence, was this not one of the conditions, nearly the essence itself of the work of art?")⁵⁵ The endlessness of such a task is expressed in both works in terms of age: Funes appears to the narrator as "more ancient than Egypt"; at the close of Proust's novel, Marcel feels dizzy from seeing "au-dessous de moi, en moi pourtant, comme si j'avais des lieues de hauteur, tant d'années" ("below me, indeed within me, as if I was many leagues in height, so many years.") (352/IV.624). This heightened consciousness seems, therefore, to have cast them both into a mythically timeless – and ageless – condition.

What makes Proust's case such an interesting example of Modernist mythmaking is that we can observe the vestiges of an allusive invocation of myth on the one hand, such as his appeal to forms from Greek mythology, and on the other the dramatic inauguration of an *internal* mythic way of comprehending human existence and consciousness. His mythic mode is one of transcendence, of atemporality and rhetorical suggestiveness in their *internalized* form, combining with an aesthetic and highly creative sensibility to reach greater insight into life. Great Modernist works, from *To The Lighthouse* to *Ulysses*, from *The Man Without Qualities* to *Death in Venice*, concerned as

⁵⁴"Mon cerveau était un riche bassin minier, où il y avait une étendue immense et fort diverse de gisements précieux" ("My brain was a rich mine shaft that contained an immense and highly varied expanse of precious metals"). Proust, *TR* 342 (IV.614).

⁵⁵Proust, *TR* 349 (IV.621).

they often are with undoing traditional forms of art and thought, encapsulate this artistic struggle by revealing the disintegrative process itself in their work. They will level direct attacks on traditional myths (Joyce and the Homeric structure), while engaging in an elaborate, internal mode of transcendent thought (Woolf and timeless perspectives). Like his counterparts, Proust combines old and new forms of mythicity, on the one hand demythologizing traditional hierarchies of meaning and social behavior, and on the other, redirecting and redefining the personal search for the sublime as a self-created, internal process.

2. THE GRAND AND THE HUMBLE

Marcel's means of achieving transcendent truths lie paradoxically on opposite ends of the scale, operating most apparently as a continuous dialectic between the mythic tenor of Marcel's quest and an indefatigable and often comic dispersal of mythic grandeur. We need go no further than René Girard's reading of Proust's most famous scene – "[t]he *petite madeleine* is a veritable communion; it has all the virtues of a sacrament"⁵⁶ – to find religious transcendence humbled by the modesty of tea-time. As Germaine Brée has noted, Marcel "believes in the existence of an absolute good and an absolute beauty, which are manifest on this earth and which art unveils. These absolutes exist outside himself and are accessible, though only under extraordinary circumstances."⁵⁷ On the one hand, only great art can open up essential realities for Marcel, as "l'harmonie d'un Wagner, la couleur d'un Elstir nous permettent de connaître cette essence qualitative des sensations d'un autre où l'amour pour un autre être ne nous fait pas pénétrer" ("the harmony of a Wagner or the color of an Elstir enables us to know that qualitative essence of sensations of another where love for another being does not allow us to penetrate").⁵⁸ An artistic sensibility endows Marcel with a special perspective, the altered but "perfectly clear" vision he compares to that provided by an optician, whereby women walking in the streets and even automobiles all seem to be

⁵⁶René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965) 80.

⁵⁷Germaine Brée, *Marcel Proust and the Deliverance From Time* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1969) 28.

⁵⁸Proust, *LP* 149 (III.665).

Renoirs.⁵⁹ Hearing Vinteuil's music in *La Prisonnière* also inspires him to meditate upon the "ineffably" individual sets of experiences that we must leave "au seuil des phrases" ("at the threshold of phrases"), and he speculates whether music is not in fact unique in its ability to provide communication between souls (246-7/III.762-3). Most fundamentally, Marcel explains in *Temps retrouvé* that the greatness of true art is

de retrouver, de ressaisir, de nous faire connaître cette réalité loin de laquelle nous vivons, de laquelle nous nous écartons de plus en plus au fur et à mesure que prend plus d'épaisseur et d'imperméabilité la connaissance conventionnelle que nous lui substituons, cette réalité que nous risquerions fort de mourir sans avoir connue, et qui est tout simplement notre vie.

(to recover, to recapture, to acquaint us with that reality far from which we live, from which we move further and further away the more thick and impermeable our conventional knowledge becomes with which we substitute it, that reality which we risk not knowing before dying, and which is simply our life).
(202/IV.474)

But involuntary memory and the countless comparisons between one sensation and another ironizes this search for transcendence due to the extreme modesty of its mechanics: Marcel's experiences of *jouissance* derive not only from great art, nor even from the grand vistas in nature of Burke's or Kant's sublime, but also (and principally) from small, trivial, and accidental sensations: "c'est sous de petites choses...que la réalité est contenue" ("it is under small things...that reality is contained").⁶⁰ Marcel tries constantly to unlock atemporal and universalizing truths, to attain an intensified degree of comprehension and insight – even a spiritual equivalent⁶¹ – that lies latent in every sensation and, by correspondence, in the most remote *cachettes* of our memories.⁶² But he must reach those remote places through the accidental and the trivial.

⁵⁹Proust, *CGII* 17 (II.623).

⁶⁰Proust, *TR* 201 (IV.473).

⁶¹Proust, *TR* 185 (IV.457).

⁶²"We scarcely make the most of our lives," he observes in *CGII*, "we leave unfinished in the dusks of summer or precocious winter nights the hours which seemed to us might have contained a little peace or pleasure. But these hours are not completely lost" ("Nous ne profitons guère de notre vie, nous laissons inachevées dans les crépuscules d'été ou les nuits précoces d'hiver les heures où il nous avait semblé qu'eût pu pourtant être enfermé un peu de paix ou de plaisir. Mais ces heures ne sont pas absolument perdues") (84-5) (II.690-1).

This heightening of the ordinary appears as an ironic mythicizing impulse whereby Marcel explicitly invests the quotidian with divine properties. Comparing ordinary people around him to Olympian gods, implying that they are reenacting divine acts also seems an ironic form of Eliade's notion of eternal return. In *La Prisonnière*, for instance, Marcel points out that painters wanting to depict Venus or Ceres have always used ordinary working women as their models, and they have thereby done nothing more than restored these women's divine qualities. When one strolls around the city, therefore, every street is "full of goddesses": a waitress becomes a nymph by a sacred wood, and three young girls seated next to their bicycles are like "trois immortelles accoudées au nuage ou au coursier fabuleux sur lesquels elles accomplissaient leurs voyages mythologiques" ("three immortals leaning against a cloud or a fabulous steed on which they accomplish their mythological voyages") (156-9/III.672-5). This gentle demythologization recurs in small, incremental, and usually comic ways in several hundred places throughout the *Recherche*. Proust invokes ancient myths as well as great figures from the arts, the humanities, and political history, but their status is most often "dissipated" and deflated through ironic juxtapositions with banal people and events. Many of these "reincarnations" can be attributed to the vain and foolish opinions of Marcel's entourage, while many others have been incorporated into Marcel's own worldview. Selecting a few representative examples from just one volume, we find in *Sodome*⁶³ that Marcel likens the mutual recognition between Charlus and Jupien to the understanding between gods (15); compares Mme Putbus's maid to a Giorgione figure (94); is reminded of *Tristan* when the telephone rings (129); recites Racine's *Athalie* upon admiring a hotel's youthful staff (171); likens a bell-boy's perfect beauty to that of Endymion (188); compares Françoise recognizing a maid to Euryclea recognizing Ulysses' scar (377); says that the "views" around La Raspelière are like the miniature monuments in Hadrian's villa (388); and, seeing an aeroplane for the first time, finds himself as moved as "un Grec qui voyait pour la première fois un demi-dieu" ("a Greek seeing a demi-god for the first time") (417). As for Marcel's entourage, they either make self-aggrandizing claims, or inspire Marcel to ironically invoke a mythic figure. Thus Cottard declares that "Socrate, ce n'est pas extraordinaire" ("Socrates, that's nothing special") (439), and Charlus compares himself to the archangel Raphael sent by God to

⁶³All page references in this section follow the same pagination in vol. 3 of the Pléiade edition.

recover Toby (i.e. Morel) (460). Similarly, Mme de Cambremer appears convinced that her opinions of Monet are as important as Monet's paintings themselves (206-7), and Cottard seems to think his potential boat-trip to see du Boulbon would be as epic as Virgil's in Salerno (366).

This pattern of a mythic construction and its inevitable disillusionment recurs frequently as Marcel describes first the aura, reputation, and admirable qualities of a person – in a sense, giving them an idealized mythic glow – and then comes into contact with the truth behind the ideal. In the scene discussed earlier when Marcel finally sees the Duchesse de Guermantes in church, he blames his disappointment on the fact that this image of her is no longer "colorable à volonté" ("colorable at will"), but is simply too real, "si réelle que tout...certifiait son assujettissement aux lois de la vie" ("so real that everything...attested to her subjection to the laws of life"). In response, Marcel's instinct for self-preservation, "ce désir qu'on a toujours de ne pas avoir été déçu" ("that desire we always have not to have been disappointed"), fills his mind with thoughts which collectively make him consider her beautiful once again (173-4). (Note the use of the past tense. Proust does not say "de ne pas être déçu" but "de ne pas avoir été déçu," implying that regardless of the outcome of events, one's feelings can be revisited and repaired in retrospect.) Similar cases of disillusionment occur when Marcel goes to hear La Berma in *A l'ombre*, knowing he is expecting "des vérités appartenant à un monde plus réel que celui où je vivais" ("truths belonging to a world more real than the one in which I lived") (14/I.434); on the train from Balbec to Douville in *Sodome*, when both the names and the places they denote (Saint-Pierre-des-Ifs, Incarville) lose all their "mystery" (494/III.494); and during the trip to Venice where even the majestic architecture becomes depoeticized.⁶⁴ Marcel describes this sequence as a mythic quest gone awry in *A l'ombre* near the end of his sojourn at Balbec, when he confesses that Albertine and her friends had briefly been supernatural creatures to him. They had constituted, he says, "toute la gracieuse mythologie océanique" ("the whole graceful oceanic mythology") during his first days by the ocean by investing the mundaneness of their encounters with wonder. And yet at the end of his stay, Marcel must recognize that

⁶⁴"The palaces, the Canal, the Rialto all found themselves divested of the idea that constituted their individuality, and dissolved into their vulgar material elements" ("[L]es palais, le Canal, le Rialto, se trouvaient dévêtus de l'idée qui faisaient leur individualité et dissous en leurs vulgaires éléments matériels") (*AD*, 232 (IV.232)).

this mythological structure has now "dissipated", that Calypso is nothing more than a woman, and Minos but a king without anything divine (509/II.301).

Mythic parallels seem to be applicable to anyone, no matter their station in life. Marcel has in a sense turned the classical aesthetic hierarchy sideways, and democratized the notion of a stratification of mythic importance. At the same time, however, Marcel's mythic quest must be regenerated, or it must be conducted in such a fashion that it prevents contact with the ugly truth. In the scene cited above in which Marcel meditates on the communicative power of music, he notes that in seeking glory, the musician actually flees it, and thus "ce n'est qu'en la dédaignant qu'il la trouve" ("it is only by disdaining it that he finds it").⁶⁵ This echoes his aphoristic "on ne peut refaire ce qu'on aime qu'en le renonçant" ("one can only redo what one loves by renouncing it") in *Temps retrouvé*,⁶⁶ and suggests a search for essences that is ironically and consciously minimizing and self-humbling *by anticipation*. The process by which the mythic journey is conducted must operate like a suitcase *à double fond*: it must allow itself to be deconstructed to reveal that what was apparently intended was in fact not entirely desirable. Marcel wants to continually reach towards his ideals, but by using strategies that are humble, digressive, and fortuitous, he can avoid ever finding the Time he says he has lost.

D. RESISTING FIGURATION TO PRESERVE MYTHIC UNATTAINABILITY

1. RESISTANCE TO FIGURATION

If mythic unattainability preserves the mythic quest, how should Marcel approach his search rhetorically speaking? How does one move in language towards an ideal whose principal attraction is its very elusiveness? The answer is to depict, as I have suggested, the act of desire in a way that simultaneously undoes the very foundation of that desire: a pervasive and elaborate use of metaphor and simile, and a concomitant

⁶⁵Proust, *LP* 245 (III.761).

⁶⁶Proust, *TR* 348 (IV.620).

resistance to that figuration. In this way, one can move towards the ostensible goal, and at the same time use a mechanism that diminishes the enterprise to the point where the goal retains its alluring distance, and hence its mythic purity. This dynamic achieves the impossible compromise identified by Adorno and Horkheimer (discussed in Chapter 1) in Odysseus' answer to the bewitching song of the Sirens: confronting the mythic ideal, while finding an "escape clause" to maintain one's own subjectivity.⁶⁷ In Odysseus's case, surviving the Sirens' challenge meant the possibility of returning home to Ithaca, and restoring his proper familial and community identity. For Marcel, the reward is the realization, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, that he must now chronicle the very journey we have just finished reading. Marcel's subjectivity through self-diminishment is therefore the realization that he must become a writer who will continually reach for essence and truth, while paradoxically limiting his own linguistic power. Despite metaphor's mythic quality, and thus its important contribution to the mythicity of a text as dense with figuration as the *Recherche*, we discover that much of Proust's figurative language contains a pre-existing self-defeating mechanism that continually *diffuses* the figurative process. This in turn serves to undo Marcel's (and Proust's) mythic aspirations, which paradoxically offers a kind of aesthetic redemption by perpetuating mythic desire.

The idea that Proust's metaphors resist their own figuration derives in part from Jean Ricardou's study in *Nouveaux problèmes du roman* which observes that with regard to Proust's theory and use of metaphor, "le fonctionnement de ce texte commence à contredire ouvertement le fonctionnement textuel de sa propre théorie" ("the functioning of this text begins to overtly contradict the textual functioning of its own theory"), owing to Proust's excessive commentary on his own metaphoric process (94-5). This point is taken up by Paul de Man in his notion of the text as an allegory of the reading process itself, and the way in which Proust's text "deconstruct[s] its own metaphors" by continually "signifying something other than what it represents."⁶⁸ David Ellison and Margaret Gray have in turn each extended the applicability of this theory by identifying anti-interpretive behavior in Proust's figurative language in terms of its

⁶⁷Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

⁶⁸Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 57-78.

reluctance to engage in metaphoric fusion.⁶⁹ In *Temps retrouvé*, as we have seen, Marcel equates essence with atemporality, and explains that such a condition is made possible by "le miracle de l'analogie" ("the miracle of analogy") (178). Metaphor, he explains a little later, is the key to achieving his work of art as well as his "jouissance" of the atemporal essence of sensations, because it encloses objects "dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style" ("in the necessary rings of a beautiful style") (196/IV.468). But Gray astutely points out that if metaphor is intended to capture and unify temporally remote sensations, "one would think the very notion of capture would provoke reluctance, hesitation, and ambivalences" on Marcel's part, given his earlier difficulties with Albertine's captivity, and even more importantly, given his realization that desire is predicated on absence and unattainability. "We need to ask," Gray surmises, "whether the narrator would indeed *want* to imprison the past in metaphor and risk destroying that charm." Even in cases where the figurative impulse appears to be working in an aggressively metaphoric mode, such as the *baignoire* scene in *Guermantes I*, or Charlus's sexual encounter with Jupien in *Sodome*, the metaphoric images, Gray argues, end up overwhelming the very sensations that inspired them in the first place. This question invites the claim that the figurative language in the *Recherche* in fact continually resists "capture," that is metaphoric – and hence mythic – closure:

Figuration might ward off such capture by foreclosing the fixedness of interpretation, allowing experience to remain unconfined, at large. Metaphoric "chains," rather than binding experience within interpretation, may precisely work to exclude it, to keep interpretation from domesticating experience, providing thereby traces of a reluctance to capture the past in writing. (117)

If Proust's figurative language is in fact secretly armed against access to captured essences, we discover a double-movement in his project: an engagement with an essentializing mythic mode of writing, and the simultaneous conviction that the goal must be kept at a safe distance in order to maintain its allure (what Girard calls "deviated transcendence" (215)). Ellison confirms this pattern, arguing that the *Recherche* "is not a text enshrined in metaphor: it is the repetitive process by which the obscure, nonreadable significance of the figure obtains, through a misreading, the lively colors, the deceiving

⁶⁹David R. Ellison, *The Reading of Proust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 1-29, and Margaret E. Gray, *Postmodern Proust* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) 115-37.

clarity, of full, controllable meaning" (27). The discursive impulse must present itself as essentializing, but it must also interrogate itself and even divert from its intended goal in order to be in a condition of perpetually reaching towards that goal.

This attractive line of inquiry incorporates Genette's skepticism regarding Proust's metaphoric images in "Proust palimpseste" (an essay I shall return to), and posits a built-in systemic weakness, a kind of willful sabotage that undoes the text's aesthetic *élan*. As we have seen, Proust's hundreds of references to famous texts, legendary figures and mythic symbols are often so clearly ironic that they collectively amount to an open attack on traditional aesthetic hierarchies and categories, a comic demythologizing and cultural leveling consistent with a wide sweep of modern texts. But the demythologization perpetrated by his figurative language depends on a subtle infiltration and self-conscious dispersal. Metaphor has always been the primary rhetorical vehicle of myth and the dominant narratives of all cultures, and the density, richness and plenitude of figuration alone in the *Recherche* charges Proust's discourse with a lyrical momentum that presumably should propel Marcel into the mythic world of essences and universal truths towards which he clearly aspires. But as the following survey indicates, this figurative language is problematic in a range of subtle but extremely important ways that ultimately serve to prevent the very aims of metaphor. And this resistance, I believe, must be seen in the context of a self-inflicted opposition to the attainment of mythic ideals.

2. EARLY EXAMPLES OF ANTI-METAPHORICITY

Examples of figuration surrounding a single moment in the novel can elucidate specific problems with Proust's metaphoric usage, but one can already discern a cumulative effect of anti-metaphoricity in many of the opening analogies of *Swann*. Taken together, they introduce us to fundamental weaknesses in Proust's use of metaphor which shall be explored in greater detail below. From the very beginning, Marcel's metaphors bespeak a desire to reach either towards a prior existence, or towards a reality at some physical remove from the present. Thus, in just the first few pages, Marcel likens the unintelligibility of his belief that he has entered the book he was reading at bedtime, to thoughts of a former existence in metempsychosis; the whistle blow of a train defines for him the expanse of the countryside across which a traveler must journey; the "cheeks"

of his pillow are like the "joues de notre enfance" ("cheeks of our childhood"); the hour of midnight is compared to the moment when a sick person, who has been forced to travel to a foreign hotel, is relieved to see the light of dawn under the door (a light which proves to be a lamp – it is still midnight!); his desire to find the woman born of his dreams is like someone who travels to a city in the hopes of reconciling reality with desire; and a slight displacement of the arm while dozing in a chair can give one the illusion that one has traveled in space and time on a "fauteuil magique" ("magic easy-chair"). Combining the form and content of these various examples (and there are countless more) suggests the desire to invest language, in particular the dynamics of figuration, with the impetus to explore worlds removed in space and time. A comparison, either as simile or metaphor, is intended to reach outside the present reality, and will enable Marcel to imagine his situation in relation to the past, with a view, as we know, to "recapture" – or recreate – his former life. These analogies largely evoke an anonymous person, a Traveler, but they announce the internal voyage Marcel will engage in throughout the *Recherche*, particularly after the first case of involuntary memory.

The above analogies all concern some form of distance and unattainability, none of which is grounds for any suspicion: they invest the text with a wistful tone which will later accelerate and become a more pragmatic and decisive exploration. There are, however, some interesting surprises here. After remembering his room at the home of Mme de Saint-Loup, Marcel observes that his various memories of the past only last a few seconds, and that he often cannot distinguish them one from another any better than "que nous n'isolons, en voyant un cheval courir, les positions successives que nous montre le kinétoscope" ("we can isolate, when seeing a horse running, the successive positions shown in a kinetoscope").⁷⁰ Such multiple images, virtually identical to one another except for the slight variations of gradual movement, are no different from the arrays of images Marcel frequently invokes in his analogies. His figurative language most often consists not of a concise metaphor, with a precise point of origin and a single coherent image (I.A.Richards' *tenor* and *vehicle*, respectively),⁷¹ but rather of a small sensation, impression, or speculative issue, that is then compared to

⁷⁰Proust. *CS* 7 (I.7).

⁷¹ I.A. Richards' terms for the thing qualified, and the image used are not unanimously accepted by metaphor theorists, but they are sufficiently practical for my present purposes; see *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford UP. 1936) 96.

what is often a long list of elaborately described sensations and situations. These analogies quickly produce such expansiveness and figurative richness that they overwhelm the total interpretive moment, and each image taken individually therefore becomes merely one of a long string of ideas that are increasingly difficult to distinguish one from another – at least in terms of their cumulative rhetorical value – like the many images of the horse. And the irresistible and ironic conclusion is that, taken together, these images appear to run away from Marcel's descriptive intentions like a horse in flight.

3. MULTIPLICITY

In a famous passage in *Temps retrouvé*, Marcel explains the revelatory power of metaphor in its ability to extract its images from the contingencies of time, but his very definition of metaphor betrays its indirect structure: "la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport, analogue dans le monde de l'art à celui qu'est le rapport unique de la loi causale dans le monde de la science" ("truth will begin only at the moment when the writer takes two different objects, [and] posits their relationship, similar in the art world to the unique relation in the law of causality in the world of science"). To Marcel, metaphor is a miniature case of involuntary memory, a scientific cause-effect mechanism whereby an object from the present (the sound of church bells) can evoke the past (noon in Combray), and the past in turn reinforces the "reality" of the present. But rather than establishing this kind of causal equation, a strict fusion of images that one finds in metaphor,⁷² the relationship between images in Proust remains analogical, the posing of a dialectical relationship in which each side of the equation remains a mere conduit, a fractured mirror. In addition, *we lose the sense of priority between images*, unable to decide which term – if any – is being transformed, that is, which is the tenor (or focal point), and which the vehicle (or catalyst). "Rather than clarify the description of characters," Ellison deplores, "the similes and metaphors superpose separate, disjunct levels that dispute the same place, the same

⁷²Contemporary metaphor theory is divided on exact mechanical (i.e. cognitive) and terminological issues, but there appears to be a fairly broad consensus that metaphor produces new knowledge through a combination, interaction and fusion of terms.

instant of duration" (16). We emerge in each case with a pair of images that appear roughly equal in interpretive standing in the novel, and Marcel's figurative language therefore does not seem to adequately intensify the present through the past as it is intended to do. Pierre Bayard in *Le Hors-Sujet* describes Proust's digressions as "des formations autonomes, qui auraient pris leur indépendance à l'égard du texte" ("autonomous formations that seem to have become independent from the text"),⁷³ a comment which seems to accurately describe a great number of Proust's similes.

In addition to this imagistic equivalence (or independence), many of Marcel's analogies also devolve into triple or quadruple images, each one nested inside the next. Roger Shattuck has compared Marcel's analogical approach to reality as the double vision of a stereoscope, where the juxtaposition of images provides "dimensionality and depth...Like our eyes, our memories must see double; those two images then converge in our minds into a single heightened reality."⁷⁴ But too often, Marcel's metaphorical idea multiplies into a whole panoply of images that expands into a distracting digression – what Genette calls "surimpression fantasmagorique" ("phantasmagorical over-impression")⁷⁵ – making the stereoscope suddenly become a kaleidoscope. Although Proust explicitly welcomes this effect ("Grâce à l'art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier" ("Thanks to art, instead of seeing only a single world, ours, we see it multiply itself")⁷⁶), it does not achieve the cognitive compactness of pure metaphor, its ability to "fuse the two senses by making believe there is only one sense," in Colin Turbayne's phrase.⁷⁷

Early on in *A l'ombre*, for instance, we find Marcel listening to Odette Swann playing Vinteuil's *petite phrase*. He goes on to present a model of our memory as a palimpsest of impressions, with an additional layer added each time we hear a piece of music. But our memories are brief, he notes, as brief as

la mémoire d'un homme qui en dormant pense mille choses qu'il oublie aussitôt,
ou d'un homme tombé à moitié en enfance qui ne se rappelle pas la minute d'après

⁷³Pierre Bayard, *Le Hors-Sujet* (Paris: Minuit, 1996) 117.

⁷⁴Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars* (Princeton UP, 1963) 47.

⁷⁵Genette, "Proust Palimpseste", 52.

⁷⁶Proust, *TR* 202 (IV.474).

⁷⁷Colin Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962) 18.

ce qu'on vient de lui dire. Ces impressions multiples, la mémoire n'est pas capable de nous en fournir immédiatement le souvenir. Mais celui-ci se forme en elle peu à peu et à l'égard des oeuvres qu'on a entendues deux ou trois fois, on est comme le collégien qui a relu à plusieurs reprises avant de s'endormir une leçon qu'il croyait ne pas savoir et qui la récite par coeur le lendemain matin. Seulement je n'avais encore jusqu'à ce jour rien entendu de cette Sonate, et là où Swann et sa femme voyaient une phrase distincte, celle-ci était aussi loin de ma perception claire qu'un nom qu'on cherche à se rappeler et à la place duquel on ne trouve que du néant, un néant d'où une heure plus tard, sans qu'on y pense, s'élanceront d'elles-mêmes, en un seul bond, les syllabes d'abord vainement sollicitées.

(the memory of a man who during sleep thinks of a thousand things that he immediately forgets, or of a man fallen halfway back into childhood who does not remember the next minute what he has just been told. Our memory is incapable of providing the immediate remembrance of these multiple impressions. But it can be formed little by little, and with respect to works one has heard twice or three times one is like the student who before falling asleep has reread several times a text he did not think he knew, and who recites it by heart the following morning. However, I had heard nothing of this Sonata until that day, and where Swann and his wife could see a distinct phrase, it was as far removed from my clear perception as a name one seeks and in whose place one finds only a void, a void from where, in a single leap and without thinking of it, there emerge an hour later the very syllables one had initially sought in vain.) (100-1/I.520-1)

I have quoted this passage at length (it continues in this vein for some time) to illustrate not only a typical example of the manner in which the breadth of Marcel's digressive imagery seems to gradually tip the balance away from the event in question. More importantly, this passage invites an illuminating allegorical reading of the analogical process itself. Thus, when Marcel compares our memory to thousands of thoughts quickly forgotten, these can be read as the countless and therefore indistinguishable – and metaphorically weakened – images Marcel often seems to line up one after the other in his similes. The image of a man regressing into a childish mode of thinking can therefore be made to represent Marcel's artistic naïveté and idealism, his belief that these deliberately selected (and hence in some sense arbitrary) comparative images will indeed release the "essence" he so desperately seeks. Moreover, his idea that remembrance is the

product of a gradual construction over time accurately reflects the analogical process: an accumulation of images that may well bring out the "true nature" of the sensation being compared. The problem, of course, is that this process is potentially infinite; the success of its mechanics is therefore veiled in mystery in his example, attributed as it is to a magical fusion in a student's mind as he sleeps. In the final analogy, the void in Marcel's mind therefore seems to represent the empty vastness of possibility at his disposal each time he wants to highlight an idea or sensation with an analogy. Within an hour, he says, there springs from this void, as if by magic, the very "syllables" he sought, an idea which suggests unconscious inspiration, but which seems actually to be a process of deliberate selection among a broad range of possible images to make the desired comparison.

Such chaotic multiplications of images abound. One important case from *Sodome* occurs in the opening moments of the famous scene juxtaposing the sexual encounter between Charlus and Jupien with the fertilization of an orchid by a bee. Here, Marcel muses that cross-pollination accelerates and vivifies the development of a species to such an extent that a natural restraining mechanism through a flower's self-fecundation must occasionally occur:

comme une antitoxine défend contre la maladie, comme le corps thyroïde règle notre embonpoint, comme la défaite vient punir l'orgueil, la fatigue le plaisir, et comme le sommeil repose à son tour de la fatigue, ainsi un acte exceptionnel d'autofécondation vient à point nommé donner son tour de vis, son coup de frein, fait rentrer dans la norme la fleur qui en était exagérément sortie.

(just as an anti-toxin defends against sickness, as the thyroid gland regulates portliness, as defeat punishes pride, fatigue pleasure, and as sleep in turn provides rest from fatigue, so an exceptional act of auto-fecundation comes in due course to provide a turn of the screw, a braking mechanism, realigns the flower that had exaggeratedly strayed from the norm.) (5/III.5)

Marcel here provides an interesting case in point, rhetorically speaking, of his own imagery. For just as he provides eight analogies for a natural self-controlling mechanism, so too does the long string of parallels dilute the impact of his intended primary analogy, between auto-fecundation in botany, and homosexuality among humans. Ironically, the very images with which he describes a form of blockage are themselves so numerous as to necessitate a kind of interpretive "coup de frein" in the face of figurative excess.

4. EXCESS

In the beginning of the second chapter of *Sodome*, Marcel also uses excessive metaphoricity, in Elstir's sense of metamorphosis, to subvert the seascape at Balbec. Marcel deplors the fact that whereas he once could note the opposition between his walks in the countryside with Mme de Villeparisis and "ce voisinage fluide, inaccessible et mythologique, de l'Océan éternel" ("that proximate fluidity, inaccessible and mythological, of the eternal Ocean"), that very same ocean later seemed "presque rurale elle-même" ("nearly rural itself"). In the fairly long ensuing description, he weaves descriptions of the sea with images drawn from the country, such that "la chaleur avait tracé sur les eaux, comme à travers champs, une route poussiéreuse et blanche derrière laquelle la fine pointe d'un bateau de pêche dépassait comme un clocher villageois..." ("the heat had traced on the water, as through a field, a dusty white road behind which the thin point of a fishing boat could be seen like a village church tower").⁷⁸ This passage (it continues for half a page in similar fashion) amounts in essence to a mythic subversion, because Marcel's wishes for happiness are linked to the "eternal Ocean" which he explicitly notes is inaccessible and mythological, and this atemporal realm of ideals is now being self-consciously deconstructed by a rival group of rather quotidian images. At the level of metaphor, this is another clear case where Marcel's essentializing metaphoricity is transformed and undone by a long string of analogies that have infiltrated and dampened his rhetoric.

We can also read this analogical obsessiveness and self-conscious selection of images into Marcel's image of a patient who can "avec une pleine lucidité" ("with complete lucidity") witness the operation done to him thanks to an anaesthetic.⁷⁹ Marcel is indeed "anaesthetized" by his nostalgia for the mythic value of the past, and yet he (and we) can witness the overcalculated surgical precision of his own elaborate arrays of images used to evoke and hopefully reach these unattainable goals. Our suspicion of the effectiveness of Proust's metaphors is further illustrated immediately before the *madeleine* scene, when Marcel remarks upon his grandmother's love of old furniture, and of old expressions "où nous voyons une métaphore, effacée, dans notre moderne langage,

⁷⁸Proust, *SG* 179-80 (III.179-80).

⁷⁹Proust, *CS* 24 (I.24).

par l'usure de l'habitude" ("where we see a metaphor, erased, in our modern language, by the habit of wear"). His grandmother, he notes, would prefer to rent places that contained some ancient artifact like a gothic *pigeonnier* or "quelqu'une de ces vieilles choses qui exercent sur l'esprit une heureuse influence en lui donnant la nostalgie d'impossibles voyages dans le temps" ("one of those old things that produce a happy influence on the spirit by giving it the nostalgia of impossible voyages in time")⁸⁰. Thus far, Proust's text has been permeated with imagery indicating a desire for voyage, for remembering, for traveling into other existences, and yet here we learn that this is but shallow nostalgia and impossibility. Proust is clearly setting up an aesthetic double-movement, an engagement and a disclaimer. He will do everything he can to delve into the world of the past, to complete his mythic journey in search of Essence and Truth, but the ground has been prepared in such a fashion that from the start we see the inherently anti-figurative impetus of the text's so-called metaphors. Marcel is absolutely aware that our desires must remain unattainable, for if they are fulfilled, "cette distance que nous rêvions de franchir est supprimée" ("the distance we dreamed of overcoming is eliminated"). The danger in this, as we have seen, is that this could lead to disappointing revelations, and, more importantly, to the end of Marcel's imaginative and artistic desires.⁸¹

Andrée, faced with a similar dilemma in *Albertine disparue*, seems to have the perfect (albeit negative) solution: "Andrée était prête à aimer toutes les créatures, mais à condition d'avoir réussi d'abord à ne pas se les représenter comme triomphantes, et pour cela de les humilier préalablement." ("Andrée was ready to love all creatures, but on the condition of having first succeeded in not representing them to herself as triumphant, and thus of having humiliated them in advance") (40-1). This "preliminary humiliation" is very much in keeping with the figurative resistance of Proust's entire metaphoric-mythic project. In order for Marcel to "love all creatures," that is, to encompass his aesthetic and mythic aspirations, his rhetoric must be humbled before it even leaves his pen. Only by tying himself to the mast of self-defeat will he be able to confront the gods of lost time.

Instead of transforming knowledge by melding existing parameters in new ways, Marcel's analogies multiply meaning-making images into an endless series,

⁸⁰Proust, *CS* 40-1 (I.40-1).

⁸¹Proust, *LP* 133 (III.649).

dispersing experience to the point where all moments both past and present are heightened (what Roger Shattuck calls an "overdetermined universe")⁸² and made to appear equally valid in their representational function. "Notre esprit," Marcel observes in *Prisonnière*, "est le vieux Protée, ne peut rester esclave d'aucune forme" ("Our spirit is the old Proteus, it cannot remain the slave of any single form") (192/III.708), and in *A l'ombre*, he even explicitly argues for deliberate deferral of satisfaction. When the imagination is uncertain of conquering its object, he declares, it must "créer un but qui nous cache l'autre, et en substituant au plaisir sensuel l'idée de pénétrer dans une vie, nous empêche de reconnaître ce plaisir, d'éprouver son goût véritable, de le restreindre à sa portée" ("create a goal that hides another, and by substituting the idea of penetrating a life for sensual pleasure, prevent us from recognizing this pleasure, from savoring its real taste, from keeping it out of its reach") (362/II.454). The elaborate array of analogies Marcel so often creates seem to work in this vein, as a deliberate anti-figurative obfuscation that can, however, preserve the allure of desire's unattainability. "L'amour," as he says later in the same volume, "toujours insatisfait, vit dans le moment qui va venir" ("Love...always dissatisfied, lives in the moment to come") (509/II.301). Marcel's metaphoric analogies must remain the small paroxysms that seek in vain to escape paralysis, continually casting their net forward in search of the mythic which they know will – and must – remain elusive.

5. ANALOGY AND VOLUNTARY MEMORY

Metaphors require the interpreter to encompass both similarity and difference, yet Marcel's analogical process favors the former. For the most part, Proust's analogies aim to establish a web of similarities criss-crossing between Marcel's present sensation and either past or abstract experiences to which he can relate it. Even though his analogies can produce unusual pairings, that is events or truths drawn from completely different experiential domains, the driving purpose of the "miracle of analogy" for Marcel is principally to emphasize similarity, not difference. We have already seen from *Temps retrouvé* how Proust's analogies operate synecdochically, that

⁸²Roger Shattuck, *Marcel Proust* (New York: Viking, 1974).

is, they are each miniature cases of involuntary memory. Thus, just as the twelve "major" episodes, from the *madeleine* to the *pavés*, pull Marcel back into the past through his recognizing a similar sensation in the past, his hundreds of analogies seek to provide little leaps, either into the past or simply out of the present into an abstract and atemporal intellectual domain, also through a process of similarity.

But the belief that any one of these analogous details – or even an accumulation of details – can denote the essence of the sensation in question is as false as the belief that a single instance of the "I" – or even a collection of "I"s – defines an entire person for Marcel. Although Proust is seldom explicit on the question of metaphor, his views on the subject can be discerned in observations he makes with regard to the linguistic function of naming and the illusory fixity this provides. In *A l'ombre*, Marcel admires Elstir's paintings because of their ability to metamorphose reality, to undo the divine name-giving act of creation. Elstir's work essentially recreates reality by eliminating or changing the names we are accustomed to, and Marcel, recognizing no doubt an Aristotelean definition, equates this process with the workings of metaphor. Names, says Marcel, "répondent toujours à une notion de l'intelligence, étrangère à nos impressions véritables et qui nous force à éliminer d'elles tout ce qui ne se rapporte pas à cette notion" ("always correspond to some notion of intelligence that is alien to our true impressions, and that forces us to eliminate from these impressions anything that does not correspond to that notion") (399/II.191). In addition, names impose an artificial unity to a reality that is actually continually shifting. Symbolism is an artifice, he states in *Guermites II*, and the best way to return to the root of our impressions is to represent an object through the one which we initially mistook it for "dans l'éclair d'une illusion première" ("in the flash of a first illusion"). Here again he discounts the dominance of names: "Les surfaces et les volumes sont en réalité indépendants des noms d'objets que notre mémoire leur impose quand nous les avons reconnus" ("Surfaces and volumes are in reality independent of the names of objects which our memory impose on them when we have recognized them") (106/II.712).

The implication is that Marcel's analogies throughout the *Recherche* are intended to overcome the artificial fixity of signification, and thereby to convey the shifting reality through time of an object or person whose identity is artificially (i.e. temporally) stabilized and crudely intellectualized in a name. A metaphoric/metamorphic impulse can uncover essence or "true impression" because, as he explains in *Temps*

retrouvé, only metaphor can reveal extra-temporal and therefore essential correspondances between two sensations. Ideally, therefore, Marcel's metaphors should aim to provide semantic shifts, should reveal the true epistemological transience that lies under each label.

The problem here is one of arbitrariness of selection among an endless dispersion of successive states through time. In an early passage on the multiplicity of what appears to be a unified emotion, Marcel notes that what we identify as our love or our jealousy "n'est pas une même passion continue, indivisible. Ils se composent d'une infinité d'amours successifs, de jalousies différentes et qui sont éphémères, mais par leur multitude ininterrompue donnent l'impression de la continuité, l'illusion de l'unité" ("is not a single continuous and indivisible passion. They are composed of an infinite succession of loves, of different jealousies that are ephemeral, but by their uninterrupted multiplicity give the impression of continuity").⁸³ Much later, Marcel's principal example of this phenomenon surrounds the illusory stability bestowed by naming, in particular as it affects his false view of Albertine as a single person. In one of several passages in the *Recherche* devoted to Albertine's multiple selves,⁸⁴ Marcel points out in *La Prisonnière* that a young woman keeps resembling her previous self less and less, and that "la stabilité de nature que nous lui prêtons n'est que fictive et pour la commodité du langage" ("the stability we naturally lend her is but fictional and to accomodate language") (57/III.573). Consequently, any single view of Albertine would remain a mere *cliché*, an insufficient slice of her persona. It would be incapable of fully representing her various incarnations in Marcel's consciousness, her impact as a "whole", and would betray the equal validity of all the other perspectives.

Reading this again as a symptom of Marcel's dispersive figuration, one can see that when Marcel chooses, in any one of his many analogies, to compare a sensation to another experience, one can accuse him of committing the same error, of arbitrarily selecting a temporally dependent slice of his experience and arrogating to it the power to release the essence of the sensation in question. Yet Marcel's comparisons generally do not metamorphose two opposing concepts so as to fuse them and thereby release their common essence. More often, they seem rather to provide multiplications of

⁸³Proust, *CS* 366 (I.366).

⁸⁴See especially the "ten Albertines" in Proust, *CGII* 54 (II.660).

images that may resemble the original sensation to a greater or lesser degree, but they cannot purport to release the true meaning of that sensation in any lasting, essential way simply because these images are as arbitrary and fragile in their own signification as any single view of Albertine. Marcel's analogies may well be described as miniature moments of involuntary memory, but their selection of imagery is conscious and deliberate, and this suggests an arbitrariness that is in accordance with Beckett's description of the category of "voluntary memory". Involuntary memory, according to Beckett, "abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal – the real." Voluntary memory, on the other hand, is the "uniform memory of intelligence."

The images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination, and are equally remote from reality. Its action has been compared by Proust to that of turning the leaves of an album of photographs. The material that it furnishes contains nothing of the past, merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism – that is to say, nothing...It insists on that most necessary, wholesome and monotonous plagiarism – the plagiarism of oneself.⁸⁵

While Marcel's analogies do seem to possess the same temporal dialectic as the major instances of involuntary memory, their meaning cannot hope to attain the same heights of essence because their apparently accidental nature is really an act of careful selection. Proust confirms this view in a letter to Jacques-Emile Blanche, in which he states: "Je trouve les images nées d'une impression supérieures à celles qui servent seulement à illustrer un raisonnement" ("I find images born of an impression superior to those that serve only to illustrate reason").⁸⁶ Marcel's figurative comparisons therefore seem to masquerade as instances of the involuntary, but their selection process is in fact deliberate, and this dramatically diminishes their purported access to essence. Gray supports this view, stating that the "'necessary rings' of metaphor would seem to deaden the spontaneous coincidence that empowers involuntary memory" (117).

⁸⁵Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Calder, 1987) 32-3.

⁸⁶qtd. in Stephen Ullmann, *The Image in the Modern French Novel* (Cambridge UP, 1960) 125.

When in *Guermantes II* Marcel realizes, for instance, that he is seeing ten Albertines as his lips approach her cheek, he meditates on how photography just as much as a kiss can elicit the awareness that an object we think has an "aspect défini" ("definite aspect") can prove to contain "les cent autres choses qu'elle est tout aussi bien, puisque chacune est relative à une perspective non moins légitime" ("the hundred other things which it is to an equal degree, since each one is relative to a no less legitimate perspective"). He wishes therefore that he could quickly gather in his mind all of his various perspectives of her. She appears to him like a many-headed goddess, and Marcel senses her light perfume; but suddenly the spell is broken: he thinks noses, lips and eyes are poorly situated on the human face, realizes he can no longer see or smell her, and becomes aware by "ces signes détestables" ("these detestable signs") that he is actually kissing her cheek (54/II.660). This moment can be read as a rather neat allegory of Marcel's attempts at metaphoric/metamorphic essence: each sensation evokes for him a multiplicity of comparative images, and in the *Recherche* he often offers one or two, sometimes a whole series, and yet, it seems that even countless thousands of such *clichés* cannot, in their totality, faithfully render the "root of the sensation." His metaphoric comparisons – and, by extension, his aesthetic efforts as a whole – therefore appear extremely fragile – and, since he is limited in the number of images he can depict, arbitrary – in their awareness of their own crude mechanism. Marcel's analogies yearn for metaphoric fusion of times, but his project ends up looking like an endless series of unbridgeable image-pairs.

6. PROUST'S DECREATIVE IMAGERY

The anti-figurative tendency of many of Proust's similes and metaphors manifests itself also in his choice of imagery. A great number of his "metaphoric thoughts" are deceptive in that while they may in some fashion heighten our understanding of a particular character or event through an analogy to another well-known experience, they also frequently suggest absence, unattainability, or fragility. Feelings of distance and the inability to grasp thoughts and feelings with complete certitude are essential to the broader concerns of the work. A more specific theme in this regard is his penchant for using medical conditions as illustrative examples of events that

lie completely outside the world of medicine, a tendency which should not surprise us given Proust's own physical ailments as well as his father's and brother's illustrious medical careers. In *Albertine disparue*, for instance, after Albertine writes to Marcel that her decision to leave is irrevocable, reading the note feels to him like taking some dangerous medication that might induce a stroke (29/IV.29); that evening, he can sleep only because the memory of her acts upon him like sleep medication (31/IV.31); soon after, he compares the gradual waning of his longing for her to an injured man who eventually no longer needs his crutches (32/IV.32). In *Temps retrouvé* he likens the "poncif de grâce surannée qui flotte dans l'oeil du public" ("the veneer of outmoded grace floating in the public eye") to the subjective visions of the sick (28/IV.300); he compares Mme Verdurin's diminished suffering over the impossibility of boredom to "certaines migraines, certains asthmes nerveux qui perdent leur force quand on vieillit" ("certain migraines, certain nervous asthmas that lose their force as one ages") (36/IV.308); Marcel deplors the "exasperating" ideal of virility which makes distinguished men not mourn for a young man they may have admired, and their forgetfulness Marcel compares to a good-natured physician who may feel sadness over the death of a young sick girl without expressing it (51/IV.323).

We have already observed images of unattainability and uncertainty in the opening volume, but we must also note the frequent invocation throughout the *Recherche* of analogies related to extremely trivial and quotidian objects or events. Booth observes that "good metaphors are *appropriate*, in their grandeur or triviality, to the task at hand. If the point is to heighten sublimity, then trivial metaphors must be avoided. But if diminishment is desired, vice versa."⁸⁷ It is the latter approach Proust seems to have taken, one that therefore heightens the ironic functioning of metaphor in the context of a mythopoetic work, and is consistent with the broader pattern of demythologization outlined above. In *A l'ombre*, for instance, when Marcel sees La Berma for the first time, he says the confused noises behind the curtain are "comme on en entend sous la coquille d'un oeuf quand le poussin va sortir" ("as one hears through the shell of an egg before the chick emerges") (18/I.438). Later, when Swann imagines being married to Odette and conversing with the duchesse de Guermantes, Marcel compares the level of detail in Swann's imagination to that of people who consider how to spend a sum of money they

⁸⁷Wayne C. Booth, "Metaphor as Rhetoric," *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1979) 55.

have just won. Significantly, however, Marcel states that such people fix the amount at an arbitrary level (42/I.462). Then when M.de Norpois tells Marcel he will let Odette and Gilberte know that Marcel admires them, Marcel is so effusive in his thanks that the ambassador recoils with a look in his eyes that is "vertical, étroit et oblique (comme, dans le dessein en perspective d'un solide, la ligne fuyante d'une de ces faces)" ("vertical, narrow and oblique (when drawing a solid in perspective, like the disappearing line of one of its sides)") (50/I.470).

Other examples of imagistic diminishment in *Swann* include Marcel comparing his conjuring up of women through dream to the way Eve was born from Adam's rib; however in Marcel's case it is from "une *fausse* position de ma cuisse" ("the *false* position of my thigh") (4). If this dream-woman resembles someone he knew from his own life, he tries to find her again much like travelers who are under the illusion that the city of their fantasies can be experienced in real life. Then, in an elaborate analogy to his own sense of time, Marcel describes how when we sleep we carry within us an ordered sense of hours, years, and worlds, "mais leurs rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre" ("but their ranks can blend and break"). Thus when he awakens, he has only "le sentiment de l'existence comme il peut frémir au fond d'un animal; j'étais plus dénué que l'homme des cavernes" ("the sense of life as it is felt tremulously in deep within an animal; I was more denuded than a caveman") (5).

In other characteristic cases later in *Swann*, Marcel compares the joy he gets from the fragrance of aubépines to a melody one plays a hundred times without further attaining its secret. He compares his emotion to a traveler who sees "sur une terre basse une première barque échouée que répare un calfat, et s'écrie, avant de l'avoir encore vue: « La Mer! »" ("on a low plain a first stranded barge repairing a *calfat*, and who, before even having seen it, cries: 'the ocean!'""); Marcel says he returns to the aubépines hoping in vain that a temporary absence from them may have enabled him to know them more (137). When he later meets Gilberte at the Champs-Élysées, he says that when we come to be skillful in nurturing our pleasures, we content ourselves with the image of our love without worrying whether that image corresponds to reality, whether they love us back, or even whether we should confess our love to them in order to make the enjoyment endure, "imitant ces jardiniers japonais qui, pour obtenir une plus belle fleur, en sacrifient plusieurs autres" ("imitating those Japanese gardeners who, to obtain a more beautiful flower, sacrifice several others"). He then observes that his "instinct aveugle"

("blind instinct") makes him recognize Gilberte in his tired memory, comparing this instinct to the one that enables us to place one foot in front of the other before we can think of it (393-4). Frequently his figurative language is used, then, to mark his observations with a kind of defect or unattainability, to give color to weakness and impossibility, particularly as it relates to efforts at encapsulating reality and satisfying desires. In each case, we also feel the paradox between greater specificity in the language and a simultaneous let-down in the purpose it actually serves.

Many of Marcel's analogies, therefore, act as miniature encapsulated views of the mythic/anti-mythic structure of the novel: the attempt to seize upon the thing-in-itself of every experience as absolutely as possible – i.e. to attain mythic essences – through the power of rhetoric, while operating with a metaphoricity that is often weakened both in form and in content. And even though Proust knows perfectly well this is a doomed enterprise, he nevertheless continuously and exhaustively repeats his little leaps toward a mythic sublime. What Leo Bersani says of *Ulysses* can equally well be applied to Proust's text : "it can only exist in a state of continuous anxiety about its capacity to sustain itself, perhaps even to begin itself" (15). Proust's metaphors continually remind us that Marcel is perfectly conscious of his failure at every step, and yet he continues to feel the process must be engaged and maintained. This mode represents an existence-as-aesthetic-process in which self-creation and self-destruction operate simultaneously, or "both sincerely presented and sincerely undermined," as Anne Mellor puts it.⁸⁸ In this regard, Shattuck synthesizes Proust's position in a statement that echoes a dynamic that runs throughout Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*: "Whatever bends to our desire disqualifies itself by becoming a part of ourselves." Thus, every desire, in order to remain attractive to us, must remain outside the present, for (and here he cites Proust) "one can imagine only what is absent." In this regard, Shattuck explains Montaigne's notion of "une erreur d'âme" as our incapacity to give life and experience its full value. The only escape from this "error of the soul" is to seek impossible perfection, to maintain desire by keeping it unattainable. Shattuck goes on to argue that because we are inherently dissatisfied with our estate, and cannot "be all of ourselves at once," we perceive our lives as finite, our characters as "successive, dependent on time to reveal

⁸⁸Anne Mellor. "On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory," *Criticism* XXI.3 (1979) 217-29.

itself in any depth." We therefore "react by yearning to enter into or become someone else, to escape the limits of our own body and being...The urge for self-transcendence burns a hole in our being without ever attaining its goal: true otherness."⁸⁹

While these observations help underscore the power of imagination and desire in Proust, we can also trace an explanation for these problems back to metaphor. As we saw earlier, Proust himself found metaphor to be the perfect tool to give his writing a feeling of eternity, to let Marcel escape from temporality. Metaphor keeps things outside the present in order to preserve their charm. The analogies it draws places the observer between two fixed points of signification, but only the first lies in a fixed narrative time. Moreover, metaphor achieves the neat paradox of incorporating an analogy which sharpens and clarifies a feeling over a particular sensation, but it also leaves the moment unresolved, indeterminate. The observer thus maintains the illusion of a clearer, sharper sense of reality, when in fact the desire for a precise truth remains unattained, what Roxanne Hanney has deplored as the "frequency of an undefined or intangible middle term."⁹⁰ Thus, just as Joyce "maintains the distinctness of innumerable other styles in order to legitimize misquoting them,"⁹¹ Marcel, by implicitly admitting at every turn in his narrative that his descriptive efforts cannot succeed, ironically manages to escape the humiliation of failure.

This self-managing aspect of Proust's figuration calls to mind Paul de Man's description of irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," which provides an extremely useful theoretical angle on Proust's almost obsessive iteration of figures. Irony, to de Man,

reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality. Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse with the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly

⁸⁹Roger Shattuck, *Marcel Proust* (New York: Viking, 1974) 98-9, 102.

⁹⁰Roxanne Hanney, *The Invisible Middle Term in Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) 1.

⁹¹Bersani 22.

caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world.

This dynamic results in an endless dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention, a "recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness"⁹² we see clearly operative in Proust's *Recherche*. His metaphors provide the illusion of descriptive freedom by pulling us out of a fixed field of meaning situated within a single time zone. At every turn, the reader is asked to draw lines across time, from Marcel's experiences to the broader more universal images he associates with them. It is the same process that governs Marcel's own journey into the past, the departure from an incidental physical sensation in his present adulthood pulling him outside temporal restrictions and allowing him to move back in time to reexamine and perhaps arrive at a more intimate possession of that ordinary experience. This juxtaposition of characters and events and their metaphorical equivalents make our understanding oscillate between specific and general, past and present, in the hopes that we somehow come to understand them as one. Borrowing Max Black's terminology, we could infer that Marcel constantly pushes an "interaction view" of his experiences, wants us to understand what he sees in terms of different social or more universal experiential antecedents, to hold in our minds the "systems of associated commonplaces" from each realm. This strategy is absolutely fundamental to Proust's fiction because the metaphorical ideal of overcoming the fixed definitions of its own words encapsulates Marcel's desire to overcome the fixed categories of time and thereby the fixed parameters of selfhood. By reading one experience through another, Marcel aspires to overcome appearance. According to Poulet, the result of this exploration is dramatic:

from this metaphoric relationship between two impressions there has finally surged up the self; not a present self, without content, at the disposal of time and death; and not a past self, lost, and hardly retrievable; but an essential self, liberated from time and contingency, a primal and perpetual being, the creator of itself, the author of an 'eternal song immediately recognized'...the existence traveling in search of its essence finds it in timelessness.⁹³

⁹²Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Adams and Searle 217-8.

⁹³Georges Poulet, "Proust and Human Time," *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Girard (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice, 1962) 171.

Of course, if we are to maintain our analogy between the self and metaphor, then Poulet's answer is as elusive as when the *Recherche* began. We still do not know whether the space between the two terms of a metaphor is filled with new meaning, or whether metaphor remains confined to its terms which really are merely a substitute for a literal statement.

E. CONCLUSION

"What is this center which is never reached, which is left further and further behind," Girard asks, referring to the "mystic center," the ideal from which each successive volume appears to devolve. His answer: the steeple of the church of Saint-Hilaire in Combray, which Marcel likens to "le doigt de Dieu" ("the finger of god")⁹⁴ and which, according to him, "donnait à toutes les occupations, à toutes les heures, à tous les points de vue de la ville, leur figure, leur couronnement, leur consécration" ("gave all occupations, all hours, all points of view of the town their form, their crowning, their consecration").⁹⁵ Girard goes on to explain that desire in the *Recherche* continually vascillates closer and further away again from the idol in question in the successive "series of concentric circles" represented by each volume. By being continually held in abeyance by the mythic ideal, the desiring subject cannot hope to attain transcendence. Girard depicts this "double movement" by quoting Proust's description of a flock of crows surrounding the steeple.⁹⁶ I cite it below to supplement Girard's symbolic interpretation by inviting a reading of this scene as a symbol of the multiplicity of images Marcel so often uses to surround the sensations he seeks to depict through his analogies:

Des fenêtres de sa tour...il lâchait, laissait tomber à intervalles réguliers des volées de corbeaux qui, pendant un moment, tournoyaient en criant, comme si les vieilles pierres qui les laissaient s'ébattre sans paraître les voir, devenues tout d'un coup inhabitables et dégageant un principe d'agitation infinie, les avaient frappés et

⁹⁴Proust, *CS* 66 (I.66).

⁹⁵Proust, *CS* 64 (I.64).

⁹⁶Girard 214-6.

repoussés. Puis, après avoir rayé en tous sens le velours violet de l'air du soir, brusquement calmés ils revenaient s'absorber dans la tour...

(From its tower windows, [the steeple] released, let fall at regular intervals, flights of crows which, for a moment, cawed and flew about, as if the old stones that allowed them to flap about without seeming to see them had suddenly become uninhabitable and, exuding a principle of extreme agitation, had struck them and repulsed them. Then, after having sliced the purple velvet of the evening air in all directions, they returned suddenly calmed to be absorbed in the tower...)⁹⁷

Like this irritable flock of crows bursting back and forth about the steeple of Saint Hilaire, the exhaustive groups of comparative images in Marcel's many analogies flutter about the sensation he is describing, seeking to penetrate its transcendent – that is, purely metaphoric, atemporal, and mythic – qualities. But the very arbitrariness, wordiness, and rhetorical equivalence of those images appears to make such transcendence impossible, and they must remain like a halo about the mysterious and elusive "invisible center". As Girard perceptively observes, "The steeple is visible everywhere but the church is always empty."

From the narrative standpoint, the net cumulative effect of Marcel's countless analogies is to underscore the tentativeness and incompleteness of Marcel's repeated attempts at transcendent depictions of experience. This adds a humbling effect to Proust's work because it derives – with the added impact of indirectness – from a figure of speech one expects should clarify and intensify. Marcel's analogies seem therefore to have installed a parasitic, systemic weakness throughout the text which acts as a kind of safeguard against the very centralizing aesthetic towards which mythic metaphoric discourse initially seems to reach. Ideally, metaphor enhances and poeticizes language, charges it with the privileged access and aura of lyricism and myth. Proust's multi-volume novel is therefore governed by a powerful irony: its sheer size and the plentiful and often excessive use of figurative language induce the reader to believe that it can succeed in its attempts at bearing down decidedly and with reliable precision on the very essence of Marcel's every recollection; the work gives itself the space to embark on expansive narrative, and license to indulge in a variegated panoply of elaborate analogies. And yet from the very outset of the first volume, we find a duplicitous metaphoric

⁹⁷Proust, *CS* 62-3 (I.62-3).

impulse: what are supposed to be signs of discursive power and artistic and rhetorical access to transcendent truths reveal themselves to be insecure preoccupations with trivial subject matter and exhaustively described analogies, few of which seem either to hit their intended target, or to believe that they really can. It is precisely Marcel's mania with precision that signals that the work will from the outset fail at rendering reality as truthfully as it appears to want to. And this is the central paradox of the *Recherche*: the very failure of its elaborate efforts at figuration are the key to its success in maintaining mythic desire. Marcel and the reader perpetually oscillate between images, hoping that the lost paradise may yet be recovered.

The image of the church in the above example invites, moreover, what is perhaps the most fundamental reason for Marcel's continual cycles towards and away from the objects of his desire: the continual need, like Scheherazade, to overcome his own mortality. Near the close of *Temps Retrouvé*, his epiphany in the library inspires him to characterize his life as being like a painter walking up a path near a lake, his view impeded by a "curtain" of rocks and trees; suddenly, an opening reveals the full splendor of the view, and he seizes his brushes; night, however, soon falls, and the sun will never rise again. Thus, the human body "enferme l'esprit dans une forteresse; bientôt la forteresse est assiégée de toutes parts et il faut à la fin que l'esprit se rende" ("locks the spirit in a fortress; soon the fortress is besieged from all sides, and the spirit must finally surrender"). Marcel then formulates two different kinds of mortality: his present fear of an accidental death, which could extinguish the treasury of his mind still to become the source of his great work, and the many deaths he has already experienced. Dying, he says, is nothing new to him, since "depuis mon enfance j'étais déjà mort bien des fois." When he ceased loving Albertine, for instance, he became "un autre" ("another") through his indifference:

Ces morts successives, si redoutées du moi qu'elles devaient anéantir, si indifférentes, si douces une fois accomplies, et quand celui qui les craignait n'était plus là pour les sentir, m'avaient fait depuis quelque temps comprendre combien il serait peu sage de m'effrayer de la mort.

(These successive deaths, so feared by the I they were to annihilate, so indifferent, so sweet once accomplished, and when he who feared them was no longer there to feel them, had made me understand of late how unwise it would be for me to fear death. (343/IV.615))

Thus, despite his current concern over preserving the vessel of all his experiences, he reveals here that he has, over the course of his life, experienced a continual cycle of death and rebirth through many different "selves." These cycles, it would seem, lie at the very root of Marcel's continual progressions from idealization to disillusionment, and then again back to new imaginative investment. In this late scene, Marcel suggests that the continually cyclical nature of his quest to recreate and deepen his memories have provided a perpetual state of aesthetic and imaginative rebirth. Now, he must address the other form of mortality, and labor to produce a work that will outlast even his physical death.

Barthes has argued that the final reversal at the end of the *Recherche*, the revelation that this is a book Marcel *is going to write*, reveals that the book is not something into which Proust has put his life, but rather is in fact the *model* for Proust's life. In this way, "Charlus does not imitate Montesquiou, but...Montesquiou is no more than a secondary fragment, derived from Charlus."⁹⁸ Shattuck echoes this view in discussing the relationship between author and work, explaining that Proust

as author...was the product of his work in progress. In the cases most crucial to literature, writing is less a record of what has actually happened to someone than a discovery-creation of what might potentially happen to people, "author" included. The symbiotic relationship between man and book grows as much out of aesthetic as out of biographical factors...Mysteriously and steadily, the *Search* secreted its true author, the literary creature we call Marcel Proust.⁹⁹

Marcel seems intensely preoccupied with the self-creative/self-eliminating process of his own storytelling, a process that is intimately bound up with the impossibility of closing either temporal, metaphoric, or finally, epistemological gaps in search of lost time. The interesting inversion whereby he discovers at the end of his journey that he must become a writer to produce the very text we have just read is also a paradoxical victory. Marcel will return to the beginning again, both textually and in terms of his personal life-quest, and will relive his hopes and inevitable disillusionments, until he arrives once again at the artistic revelation in *Temps retrouvé*. This too is a form of eternal return. As Proust and

⁹⁸Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in David Lodge (ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory* (London: Longman, 1988) 169.

⁹⁹Shattuck, *Proust* 21.

his narrator – and by extension his readers – repeat their journey, they find themselves caught in an endless spiral of repetition, like the night in the center of *The 1001 Nights* Borges imagines is itself the retelling of the *The 1001 Nights*.¹⁰⁰ The paradox, of course, is that while Marcel's search for mythic transcendence is to be repeated and endlessly satisfied, that search is also destined to fail an endless number of times, even beyond the extinction of the last reader onto whose shoulders the Proustian quest has temporarily fallen.

¹⁰⁰Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths" *Labyrinths* 25.

CHAPTER 3: JOHANNES V. JENSEN

*The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Sixty-seven-year-old Claudia...crying not in grief but in wonder that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once.

Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger*

A. THE 160 MYTHS

Like Proust, Johannes V. Jensen is interested in uncovering the richness of the present by drawing narrative arcs into past time. In the approximately 160 short stories which he published in nine volumes across four decades (1907-1944) as *Myter* (*Myths*),¹ Jensen often delves either into his own childhood (sometimes using Proustian involuntary memory), or into ancient times – man's childhood, as Enlightenment theories of myth held. But where Proust's mythicity can in large part be associated with the metaphorical, Jensen's is more heavily geared in these stories towards that other key Proustian concern, the notion of atemporality, of leaping outside the present moment in order to link it with its counterpart in the past. Rather than placing his stories in a pure

¹Johannes V. Jensen, *Myter*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal. 1960).

mythic or sacred time in the traditional sense, he is careful to employ a dialectical interplay between two time-zones in order to uncover the unsuspected origins behind current realities, or to meditate upon nature and humanity from a detached atemporal plane.

That myth has played a preeminent role in Jensen's work is no secret: when someone suggested to him that in actuality his entire oeuvre was mythic, he replied that he would not contradict this.² But Jensen explicitly declares his standing as modern mythmaker by naming his 160 short stories as *Myter*. Examining a mere handful of these stories, however, soon reveals that they are governed by a highly idiosyncratic and rather generous conception of "myth" which has, as Harry Andersen correctly observes, "ført os allesammen på vildspor" ("sent us all on a wild goose chase").³ Jensen, I hope to show, actually exemplifies the Modernist mythopoetic mode insofar as his work pursues transcendent vision while undoing the very fabric of that vision. Jensen achieves this double movement by constantly aspiring towards traditional mythopoetic goals, while at the same time spreading the applicability of myth so broadly and diffusely that it loses its power over him and his readers. There are a number of de-creative and dispersive elements in the *Myter*, but the most significant of these, as we shall see, is bound up with the apparently insoluble issue of genre.

Spanning four decades from *Myter og Jagter* (1907) ("*Myths and Hunts*") to *Møllen. Myter og Beskrivelser* (1944) ("*The Windmill. Myths and Descriptions*"), these short works have delighted and perplexed Jensen's readers and critics, principally due to his rather free use of the term *myth*. Myths are traditionally understood as surreal and richly metaphorical narratives situated in an ancient, sacred time, that tell of origins and universal meanings. The great variety of myths from the classical world of Homer, Herodotus, Ovid and Virgil, to the native traditions of the Icelandic sagas and Lakota creation myths, have many traits in common despite the impressively rich panoply of sources. Jensen's overarching intention in his myths, briefly stated, is to explore the depths of time and memory in order to unfold the full essence of the present. In "Dadde," he actually conflates myth and memory, stating that he once found a ring on a country road that had been dropped there by "Tidens Fugl" ("the bird of time"), and that this ring

²Jensen. *Møllen. Myter og Beskrivelser. Niende Bind* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1944) 11.

³Harry Andersen. *Studier i Johannes V. Jensens Forfatterskab* (University of Copenhagen, 1972) 117-8.

is "Mindets Ring, Mytens Ring" ("the ring of remembrance, the ring of myth"); when he gazes within it, "vender svundne Ting tilbage i Nuet igen" ("it brings back into the now things that have disappeared").⁴

A significant number of Jensen's myths do indeed seem traditionally "mythic" insofar as they are situated outside time, tell of surreal and often allegorical figures and events, and seem to convey themes of universal importance. He presents stories in which, as his friend Frithiof Brandt says "one sees the subject in an unimagined perspective...of time binding present and past and future together."⁵ In this regard, Tom Kristensen has characterized the myths as recollections where "atmosfære og natur spiller med ind. Det nedarvede, instinkterne, forbindelserne med dyrene, som vi stammer fra, er vaagen i disse mytiske øjeblikke, og derfor er der en varme over disse minder, en solskinsvarme og en animalsk lunhed, enfølelse af at være i slægt med alt" ("atmosphere and nature are incorporated. Our ancestry – our heritage, our instincts, our relationships to animals – is awake in these mythic moments, and thus there lies a warmth over these reminiscences, the warmth of the sun and animals, the feeling of being related to everything").⁶

However, Jensen also stretches our conception of the genre "myth" up to and beyond the breaking point because his myths, in true Modernist fashion, are highly personal, written with extreme (almost microscopic) attentiveness to detail, most often concerned with quotidian events from his own life, often set in modern cities, and typically favor impression and its impact on consciousness over specific plot. Most importantly, however, many of Jensen's myths are frankly – and, one might say, 'merely' – essays, travel pieces, and personal anecdotes that violate the most generous definition of myth, *even his own*. The majority of the 160 *Myter*, in fact, are no more than personal reminiscences that lack any identifiable stylistic traits usually associated with mythical discourse, and that do not even appear to conform to the various definitions of myth he has himself offered at various times.

⁴Jensen, *Myter II* 69.

⁵qtd. in Rossel 86.

⁶Tom Kristensen, *Den evige Uro* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1958) 97.

JENSEN'S ATTEMPTS AT DEFINITIONS

Jensen was of course fully conscious of the problem of classification, but even when confronting its slipperiness, he seemed to persist in trying to finesse the issue with qualifications and afterthoughts. Early in his career, Jensen sought to define the aesthetic boundaries and intentions of a mythic form which was clearly his own invention. In his preface to *Årbog 1916 (Yearbook 1916)* he attempts to include as many types of writing as possible under his mythic umbrella:

Oprindeligt begyndte jeg uden Plan med nogle Smaastykker om Dyr; Jagt- og Rejseskildringer; Naturbeskrivelser; opfundne Ting, som jeg ikke vidste noget bedre Ord for end Myter; efterhaanden blev dette Begreb mig bevidst ikke som Fællesbetegnelse alene men som en virkelig literær Art. Jeg har dyrket Myten som en Form for sig og har her ikke fundet Efterlignere...Formen er min egen...

(Originally I began without any plan with a few short pieces about animals, hunts, travels, descriptions of nature, things imagined which I had no better word for than myth; eventually this concept became not only a common label but a true literary type. I have harnessed myth as a form unto itself and have yet to find a better term...This form is my own...)

He then follows with several suggestions towards a definition. Reality, he argues, does not exist until it is highlighted through a precise detail, and myth is "et Stof fra fortiden belyst og givet ny Betydning gennem den moderne Indsigt" ("something from prehistory that is illuminated and given new meaning through modern insight"), a connection established between "et Stykke af Naturen" and "Tiderne" ("an element from nature" and "the times"), when "De Gamles Følelse [er] udvidet til ogsaa at omfatte og optage det Moderne" ("old people's feelings [are] expanded to include and grasp the modern"). Jensen unfortunately only devotes a few lines to saying that some of the stories he has included under the term "myth" do not strictly speaking have anything to do with myth, and that, on the other hand, myths can be found in some of his other works, notably his *Eksotiske Noveller (1916) (Exotic Stories)*. His fifth collection, *Pisangen (1932) (The Plantain)*, he even confesses, incorporates pieces which are too far removed from the myth as artform.⁷

⁷Jensen, *Årbog* 7-13.

A few years later, Jensen confirms his desire to embrace as many forms as possible, stating that myth

indeholder komponerende Ting, hvad man ellers vilde kalde Noveller eller Æventyr...indtryk fra Rejser, Beskrivelser, Dyrehistorier, *nature morte*, ethvert Stof hvori der er Liv, og som adskiller sig fra Essayet eller Artiklen deri, at en universel Rytme er invirket deri. Den korte bevingede Form er født af vor Tids Tempo, Myterne gør sig Haab om at ses ikke under Synspunktet Bagatellen, men Essensen, Tingenes Marv.

(has several components, what one might otherwise call novellas or fairy tales...travel impressions, descriptions, stories of animals, *nature morte*, any matter where there is life, and which distinguishes itself from the essay or article in that a universal rhythm is worked into it. This short familiar form is born of the pace of our era; myths hope not to be seen as trifles, but as essence, the belly of the thing.)

This broad encompassing movement is reinforced in *The American-Scandinavian Review* where Jensen writes (in English) that myths "are not short stories in the ordinary sense of the word, nor fairy tales: they have something of the essay, of the quality of a musical theme, an attempt to focus the essence of life in a dream."⁸ These and similar comments across Jensen's various works are more suggestive than rigorously exact, surrounding his concept like an aura whose epistemological precision is tentative at best.

In 1944, Jensen confronts more fully the cracks in his nomenclature in "Efterskrift til Myter og Beskrivelser 1907–1944", the preface to his ninth and last collection, *Møllen*. However, although he is now at a late point in his career and examining his work with apparent candor, Jensen further problematizes his myth collections instead of really solving them. He opens with the rather bold admission that his entire mythic oeuvre should be recast under new terms: "Denne niende og sidste Samling Myter har jeg givet Undertitlen 'Myter og Beskrivelser'; og egentlig skulde alle de udkomne Bind have været betegnet saaledes, da Indholdet har lige saa mange beskrivende, journalistisk prægede Ting som Myter i egentlig Betydning" ("I have given this ninth and final collection of myths the subtitle 'Myths and Descriptions'; actually, all the volumes that have appeared should have been denoted as such, as they contain as

⁸qtd. in Andersen 122.

many descriptive, journalistic pieces as actual myths.") He even goes on to admit that in considering the pieces for this final volume, he felt that they were so close to the essay genre that the mythic mode of writing must hereafter be abandoned. And yet, immediately after this he still feels the need to diminish this self-critique by claiming that "Myte og Essay er dog ikke skarpt adskilte Omraader, for alt hvad der hedder Evolution er i sig selv Myte, hvis der derved forstaaes et dagligt Fænomen, fordybet ved hvad det har i sig af Oprindelse" ("Myth and the essay are however not sharply distinct areas, since everything that can be named evolution is inherently myth, if we take it to mean a daily phenomenon that is deepened by what it contains of its own origins"). This dialectic persists throughout the essay. Jensen redefines his conception of myth as a theme moving in two dimensions, breadth and depth—that is, richness of theme and movement across time—and states that after beginning with natural subjects for their limitless wealth of meaning, he went on to include "andre Motiver af enhver Art" ("other themes of all kinds.") But in the next breath, he again defends his position, claiming that a link between classical notions of myth and his own myths could be justified in that "Ungtidens mytologiske Forestillinger jo ogsaa i en primitiv Form beskæftigede sig med Tingenes Ophav, et Perspektiv i Tiden. Den moderne Myte har endelig det tilfældes med den antike, eller med Eventyret, at et Fantasiprodukt har sin egen suveræne Virkelighed" ("Youthful mythical imaginings are also, in primitive form, preoccupied with origins, a temporal perspective. Modern myth has this in common with the classical, or with the fairy tale, that a product of fantasy has its own sovereign reality").⁹ This last observation underscores the notion that mythopoetic projects in any era do not intend to depict an external reality so much as stand by themselves as the reality to be apprehended. As Jensen has said elsewhere of journalism in the United States, "the press is so well prepared to describe every instant all over the world that one gets the impression that it is actually in the press that everything takes place, not in reality."¹⁰

Jensen continues his problematic self-assessment in his introduction to *Møllen* by defending the short story form itself on the grounds that it can incorporate a wide range of genres from folktales to biblical stories, and that it need not dwell on whole "episodes" but can confine itself to brief situations and impressions: "Det er som om man

⁹Jensen, *Møllen* 7-8.

¹⁰Jensen, *Introduktion til vor Tidsalder (1915) [Introduction to our Epoch]*, qtd. in Rossel 27.

nu endelig er vokset fra det spændende Moment, ligesom man i Malerkunsten er gaaet over fra 'Fortællingen' til Farven" ("It is as though we have now finally grown out of the thrilling moment, just as in painting we have moved from 'narrative' to color") (9). And although he humbly distances himself from H.C. Andersen, he points out that Andersen's approach had something of the modern in that he incorporated journalistic pieces in his collections which were really neither fairy tales nor stories. Jensen admits that this is not unlike what he himself has done, explaining that the short myth grew out of practical considerations, namely the particular hunger the press had for greater conciseness and an extremely broad range of topics. His own myths, he argues, in following this trend towards brevity and variety, can be characterized as a cross between journalism and poetry.

As we shall see, much has been made of the shifting thematic ground under Jensen's overarching term "myth." In *Årbog 1916*, Jensen actually explains that he has deliberately "blasted" the genre to include as many things as possible in his classification. In this regard, he admired H.C. Andersen's flair for including a broad and unexpected range of subjects in his fairy tales, praising, for example, Andersen's ability to make even a railroad sound poetic. Jensen's primary impetus for keeping his classification loose may have derived from his admiration for a Danish literary giant ("Jeg har elsket ham for det og søgt at følge ham i det" ("I have loved him for this and have sought to follow him in this")) (12), or it may have been rooted in a belief similar to one Proust has expressed,¹¹ that we are blinded by our daily routine, and that we must look below its surface in order to harness the unlimited mythic potential within us. We must remember, however, that mythopoesis often challenges strict aesthetic and thematic categories. An illuminating example of how mythic discourse diffuses genre is provided by Jean Love in an analysis of mythopoetic thought in the novels of Virginia Woolf:

The lack of differentiation and of hierarchical integration that characterizes mythic thought may be in evidence in the organization and patterning of the whole...The sorting out of genre, the separation of works into classes is an empirical-theoretical exercise and the more mythopoetic author may not consider such distinctions as he creates. On the other hand, he may, as Virginia Woolf's

¹¹see *Albertine Disparu* 183.

essays indicate that she did, deliberately merge different genres, to create a single whole out of entities that often are separated from one another.¹²

This attitude is of course compounded by the general fragmentation of cognitive and artistic categories in the Modernist era. Fokkema and Ibsch remind us that "[t]he intellectual awareness of epistemological problems leads the Modernist towards imaginative experiments which blur the distinction between poetry and narrative prose...and between the novel and the essay."¹³ Jensen's spreading of his category of myth falls into this trend, and amounts to an epistemological weakness he has clearly not sought to contain with extreme rigor.

B. CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM

Mythopoesis, for Jensen, seems to have a cyclical dimension similar to Proust's, in that many of his myths seek to move back through memory, either personal or communal, and in a sense reestablish the origins of the present event in a way that can sharpen its meaning and deepen its significance. A keen Darwinist, Jensen is, in a sense, trying to find the evolutionary origins of all that surrounds him, not merely in nature, but in his own social life and his meditations on private experience. Everything can be traced back to its source, and holding that source up against its present version produces a tension which in Proust reveals extra-temporal essence, and in Jensen produces "myth."

But this general symbiosis between myth and memory surfaces in only a limited number of Jensen's *Myths*; moreover, he clearly seems divided between diminishing the epistemological fixity of his label *Myte* and justifying a mythic reading of his pieces. It is therefore not surprising that much of the critical energy surrounding this vital part of Jensen's *oeuvre* has been classificatory, concerned in particular with Jensen's own fragmentary and at times self-contradictory attempts at defining his own concept of myth, and with deciding the degree to which these myths can be circumscribed within one or several different genres. But as one soon discovers upon

¹²Jean Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1970) 25.

¹³Fokkema and Ibsch 38.

reading the myths, such a problem should rather invite the notion that Jensen's myths are not a genre but a *mode of apprehension, a condition of thought and consciousness*. Jørgen Elbek puts it most aptly in his biography of Jensen, calling myth "ikke navnet på en særlig litterær art men på et sjæleligt fænomen, en særlig slags oplevelse" ("not the name of a literary craft but of a phenomenon of the soul, a particular mode of experience").¹⁴

Unfortunately, some of the most important Jensen critics, from Alf Henriques to Leif Nedergaard, have too frequently sought to solve this problem from the point of view of genre, by attempting either to make existing notions of myth more accommodating, or by reorganizing the myths into new sub-categories. In his essay "Til Belysning af Myteformen" ("Towards a Clarification of the Mythic Form") in *Johannes V. Jensen: Myter og Digte i Udvalg*, a selection from Jensen's myths and poems, Leif Nedergaard provides a historical survey of the myths, but omits an analytical assessment of the problem of genre. On three separate occasions, he explicitly points out instances where non-myths have been included in some of the collections, but then ends abruptly, making no attempt to address this conflict either in terms of Jensen's aesthetic impulse, or in any broader theoretical or cultural context.¹⁵ More recently he has sought to circumvent the problem by classifying the myths into two categories, Fantastic and Experiential, but this too appears inadequate.¹⁶ In spite of the permeability of Jensen's mythic category, a two-part distillation is not only over-reductive, but it attempts to address the problem at the level of form and genre rather than seeing it either as an inherently paradoxical mode of thought, or as part of a broader artistic sensibility that favors the undefinability of categories.

Alf Henriques' more comprehensive four-part classification in his much earlier and excellent two-part article entitled *Johannes V. Jensen som Mytedigter (JVJ as Mythmaker)*, seems more appropriate given the myths' diversity of content, their shifting nuances of fictionality and meditateness. He groups them under the labels *Livsfølelse*, *Naturfølelse*, *Fabulerende*, and *Ræsonnerende* (Meditations on Life, Meditations on Nature, Fable-like, and Reasoning (i.e. essayistic)). Aage Schiøttz-Christensen, although

¹⁴Jørgen Elbek, *Johannes V. Jensen* (Viby, Denmark: Kimære, 1987) 65.

¹⁵Leif Nedergaard, *Johannes V. Jensen: Myter og Digte i Udvalg* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1969) 164, 169, 176.

¹⁶Nedergaard, "Johannes V. Jensens tvedelte mytebegreb," *Bogens Verden* (March 1993): 294-8.

agreeing with Henriques (and Jensen himself) that myth is omnipresent in Jensen's oeuvre, finds this division of the myths into further sub-categories misguided, and refuses to call myth a genre: "Ordet myte," he concludes, "er digterens fællesnævner for en motivgruppe, der findes realiseret paa forskellig vis i samtlige forfatterskabets afdelinger" ("the word myth is the poet's catch-all term for a core group of themes which find their expression in different forms throughout the author's various works.") The central theme Schiøttz-Christensen associates with Jensen's mythicity is that of universality, and while this leads him to the useful triumverate of overarching mythical dualities "life-death, now-before, and here-there," even these seem insufficiently specific to address the complexities of Jensen's particular brand of mythicity.¹⁷

While Harry Andersen also disagrees with such exaggerated schematizing, he seems to concur in part with Schiøttz-Christensen's line of thinking, although rather than calling Jensen's various subjects "themes," he follows Jensen's lead (in his epigraph to the fifth and sixth myth collections *Pisangen* and *Kornmarken* (1932)) and asserts not only that myth is *several genres* enclosed under one term, but that he (Andersen) wishes to present himself as spokesman for the continuance of the concept of myth. But while his various ways of explaining it are interesting, they seem as inconclusive as Jensen's own: Andersen calls myth a type of "vision," "en særlig kunstart" ("a special type of artistry"), in its purest form like the pattern of a carpet "der opleves som en organisk helhed kunstnerisk betragtet" (which is "experienced as an organic whole when considered aesthetically"). Andersen thus ultimately defends Jensen's own position on myth by locating examples from the myths themselves that seem to cohere with those definitions, including Jensen's useful notion of an "indre Uendelighed" ("inner infinity").¹⁸

Much of the commentary devoted to the *Myter* appears eager, therefore, either to reconcile Jensen's rather loose set of parameters with the body of the myths themselves, and to try to explain any discrepancies from a definitional and genre-based point of view, or to provide other corresponding terms and themes which may in one way or another encompass the myths under terms or themes almost as broad as Jensen's own. One important exception to this pattern is Sven Rossel's study in which he emphasizes –

¹⁷Aage Schiøttz-Christensen, *Om Sammenhængen i J.V.J.'s Forfatterskab* (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1956) 317. 324.

¹⁸Andersen 117-131.

and this is crucial – that, as Jensen himself states in *Æstetik og Udvikling*,¹⁹ myth is for Jensen an overarching *method*, "a technique which entails a revelation."²⁰ Rather than attempting to delimit a strict set of parameters, Jensen's mythic aspirations seem to come closer to Joyce's concept of epiphany,²¹ beginning with concrete observations, and then opening into the field of "memory and presentiment" in search of an "expansion of perspective" (98). Jensen constantly sought to "differentiate this concept as an art form," but we must realize, Rossel warns, that "[a]ny attempt to delimit the myth from a formal point of view against the prose poem, the short story or the essay can be no more satisfactory than an attempt from the point of view of theme, for the concept of the myth is, in Jensen's own words, universal" (86).

C. AESTHETIC SELF-MANAGEMENT: THE CREATIVE/DECREATIVE

Rather than attempt to resolve the uncertainty of Jensen's classification from an internal and formalistic point of view, I think this problematic calls for an analysis from a somewhat more detached standpoint. We must recognize Jensen's artistic efforts at creating mythopoetic discourse, but then we must realize the aesthetic consequences of Jensen's thinning out of an existing genre by incorporating a multitude of different sub-genres, and that this is quite consistent with the self-managing and aesthetically dispersive impetus in Modernist projects elsewhere in Europe.

Jensen's *Myter*, I would argue, carry with them a kind of self-defense mechanism against mythic tradition: they work to disperse and diffuse the power and centrality of the mythic which traditionally is predicated on hierarchy and differentiation, on exclusivity and implied allegiance. In the process, his myths circumvent criticism and forestall derision over a presumptuous appellation, thanks to the built-in ability to shift their frontiers in amoeba-like fashion, and accommodate the aesthetic insecurities of the Modernist era. The various critical attempts at subdividing and classifying Jensen's *Myter*

¹⁹Jensen. *Æstetik og Udvikling* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1923) 81.

²⁰Sven Rossel. *Johannes V. Jensen* (Boston: Twayne, 1984) 86.

²¹ see in this regard Inga Wiehl's essay "Johannes V. Jensen's 'Myte' and James Joyce's Epiphany: A Study of 'Potowatomi's Daughter,'" *Orbis Litterarum* 23 (1968) 225-232.

according to shifting conceptions of genre or theme may indeed provide valuable understanding of his aesthetic intentions as well as some of the many ideas that connect and intertwine across his myths and his other works. But these efforts make the mistake of perceiving the myths either as a genre or as a separable artistic entity, an error Rossel attributes to critics' desire to see H.C. Andersen as a precursor to Jensen's myths.²² The myths are rather a *method, an omnivorous aesthetic impetus* that eagerly scrutinizes and devours everything from the trivial to the epic, continually embracing new motifs and themes as it moves forward. Although an important number of traditionally mythic attributes can be located, these myths have no clear borders: *it is precisely part of Jensen's mythic ideology to enclose so much in his category that it ceases to be a category altogether.* In reading him, we yearn for confirmation of mythic attributes, but Jensen universalizes myth to such an extent that the very notion of myth is dissolved. Myth is everywhere, and at the same time, this very universality diffuses its power. It is precisely the slipperiness of genre, it seems to me, that reveals aesthetic self-management in Jensen, an effort – however unconscious – at personal and artistic/literary redemption.

The pattern of self-management described in Chapter 1 recurs under many different guises in the great number of mythopoetic projects that emerged in the early twentieth century. We can also locate this renunciative pattern at the level of an individual example from Jensen's myths. One of his first, "Kondignogen" (1906) ("The Kondignog"),²³ provides a very similar scenario, one which encapsulates this dynamic in more broad aesthetic terms, both vis-à-vis Jensen's own oeuvre and as exemplar of Modernist mythmaking in general. This story can be considered one of his most authentically "mythic" even by classical standards: it is surreal, broadly allegorical, and involves a projection outside time. The plot, set in Madrid, is rather simple: as a result of intense hunger and fatigue, the narrator (who appears to be Jensen himself)²⁴ comes under the delusion that he has become metamorphosed into a gryphon-like creature with rough skin, wings, and a powerful tail. No-one in the streets seems to notice anything unusual,

²²Sven H. Rossel "Andersen og Jensen – Eventyret og Myten," *Hvad Fatter gjør...* (Heming, Denmark: P.Kristensen, 1982) 392-402.

²³Jensen, *Myter I* 18-26.

²⁴Jensen compares his story to his friend Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (1890) (trans. *Hunger* (1899)).

and he wanders the countryside in despair, until he is seen by a young woman who is herself starving, and feels released from his vision.

More than a symbol of human isolation and angst, as Henriques claims,²⁵ this story, I want to argue, actually provides a remarkable allegory of mythic yearning and self-delusion, the need to escape the mythic while being caught in its coils. The literal physical hunger corresponds to a psychic desire for a return to origins: Jensen represents modern humanity starved for prehistory, for mythic reassurance. This desire is predicated on the assumption that a return to human and linguistic origins – that is, a return to mythic conditions – can provide him with the purest artistic vision and creativity, the deepest insight into his psyche and into the human condition. As this hunger becomes protracted, it turns into an obsession, such that he (and, by extension, we) becomes consumed by a mythopoetic yearning to reinvest the present with ancient significance, to get to the root of our present reality by repossessing archetypal forms of experience and knowledge. Ultimately, however, only a communion with our lack, our weakness, can release us from our need: we must confront and incorporate our hunger in order to overcome it. We are purged through a humiliated self-consciousness.

Jensen readers will recognize the emergence of prehistory in a modern setting: "Naar jeg bliver afkræftet, viser det sig ikke saadan egentlig legemligt, jeg tærer paa en psykisk Reserve; det er som om min Bevisthed for at balancere maa laane fra skjulte Urkilder, der tilsidst fører ned i Dybder udenfor Tid og Rum" ("When I am drained of energy it doesn't manifest itself physically: I tap into psychic resources. It is as though my consciousness, in order to regain its balance, must borrow from hidden originary sources that ultimately lead me into depths outside time and space.") His artistic craving for mythic inspiration is also framed in terms of extreme feelings of nostalgia (both personal and humanitarian) and loneliness, "den indre uendelige Forladthedfølelse" ("the infinite internal sense of loss"), and then actual physical hunger. He begins by saying he has always found himself somewhere over, under, or in the periphery of time passing, but that "kun *en* Gang har jeg paa uforklarlig Maade været helt udenfor Tiden, saa gennemgribende isoleret, at jeg uden i Grunden at føle Ulykken dermed maatte lægge mig ned paa Forlemmerne og gaa afvejen, et Sted hen i det Fri for at æde Græs" ("only *once* have I been inexplicably completely outside time, so

²⁵Alf Henriques, preface to "Menneskeøglen." *Perspektiv I* (1953) 22.

profoundly isolated that, without even feeling the wrongness of it, I had to lie down on my forelimbs and wander off somewhere out into the open to eat grass.") We find here some of Jensen's favorite themes, the originary or prehistoric that lies latent in all of us, and the feeling of stepping outside time. As he recalls the episode, he feels "Erindring i Skindet" ("remembrance in his skin"), that somehow time abandoned him, and loneliness gave him another self and "førte mig ud af Tilværelsen, samtidigt med at jeg forblev midt i den" ("led me out of existence while at the same time I remained within it.")

Jensen's physical hunger must here be read as an aesthetic one, the artist's isolation in wanting to apprehend the reality about him or her in a defamiliarized and therefore heightened fashion. Only through a mythic transformation can such transcendent insight occur, for mythopoesis can provide him with a journey through time, to the origins of his own emotions and sensibilities, as well as the origins of human behavior, to a more "natural" condition. Because he feels burdened by his desire ("Det var som om det var mig alene, der bar Byrden af, at Træerne bejlede saa grønt, og Solen skinnede paa Gruset, of Springvandet susede saa evindeligt" ("It was as though it was only I who bore the burden that the trees offered themselves so greenly, and the sun shone on the gravel, and the fountain rushed so perpetually")), he feels "Et andet Væsen [røre] sig i mit Indre" ("Another being [stirring] within me"). This gradual transformation he calls the natural art of madness, a kind of self-defense mechanism of the soul that leads to an outpouring of "indre mytiske Kræfter" ("inner mythic powers.") The clarity of vision becomes overwhelming, and he begins to feel himself drift outside time; the fountain becomes "hele Verdenshavet" ("all the world's oceans"), he feels himself placed in eternity, and his soul is run through by the void and silence he comes to associate with the experience of dying.

From these intense feelings arises the creature Jensen has invented, the "Kondignog," a kind of dragon-like human monster. This transformation occurs in his mind's eye: no-one around him seems to notice anything different about him. Given Jensen's own definitions of what he meant by myth, in particular that it is a vision of the present made richer through harnessing and finding correspondence with the past, his grotesque hallucination not only shows artistic yearning in exaggerated and fantastic form, but also shows the concretization of mythic potential within us. But unlike his distant cousin Gregor Samsa from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, his transformation is invisible to others, and unlike Odysseus' confrontation with the sirens, the mythic power

is a projection of Jensen's own psyche. He is now trapped within himself by his aesthetic desire to reveal the true richness of reality through myth.

The rewards of finally being thrown into the world of myth are paradoxical at best. His extreme condition is emblematic of unattainability: once he sees himself transformed, the story shifts into a rather breathless and highly charged description of exaggerated bursts of energy: he flies up hills, beats lakes into foam, snaps his enormous tail. His beast-like condition mainly offers the ability to engage in physical exploits. Only briefly does he seem to enjoy a moment of privileged vision: "stadig ser jeg glimtvis den egentlige Virkelighed bag alle de Ting, jeg lever i, andre Farver, andre Vækster" ("I continue to see glimpses of the actual reality behind all those things among which I live, other colors, other growths"). This fleeting vision is soon drowned out by another push of extreme physical indulgence which leaves him spent and tearfully satisfied at the foot of a cliff. But despite these cathartic moments of mythic beastliness, Jensen must still wander aimlessly, searching for someone who will see him exactly for what he is to release the spell. He realizes that the physical exertions he has just lived are not enough: he still needs to find a lasting artistic and spiritual place in the mythic world. In the profane world, he hungers for a vision that is unattainable, except perhaps in death: "i den Verden, hvori jeg lever, er der ingen Næring for mig, og den anden Virkelighed, der egentlig hører mig til, kommer mig aldrig saa nær, at jeg gaar ind i den – lykkeligvis, for det er kun naar jeg er mest panisk bange, at den er mig nærmest; det er som om jeg maa dø endnu en Gang for at komme derind" ("in the world where I live there is no nourishment for me, and the other reality, the one I really belong to, will never come close enough for me to enter it – luckily, for it is only when I am panic-stricken that I am closest to it; it is as though I must die one more time in order to enter it.") This reference to the power of fear is reminiscent of Burke's views on the sublime, how horror contemplated from a safe distance can elicit feelings of sublimity. In Jensen's case, he suspects that he must remain at this "sublime threshold" to the world he seeks, for access may only be possible through death.

While under the spell, Jensen's meditations upon his limbo convey true artistic pathos. In a passage that powerfully depicts the condition of an inspired artist who finds solace neither in the ordinary quotidian world, nor in a heightened "artistic" mode of apprehension, he writes:

Nu og da lister der sig som en Svimmelhed over mig, og da træder Bregnetræerne ud af Luften over mit Hoved, jeg ser undertiden noget der ligner Mørkepletter i Dagen omkring mig, Skyggen af en anden Tilværelses Rovuhyrer, ser dem glide sammen og hører Lyde, som om de hoster skummelt og skraber i Jorden...Jeg har ved pludselig at vende mig set Glimt af lange olivengrønne Halse og Hoveder med Andenæb række sig som Fabriksskorstene op over Husene i Gaden...skal jeg ende hos dem, skal jeg synke Tusinder og atter Tusinder af Aar tilbage, indtil jeg er hjemme der?

(Now and then a dizziness creeps over me, and the bracken steps out of the air over my head. Now and then I see something resembling dark spots in the sky above me, shadows of savage monsters from another existence, I see them converge, and I hear sounds as though they are coughing ominously and scraping the earth...By quickly turning around I have seen a glimpse of long olivegreen necks and heads with duckbills reach over the houses in the streets like factory chimneys...shall I end up with them, shall I sink thousands and thousands of years into the past until I am at home there?)

Although Jensen may associate prehistory with superior poetic vision, he clearly feels threatened here: the mythic world that looms about him, however superior a metaphorical and lyrical power it may offer, is too sinister and overpowering. He recognizes that he is trapped in an overwrought mythic condition, one which grossly exaggerates his more subtle lyrical needs, and he therefore cries out for help.

Jensen has received a privileged view of atemporality, but it has proven far too powerful, and has yielded mostly physical pleasures. He knows that only the gaze of a single ordinary person can release him from his spell and return him to profane time, to humanity. He finally comes upon a young starving girl, appropriately named Consuela ("consolation"), who stares at him with empty and innocent eyes; the spark of recognition between them saves him from his delusion, and he feels his human form return. This scene is charged with symbols: she is at the water's edge, her red skirt appears to him as a fiery flower, and she seems to be in a sea of bright light while "kun jeg førte Mørket med mig hvor jeg gik" ("only I drew darkness with me where I walked"). Jensen observes that she is holding a burdock in her hand, and because she too suffers from starvation, he knows she must be aware of "dens rige metalliske Duft, taknemlig og ny i Sanserne som hun var bleven af Nød" ("its rich metallic odor, now that she had become thankful and

her senses renewed by need"). This scene reveals Jensen's artistic egocentrism, for he equates (rather unfairly, it seems) Consuela's literal hunger with his metaphorical hunger, saying that her condition enabled her to immediately recognize him. Nevertheless, Jensen "væltede mig paa Jorden foran hende i en Storm af Smerte" ("threw myself on the ground before her in a storm of pain"). He has used her as a figure of innocence to restore his human form, but he emerges humbly, without the full and terrifying array of mythic powers towards which he had initially – and subconsciously – aspired. For all the tumultuousness of his hallucination, Jensen seems to acknowledge through Consuela the benefit of a limited access to the mythic, as well as the solace of simplicity and the cleansing power of innocence and empathy over his suffering.

Mythopoesis is often an attempt at exploring the world beyond self-consciousness,²⁶ but here that flight is thwarted. Because Consuela sees Jensen for what he is, she enables him to become, like Odysseus, self-conscious of his debased condition. Jensen has submitted himself to mythic powers while ultimately eluding them; like Odysseus, his journey through hunger thus symbolizes the aesthetic cleansing power of Modernist self-managing mythic projects. We are essentially in the world of romantic irony as Anne Mellor has defined it:

The fictional world must be both sincerely presented and sincerely undermined; the romantic ironic must constantly balance or 'hover' between self-creation and self-destruction in that mental state Schlegel insisted that mimesis is possible. The work of art moving back and forth between enthusiastic creation and skeptical de-creation accurately mirrors the fertile chaos (*Fülle*) of life itself.²⁷

Elsewhere in Jensen's myths, this metaphoric hunger and resultant delusion appears in his constant efforts to harness special meaning in the present by linking it to the past, by finding correspondences across time, by speculating about metaphysical issues such as the eternal now. The release from this highly individual vision of a mythic transformation comes when he takes the vitally self-conscious – and self-defeating – step of including conventional autobiographical and journalistic pieces and anecdotes into his scheme. Confronting the ordinariness of his life with mythopoetic *élan* while simultaneously

²⁶ see in this regard Lynda D. McNeil's *Recreating the World/Word: The Mythic Mode as Symbolic Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) chap. III.

²⁷Mellor, Anne K. "On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory." *Criticism* XXI.3 (1979) 226-7.

maintaining the self-conscious definitional weakness of trying to pass it off as myth therefore effectively purges Jensen of his mythic cravings.

D. TRADITIONAL AND MODERNIST MYTHICITY IN JENSEN

It is largely because of a self-consciously problematic classification that Jensen's *Myter* fit rather neatly into the broader arena of great Modernist literature and its most cherished themes and ideologies. In reviewing the essential characteristics of Jensen's mythicity, that is, the drive and intent of his mythic consciousness, one is struck by the extent to which each of these quite traditional stylistic features bespeak a Modernist aesthetic attitude. Throughout his work, and most notably in his famous six-volume work, *Den lange Rejse* (1908-22) (trans. *The Long Journey* (1922)), Jensen has demonstrated a deep affinity for the scope and tone of traditional epic narratives. The short myths, however, show signs of radical modernization of older forms of myth, in many cases to the point where they individually and collectively cease to be mythic altogether, by any reasonable standards. In assessing the posthumous collection *Mytens Ring*, Harry Andersen has correctly observed that even though none of the included stories are actually myths, this does not mean that one cannot find mythical elements in several of them.²⁸ I want to apply this assumption to the body of Jensen's short myths, assess where mythic traits within the "myths" can be found, and determine how these have been reshaped by a Modernist artistic consciousness. The four principal traditional traits of Jensen's mythicity can be summarized as follows.

1. THE TRADITIONALLY MYTHIC

a. Placement outside "profane time".

A significant number of Jensen's myths can be said to possess mythic qualities by criteria external to his own, principally on the strength of their atemporality. Jensen exhibits throughout his myths the desire to harness the potentiality of each moment, of bringing out the ancestry that lies hidden inside the present. Again and again

²⁸ Andersen, 126.

Jensen describes "Nuet" ("the now"), and finds ways of constructing his stories such that the now is defamiliarized to the point where we see that it contains something significant – even a long line of significant events – from the past. Eliade in this regard speaks often of myth's "sacred time," "the primordial Time...when the event *first took place*. This is why we use the term the 'strong time' of myth; it is the prodigious 'sacred' time when something *new, strong, and significant* was manifested."²⁹ To attain this richness of the eternal now, Jensen uses five principal forms of atemporality which collectively are the single feature that most speak to a mythopoetic approach. Like many of the greatest Modernist writers from Proust to Faulkner, Jensen's principal tool for defamiliarizing and intensifying the present, that is, his primary vehicle for entering a heightened "mythic" mode of apprehension, is movement through or outside fixed linear time. As Bodil Wamberg has put it, time functions in Jensen's myths as "en tidskikkert" ("temporal binoculars")³⁰ such that "evighedsperspektivet manes frem" ("the aspect of eternity [that can be found in the present moment] is brought to the forefront").³¹ Approximately one third of Jensen's myths do in fact break the constraints of traditional narrative time in what appear to be five principal ways:

i. A "removal" from or "stepping outside" time, usually for a metaphysically inspired perspective on humanity. Besides engaging in specific forms of temporal manipulation as well as instances of Proustian involuntary memory outlined below, Jensen sometimes opts for complete atemporality, that is, an actual departure from the present into a kind of temporal 'dead zone'. As with other forms of temporal manipulation, the intention is most often to demonstrate the universality of the present moment's significance, but rather than establish a dialectic with a specific instance in the past, these complete leaps out of time typically signify the desire for a more detached philosophizing, both on the human condition and on our origins. The obvious example, "Udenfor Tiden" ("Outside Time"), is a travel essay *cum* anthropological portrait of the natives of Malaysia. Jensen feels that these people live outside time because their

²⁹Eliade, *Myth and Reality* 19.

³⁰this phrase is irresistibly reminiscent of Roger Shattuck's study of Proust on the same issue, *Proust's Binoculars* (Princeton UP, 1962).

³¹Bodil Wamberg, "Om den Johannes V. Jensenske Myte." *Nordisk Tidskrift för Vetenskap, Konst och Industri*, No. 59 (1983) 123.

behavior seems to match what Jensen imagines our primitive ancestors were like. His language is permeated with "originary" imagery irresistibly reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.³² These people, Jensen observes, represent "et Trin Menneskeheden er gaaet igennem" ("a step mankind has passed through"); the tropical atmosphere feels "magisk nærværende" ("magically close") and conveys the feeling of an "evige Sommer" ("eternal summer"); in this place, Jensen feels that "Verden er ung" ("the earth is young").³³ This community represents living myth for Jensen, a tangible connection to human origins he seeks to manifest in so many different ways outside the classical anthropological mode of analysis.

In this group one also finds stories that make the same leap into atemporality, though in more implicit fashion: "Fusijama", "Darwin og Fuglen", "Kondignogen", "Kornmarken" and "Rugen Bølger" ("Fujiyama", "Darwin and the Bird", "The Kondignog", "The Cornfield", "The Waving Rye"). In "Fusijama," one of Jensen's shortest and most accomplished stories, he finds himself on a ship gazing at Mount Fuji floating in the distance as if above the horizon. The stark beauty of the peak surging into the sky inspires in Jensen the feeling that the whole planet "var kommen mig imod i sin kosmiske Friskhed" ("has come towards him in all its cosmic freshness"). And in a maneuver that will recur in several other myths, Jensen calls such a novel mode of apprehension "primitive," and associates it with the innocence and depth of a child's vision. In the next moment, when he declares his epiphany, Jensen is outside time: "Da jeg saa' Fusijama brast den sidste Drøm om en anden Tilværelse end den der er. Jeg begreb at den højere Verden vi stunder imod kun kan være netop den der er, men at vi aldrig i det givne Øjeblik er naaet op til den, at vi til daglig er blinde for den" ("When I saw Fujiyama, the last dream of an existence other than the one that is was shattered. I realized that the higher world towards which we strive can only be the one that *is*, but that at the given moment we never reach it, that we are blind to it every day").³⁴ In a sense, this myth lies at the core of Jensen's entire project. All his myths, in one way or another, aspire to reach into the depths of present detail, to defamiliarize the simplest

³²"Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings." Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1989) 66.

³³Jensen, *Myter II* 157-8.

³⁴Jensen, *Myter I* 78.

fragments of nature or the quotidian, and show the way in which they can be connected to the greater world at large, across all times. This movement is for the most part dependent on a departure from the present moment, a temporal shift. And even though he here admits that the dream of a higher reality has been shattered for him, his narratives can, by aspiring towards transcendence, nevertheless seek to acquire the status of traditional myths: they can become their own self-contained reality.

ii. Flashbacks to his youth. In stories such as "Det Gamle Ur" ("The Old Clock") and "Pause," one recognizes Proustian moments of involuntary memory, moments in the present in which a physical sensation throws Jensen immediately back to a corresponding episode from his youth.³⁵ The myth thereby establishes a tension, an exchange between two similar moments in history which can fuse and illuminate one another. In "Pause" Jensen is a young soldier on a training exercise, and while his company waits behind a hedge, he suddenly hears "Suset af en Poppel" ("the hiss of a poplar") and thinks back to "en Aften som for Tyve Aar siden, en Høst som i min Drengetid" ("an evening like this twenty years ago, a harvest like one from my youth"). The recollection has a dynamic function, however: Jensen states that at that moment he actually wakes up after "tyve Aars Aandsfraværelse. Der er ingen Tid gaaet, det er det samme Nu" ("twenty years of the soul's absence. No time has passed, it is the same now").³⁶ He has suddenly become aware of the collapse of time, and is so affected that he can abstract himself from his present situation and find that it is inconsequential that he happens to be a soldier. The fusion of different times provides him with the ability to see the particular trajectory his life has taken, and like Yu Tsun in Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," to realize that his was merely one of an infinite number of possible trajectories.

Jensen portrays his narrators (i.e. usually himself) as coming upon these experiences accidentally in order to heighten their spontaneous quality and call attention to the broad accessibility of myth. But from an authorial point of view, Jensen's memorial

³⁵ As Erik Dahlerup expresses it in *Columbus fra Himmerland* (Farsø Bibliotek, 1994) 67: "nutid og fortid i enkelte øjeblikke smelter sammen" ["the present and the past melt together in single instances"].

³⁶Jensen, *Tretten Myter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1982) 37.

reconstructions are anything but involuntary. In "Outside Time," in fact, he reveals a fundamental impulse behind his mythic work:

Det man leder efter, det der ikke kan vendes tilbage til, at Verden er ung, det kunde man ikke opleve den Gang, netop da man var ung, men man kan opleve det nu, tredive Aar efter, i Mindet, er det ikke underligt! Er Nuet sandt, skal man vokse op til det, bagefter? Fra en Afstand bliver al Bevægelse til Hvile. Det siger Stjernerne.

(What one seeks, that which one cannot return to, that the world is young, one couldn't experience it in the days of one's youth; but one can experience it now, thirty years later, in memory – isn't that odd! Is the Now true? Must one grow up to meet it later? From a distance all movement becomes repose. So say the stars).³⁷

iii. Cycles whereby the present event is but one of a long line of repeated acts. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Eliade points out that archaic or so-called 'primitive' societies believe that their various activities from harvests to hunts acquire meaning and significance – in fact, acquire reality – only insofar as they are repetitions of corresponding archetypal acts. Moreover, these repetitions abolish time, because whenever an act such as a sacrifice is repeated, it

not only exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god *ab origine*, at the beginning of time, it also takes place at that same primordial mythical moment; in other words, every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it. All sacrifices are performed at the same mythical instant of the beginning: through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended...man is projected into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed.³⁸

This same dynamic occurs in several of Jensen's myths, notably "Maanebyen" ("The Lunar City"), "Tømmerlæsset" ("The Load of Lumber"), "De Lyse Nætter" ("The Bright Nights"), and "Ved Livets Bred" ("At the Banks of Life"). In the latter story, for example, Jensen evokes his own childhood experience as a springboard into a longer ancestral perspective. Here he reminisces about his father collecting flower samples in a field, and

³⁷Jensen, *Myter II* 158.

³⁸Eliade, *Return* 35.

the memory is so vivid that he sees it before him "med hele Nuets Liv, skønt Øjeblikket ligger saadan som fyrretyve Aar tilbage i Tiden" ("with all the vitality of the now, even though the moment lies something like forty years back in time"). He also relates how, the last time Jensen was to see him, his father told him how when he was a toddler, his parents would place him behind a few sheaves in the middle of the field they were harvesting, to occupy and protect him. And it then occurs to Jensen that he too has the same memory, even from the very same field his father experienced. This image, Jensen reasons, is "mere end en Erindring, det er arvet Erindring, biogenetisk Oplevelse, om man vil, Erfaringer indefor Slægten" ("more than a memory, it is inherited memory, biogenetic experience, if you will, experiences within generations").³⁹ He observes that as long as humans have harvested, they have, like Jensen's own parents, placed their children in the field with them and handed them a flower or a twig to occupy them. As he does in "Den store Bø" ("The Hippopotamus"), Jensen here is clearly using childhood as a metaphor for the earliest stages of humanity, and just as the richness of our childhood is hidden in our memory, so the beginnings of life lie latent in present behaviors that prove to be cyclical:

De tidligste Indtryk er upersonlige, Naturen selv, uden Meddelelsesmiddel, uden Sprog, Tilværelsen selv som et Under. Det kommer til mig endnu, naar jeg genkalder den Dag da de høstede Rug paa min Bedstefaders Mark, Forestillinger fra Livets Morgen...uforgængelige, dybere, mægtigere end andre. Tingene som de opfattes af yngre og friskere Membraner kan i og for sig ikke erindres, kun genkaldes, omfattes af Erindringen, som man omfatter en Tone eller en Duft. Man ser aldrig Aakanderne i en Aa igen paa samme Maade som første Gang i den tidlige Barndom...der er kun een første Gang. (14)

(The earliest impressions are impersonal, nature itself without any medium, without language, existence itself as wonderment. It comes to me still when I remember the day they harvested rye on my grandfather's field, conceptions from the morning of life...transient, deeper and mightier than others. Things as they are apprehended by younger and fresher membranes cannot be remembered as such, only recalled and beheld by our memory the way one beholds a sound or a smell.

³⁹Jensen, *Myter II* 10-13.

One never sees waterlilies in a pond the same way as the first time in earliest childhood...there is only one first time).

At this point, Jensen feels he shares this inner, deeper world with his father and with an ancestry that goes back "saa længe Mennesker har lagt Korn i Jorden" ("as long as humans have laid seeds in the ground")(15). As with "Tømmerlæsset" in which the simple sight of a load of lumber being hauled by horses evokes deep traditions stretching back hundreds of years and across five continents, so here Jensen reveals that the simplest of personal acts and reminiscences carry with them a history that is ancient. This is very much a mythicizing act, not only because it transcends the limitations of present time, but also because it dissolves the importance of subjectivity. Although this memory is very particular and personal, Jensen says above that early impressions also have an *impersonal* quality to them because the individual situated in the present is merely the latest manifestation of a long line of people engaged in the same act. However private these memories may seem, they are not unique; rather, they are merely another link in an infinite chain of agents. And if we then discount the linearity of time, as Jensen is wont to do, we arrive at a conclusion found not only in Eliade but also in Borges, namely that every one of these agents is one and the same person.

Throughout his myths, Jensen seeks transcendent insight into daily events, and here he suggests that this mythical perspective of repeated history is the closest we can come to the essence of life which we constantly seek. Only a retrospective glance into our own childhood as well as that of humanity can bring us closer to the "truer" world; in Jensen's words, "den Verden man ser frem til fordi man savner den, viser tilbage mod en Fortid, Barnets Verden" ("the world one looks towards because one misses it in fact points back towards the past, the child's world") (15). In this regard, Eliade points out that even though myths may contain elements that deviate from the facts on which they were originally based, the myth may (ironically) be considered not only the truth but even *truer* "by the fact that it made the real story yield a deeper and richer meaning."⁴⁰

iv. Time accelerations, stories in which time is actually observed in the process of moving forwards or backwards. Examples include "Møllen", "Moderen og

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Return* 46.

Barnet", "I den nordiske Skov", "Sommerblæsten", and "Løvspringet" ("The Windmill", "The Mother and Child", "In the Forests of the North", "The Summer Storm", "The Leafing"). "The Windmill", for instance, recounts the story of a young rider who seeks shelter in a windmill, and who awakens during the night to the loud noise of the mill working furiously. He realizes he has slept for a lifetime, that he has become an old man in just a few hours, and that the turning of the mill is the passing of time, "hele Menneskehedens Nød" ("the whole of mankind's distress") churning away. As he rides away next morning, he feels the horse's warmth and vitality seep into him, and gradually his youthful form returns to him: "en Vinter laa bag ham, og...han...var kommen til at forstaa Fuglenes Maal" ("A winter lay behind him, and...he...had come to understand what all birds seek").⁴¹ The rider has not merely been manipulated with all the gratuitousness of fairy tales. He understands, as he rides off with furious speed and looks at the sky, that all flight is an escape from mortality.

v. *Jumps into prehistory made to fuse with the present.* Many of Jensen's myths are sketches of contemporary life, but on occasion, during the course of his descriptions, he will fix his narrative eye upon one or two details that can immediately shift the moment into prehistory, if only in a flash. This movement is very similar to, but distinct from the stepping "outside time," as it specifically refers to a leap into the past, rather than a condition of "timelessness" found in, say, "Kornmarken," "hvor der er hverken Tid eller Sted" ("where there is neither time nor place").⁴² Some of the stories already mentioned certainly qualify, but we also find "Søster" in this group, a vignette of a young woman and her infant waiting for the tram in the freezing cold. Jensen speculates as to the circumstances of her pregnancy, and muses that the love-hunt of the backstreets is no different from the one that took place in the bush in a prehistoric time. He also describes the brutal weather – a March storm – saying that even here in downtown Copenhagen, the notion of specific time and place are suspended: "det kunde være paa Baffinsland, i en Fortid som slet ikke var gaaet" ("it could be Baffin Island in a prehistory that had never happened").⁴³ The myth "Aaen og Landevejen" ("The Brook and the

⁴¹Jensen, *Tretten* 83, 87.

⁴²Jensen, *Myter II* 177.

⁴³Jensen, *Myter II* 133.

Highway") portrays an ordinary countryside scene in which the present fuses with prehistory through a symbolic dialectic between "Livets første Stadier og Udviklingen paa Toppen af sin Kapacitet, to Strømme, Naturen of Tekniken, Tiden og Nuet!" ("life's first stages and development at maximum capacity, two streams, nature and technology, time and the now!")⁴⁴ Interestingly, this contrast is then likened to the different worlds experienced by children at play and the observing adults: they too are each in their own time (82).

In a few cases, Jensen also makes specific leaps back in time, in particular in "Maanebyen" ("The Lunar City") where he tells of his visit to Cairo and his desire to see the pyramids by moonlight. One night he explores one of the excavated tombs near the Sphinx, and encounters a young Egyptian woman who leads him out of the cave onto a plateau. Jensen looks around but does not recognize the view, and then is shocked to discover that the environs are the same, only they are immaculate and show no signs of decay: "der kunde ikke være Tvivl om at vi var bleven sat fem Tusinde Aar tilbage i Tiden!" ("there could be no doubt that we had been placed five thousand years back in time!"). After admiring this magical vision, Jensen kisses the young woman, and, feeling her coldness and a kind of electric shock, finds himself suddenly returned to the present. This trans-historical vision is foreshadowed earlier on in the story when Jensen deplors the working conditions of the young men and women whom he sees slaving away in the heat to excavate the ruins surrounding the great pyramids. These workers used to be called slaves whereas now they work voluntarily and receive a small payment, "men Opsangen og Flodhesteskindspisken er nok den samme" ("but the song and hippopotamus-skin whip is probably the same").⁴⁵ In an exotic setting such as this, it is no surprise that Jensen should hark back to ancient history, particularly when his subject is what we have come to refer to as a "timeless monument." However, seen in the context of his other forms of atemporality, this journey outside the present moment serves to intensify and mythicize his experience of the pyramids: Jensen has essentially literalized feelings of historical grandeur evoked by the pyramids, taken a traveler's meditation on the vast scope of history in the face of a great monument and concretized it in the form of a "real" experience. Moreover, calling this place the "lunar city" reinforces the way

⁴⁴ Jensen, *Myter II* 80.

⁴⁵Jensen, *Myter II* 51, 49.

Jensen not only sees all times unified in the present, but also his transcendentalist bent, his adherence to the belief that everything around us is unified and interrelated, from the cosmic to the atomic.

By whatever means Jensen achieves atemporality, he seems to aim for a *dialectical* interaction between events situated in different times in similar fashion to Proust. Jensen departs from an experience in the present, and in one form or another casts a net into the past to bring forth a parallel experience, either single or multiple, which in turn will illuminate and give depth to the present – and most recent – version of that experience. This contrastive and comparative reflectiveness between moments from different time periods is not unlike the manner in which the terms of a metaphor interact with one another to form a new idea, as we have already seen in Proust's analogies. As a result, we, like Jensen, can comprehend how the transcendent might emerge from the trivial, how the ordinary becomes illuminated, universalized, charged with meaning: it becomes *mythicized* through a dynamic transhistorical and analogical (and in some sense metaphoric) process.

The motif of a return to origins occurs in a variety of ways in Jensen's work, most evidently in *The Long Journey*, and more intricately and intimately in many of his myths. As we saw above, Jensen most frequently uses either a special detail from the present to leap into the ancient past, or associates the innocent and intense perspective of a child as a parallel and metaphor for the gaze of “primitive” humans. One reason behind such an artistic impulse derives in part from the Modernist climate of intense socio-cultural flux and multiplication. In this increasing chaos, there is solace in seeking out the quintessential, the microcosm: relative tranquility and order can be found by scrutinizing a single fragment. Virginia Woolf, one of the most lucid commentators on this feeling of being overwhelmed by vast new potentialities, expresses this desire for a microscopic examination of daily life in her essay “Notes on an Elizabethan Play.” She asks what our attitude is when we finish reading *War and Peace*, and states that it cannot be disappointment:

Rather, we are made more than ever aware of the inexhaustible richness of human sensibility...The mind is so saturated with sensibility, language so inadequate to its experience, that far from ruling off one form of literature or decreeing its inferiority to others we complain that they are still unable to keep pace with the

wealth of material, and wait impatiently the creation of what may yet be devised to liberate us of the enormous burden of the unexpressed.⁴⁶

Jensen too feels the world to be infinitely rich, even at the smallest incremental level of the quotidian, and through his myths he seeks to harness and express this richness. As he says in "Den gotiske Renaissance" (1901) ("Gothic Renaissance"), "Will no one find expression for the great longing in his soul in what *is*, in this boundlessness which is before us daily with its sum of unmeasured, unknown power!...Then is man's creative imagination for ever set in motion toward myths?"⁴⁷ With this desire to reveal the endless wealth that lies just under the surface of day-to-day existence, Jensen turns to a mythopoetic mode of writing in order to make two kinds of return, to mirror two particular conditions: one to the birth of humanity and our ancestors' apprehension of the terrifying and glorious new world that surrounded them; the other to his own childhood, a time when his experience of the world was brightest and most eager. Of course, it is only in retrospect that the purity and depth of these original visions can be genuinely harnessed and defined, for they can then serve special aesthetic purposes, as we have seen in Proust.

b. Allegorical intentions behind surreal stories, i.e. metaphor as larger structure

The strength and detail of Jensen's diction do not depend on metaphor as figure of speech, so much as on metaphor as broader narrative structure. Stories such as "Majnat", "Kondignogen", and "Vinternat" are either wholly surreal or contain certain supernatural elements, but they clearly carry a metaphorical function, and invite such interpretations. In "Vinternat" ("Winter Night"), for instance, Jensen has a bizarre telephone conversation with an old friend who disappeared many years ago. This friend turns out to be Jensen's former self who, in a distant sighing voice recounts how, after some professional successes, he became afflicted with a headache so overwhelming it drove him to entreat his wife to strike his head with an axe! And, like a Borgesian aleph,⁴⁸

⁴⁶Woolf, *Common* 55

⁴⁷qtd. in Rossel 84

⁴⁸Borges. "The Aleph," *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1978) 26. "The aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe."

out of his head there poured "en modbydelig betændt Ansamling af Asien og Afrika og alle Hovedstæderne og Havet og Bjergkæder og Jernbaner, Sporvogne, Skruer, Kabler...Aviser, Bøger og Kul, Sne, Røg..." ("a disgusting, poisoned collection of Asia and Africa and all the capitals and the ocean and mountain ranges and train stations, trams, screws, cables...newspapers, books and coal, snow, smoke...").⁴⁹ Last of all came a meteorite, the result of a "Stjærneskud i mit Sind som ung" ("shooting star in my soul when I was young"). After being rid of the meteorite, the younger Jensen explains, he finally died; and there he says farewell to the present Jensen. Like Proust's Marcel, Jensen concretizes the realization that he carries a vast storehouse of memories and fragments from his past in his own mind. This in turn can be associated with monism and notions of universality at the infinitesimal level, in this case with the human mind functioning as the symbol of infinity. In this regard, Borges's "Funes the Memorious," who becomes endowed with infinite memory, and the stultifying curse that this 'gift' finally becomes, presents a situation strikingly similar to the feelings of oppression experienced here by Jensen's younger self.⁵⁰

c. A heightened attentiveness to the relation between language and an originary apprehension of reality

Few of Jensen's myths make explicit reference to language in terms of its specifically signifying function. But in the context of other myths in which he associates a child's view of the world with that of the earliest humans, we can derive the importance of language from his playful myth "Den store Bø." Here, *Bø* is the onomatopoeic expression a child at the zoo uses to refer to a hippopotamus. He points to the various animals, and "som en lille Adam" ("like a little Adam") chooses his friends among them and names them with all the mispronunciations one might expect. Later in the story, Jensen deplores the ignorance of contemporary humans, calling their passivity at the zoo "fattig" ("impoverished"), and more significantly, links the child's awe and respect for these animals to that of the ancient Egyptians.⁵¹ One finds therefore a linkage between an ancient culture, a child's eager apprehension of the natural world, and the birth of

⁴⁹Jensen, *Tretten* 49.

⁵⁰Borges, "Funes the Memorious," *Labyrinths* 59-66.

⁵¹Jensen, *Myter II* 61, 65.

language. The child's funny expression "den store Bø" contains within it an appreciation for the hippo's odd plasticity, its loveable grotesqueness, and the gigantic mouth whose teeth look like steps going down into a dark cellar. Jensen here playfully illustrates the evocative, creative, and ultimately mythmaking power of language, even – and perhaps especially – in a very basic, almost pre-verbal state. This example reminds us of early theoretical views that held that myths in a sense represent mankind's childhood. But in addition to reinforcing the connection between a child's wonder and the perspective of an ancient civilization, Jensen also seems to universalize this mode of apprehension: we have all gazed in wonder at the marvels of the natural world. All of us, in this sense, have both the capacity and the natural inclination to be mythmakers, and this takes place in large part through the reality-bestowing power of language, even in its simplest form.

d. The desire to show the ubiquity of the mythic, incl. cyclical time (see I iii.)

Jensen, as is well known, was an avid believer in Darwinism, and in his preface to his ninth collection *Møllen*, he even states explicitly that anything containing an evolutionary element is inherently mythic because of the potentiality of origination this reveals.⁵² This position bears strong resemblance to the transcendentalism espoused by Emerson in particular, which holds that any fragment of nature, no matter how small, is a microcosm of all of nature. To this effect, Borges writes in "The Zahir":

Tennyson once said that if we could understand a single flower, we should know what we are and what the world is. Perhaps he meant that there is no fact, however insignificant, that does not involve universal history and the infinite concatenation of cause and effect. Perhaps he meant that the visible world is implicit in every phenomenon.⁵³

A significant number of the *Myter* seek to show that even the smallest of events in nature, if scrutinized with sufficient diligence and imagination, can reveal not only a long human ancestry, but even a universal connection to the cosmos. Jensen proves his talents as a naturalist, as a keen observer of the surrounding natural world both in exotic settings and in his own homeland in Northern Jutland, but he also seeks to defamiliarize the most quotidian daily reality. Only with a corresponding intensity of scrutiny can we begin to

⁵²Jensen. *Møllen* 8.

⁵³Borges. *Labyrinths* 163.

understand that prehistory in fact surrounds us at every moment. And natural prehistory visible in the present, Jensen believes, implies the mythic.

Examples in this group include "Darwin og Fuglen", "Rugen Bølger", and "Nordisk Foraar" ("Darwin and the Bird", "The Waving Rye", and "Nordic Spring"). In "Sommersolhverv" ("Summer Solstice"), for instance, he points out that the thousands of little circles of light formed by sunlight coming through overhanging tree branches demonstrate the sphericity of the sun. But the aim is not merely to depict a scientific anecdote, namely the phenomenon of *camera obscura*; it is rather to suggest the cosmic universality of every element in nature, itself a metaphor for the potentially infinite (and timeless) richness of meaning that lies for the most part dormant in every iota of our daily life.

2. THE MODERNIST MYTHIC

a. A creative/decreative element: dissolution of genre, i.e. the non-mythic

In spite of these various mythic features which one might well grant him, a great number of Jensen's myths – the majority, in fact – contain no such elements. The collection *Pisangen*, as Jensen himself admits, does not contain much of the mythic, and his ninth collection *Møllen*, for example, Rossel characterizes as being "dominated by journalism."⁵⁴ In fact, more than two thirds of the 160 myths do not appear to move beyond the travel essay, the journalistic biographical sketch, or the traditional short story. Of the great number of non-myths that can be enumerated from each group, I shall provide only a brief selection:

Among so-called myths which are either Jensen's meditations on, or short stories inspired by, his travel experiences, we find "Kulien" ("The Coolie"), the story of an old rickshaw driver who is driven to brutally murder a rival driver; "Med Skyds" ("By Carriole"), a travel reminiscence involving an amusing linguistic misunderstanding with a young Norwegian farm boy; "De Blinde" ("The Blind Ones"), a portrait of a young blind girl in Cairo and her spirited and demanding friend; "Den Døvstumme" ("The Deaf-mute"), an anecdote about his encounter with a deaf-mute in Hamburg who inspires a

⁵⁴Rossel 39.

brief meditation on this condition; and "Olivia Marianne," a description of the gravesite of the wife of Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore, and a speculation about her and her husband's hardships in the tropics.

In the domain of autobiographical sketches which lack traditional mythic traits one finds in particular a great number of vignettes about Jensen's careful observations in nature (among them "Solsorten" ("The Blackbird"), "De unge Storke" ("The Young Storks"), "Sælernes Ø" ("The Island of Seals"), and "Myreløven" ("The Ant-Lion")), as well as accounts of some of his hunting expeditions, including "Regnsproven" ("The Curlew"), and "Potowatomis Datter" ("The Daughter of Potowatomi"). The latter, for instance, is an account of Jensen's callous impulse of firing his rifle at a bobbing figure in a river he thinks is a young Native American woman, but which turns out to be a muskrat. Other personal anecdotes include "Gule Tulipaner" ("Yellow Tulips"), a description of Jensen's sensorial associations with and enthusiasm for the arrival of Spring; "Menageriet" ("The Menagerie"), the childhood reminiscence of seeing a series of cages containing wild animals, and a song of lament that he imagines emerging from the snarling lips of a tiger; "Alderdommens Ø" ("The Island of Old Age"), an account of his visit to a hospital in Copenhagen; "Den største Sorg" ("The Greatest Sadness"), an account of his brother's failed attempt – as a mere toddler – at walking across the fields to find his parents; and "Killingerne" ("The Kittens"), a sketch of the daily life of two kittens and a ship's crew.

Jensen also labeled "myth" a number of what one might characterize as traditional and self-contained short stories. They include "Hos Fuglene" ("Among the Birds"), an intensely paced, but, stylistically speaking, fairly conventional narrative of a young female tourist who becomes stranded in the Egyptian desert, and "Kejseren, Billedhuggeren og Pøbelen" ("The Emperor, the Sculptor, and the Mob"), a three-part historical work of fiction on the circumstances of the creation of an official sculpture in the era of the Roman Empire.

b. A focus on the quotidian; extreme realism and detail

The tendency towards realism in fiction gained favor during the mid-nineteenth century. As we have seen in Proust, paying attention to the small and the trivial became an increasingly vital artistic concern for Modernist authors, working as they were in an era of intense cultural democratization that also scrutinized consciousness

in any mode of contemplation. Many of the greatest writers of this period preoccupied themselves with what Ortega y Gasset calls the "micro-structure of life,"⁵⁵ shifting their gaze from the swift plot-driven novels of the nineteenth century, down to minute by minute displays of consciousness. The Stendhalian pace of events gave way to often labyrinthine digressions departing from minuscule events (Proust and James), passages devoted to empty rooms and absence of activity (Woolf and Musil), and even works aggressively resistant to any interpretation of meaning (Beckett and Breton). Of increasing importance was not the nature of the reality being apprehended, but the manner in which it was conceived by an observing consciousness. Therefore the most elaborate or transcendent aesthetic aspirations did not require major plot movements: they could be derived from the most trivial of settings, from meaningless objects. This of course served to problematize not only notions of "importance," but also the very notion of artistic "transcendence."

The world of traditional mythic narrative is one of highly figurative language, one that most often speaks in poeticized, allegorical, and universalizing terms, even when concerned with the fate of individuals. Jensen's myths are not retellings of ancient stories of omnipotent gods, but the province of the ordinary. Even his more surreal stories such as "Majnat" ("May Night") or "Kondignogen" are anchored in a quotidian day-to-day context. Rather than being a type of plot, myth for Jensen can be more accurately characterized as a mode of experience and creativity, a heightened acuity of vision into the quotidian. Like Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Jensen appears to want to demonstrate the universal presence of myth in the miscellaneous – and modest – trivia of the contemporary urban and natural world, although contrary to Barthes' semiological dispersion, Jensen is engaged in a more private and naturalistic mythmaking. As Frithiof Brandt observed, Jensen has a talent for seeing "storheden i livets elementære grundforhold" ("the greatness in life's elementary and fundamental circumstances").⁵⁶ He can therefore concern himself with the changes in seasons, with children encountered during his travels, with hitherto ignored historical anecdotes; he is as comfortable making cosmic observations about the natural world through descriptions of a hunt as he is with speculating on the arbitrariness of existence through a childhood reminiscence. The

⁵⁵José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968) 36.

⁵⁶Frithiof Brandt, *Ord och Bild* 53.9 (1944) 405.

power of Jensen's mythic gaze is its ability to harness great significance from the miniscule and the incidental. In this way, his work provides a naturalistic and evolutionary version of Romantic mythmaking and transcendentalism. At the same time, he calls attention to the surprising and usually modest location of such forms of transcendence, a scrutiny whose irony is in keeping with a Modernist sensibility. One additional feature of this modesty is his general aversion to references to existing bodies of myths. Rather than plumbing the depths of, say, the extremely rich mythic heritage of Scandinavia such as the Eddic poems, Jensen favors an exploration of the broader natural conditions of primitive humanity, the very conditions upon which later narratives such as the sagas may have been based. One therefore finds very few actual references to known mythic stories. (One interesting exception is the bird Rok which appears in both "Vinternat" and "Mariehønen.")

c. exploration of an individual consciousness

In a small number of his myths, Jensen employs an impersonal narrative voice that is much in keeping with traditional forms of myth, particularly in his more surreal and fable-like stories such as "Møllen" ("The Windmill") and his Hans Christian Andersen-esque stories such as "Edderkoppen", "Den gamle Troll", and "Sommerblæsten" ("The Spider", "the Old Troll", and "The Summer Storm"). However in most cases, his myths reflect the quest for meaning from the point of view of an *individual consciousness*, almost always his own. This of course runs counter to the narrative scope of traditional myth, not because of its focus on a single figure, but due to the narrator's absolute privacy of access to the hero's (or antihero's) consciousness.

Jensen's autobiographical impulse intersects his investigation of myth to form a Modernist hybrid quite consistent with the works of Proust and Woolf, as well as Joyce, Faulkner, and Mann, to name the most important. In these kinds of works, the shell of narrative detachment that ordinarily surrounds myths is pierced by an intrusive and unabashedly candid narrator who is completely enmeshed in the mind of the main character. The resulting mix of the private and the mythic produces dramatic and very particular kinds of results, usually a type of problematization of mythic or privileged consciousness. Key examples include Molly Bloom's final stream-of-consciousness in the final "Penelope" chapter of *Ulysses*, Bernard's struggles with linguistic meaning in Woolf's *The Waves*, Hans Castorp's frequent metaphysical meditations on the nature of

time in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and, as we have seen, Marcel's constant disillusionment with great figures throughout the *Recherche*.

d. dissolution of individual subjectivity.

Although in some stories Jensen uses the detached impersonal narration true to mythic tradition, he presents a much more fundamental diffusion of subjectivity at the individual level of the narrator, a collapse of the self that is very much in keeping with the dispersiveness of his genre. Some stories portray a divided self quite clearly: we saw how in "Winter Night," for instance, an older Jensen has a surreal telephone conversation with his younger self; and in "The Kondignog," he sees himself transformed into a monstrous creature symbolizing his darker mythic obsessiveness. But the thinning out of subjectivity is pervasive across many of his myths principally by virtue of Jensen's constant attempts to overcome time. This becomes clear when we compare this to very similar strategies in Borges's work, both in his many short stories as well as in essays such as "A New Refutation of Time." A brief overview is warranted at this point.

The idealism of Berkeley and Hume were key influences on Borges's thought, and this led him, already early in his career, to wage a kind of campaign against notions of the subject. In the early essay "The Insignificance of Personality," for example, Borges declares that "personality is an illusion consented to by conceit and habit, and, moreover, ...it is without any metaphysical basis or visceral reality."⁵⁷ In his later essays "The Crossroads of Berkeley"⁵⁸ and "New Refutation of Time,"⁵⁹ Borges develops his argument against the "I" as a logical continuation of the British philosophers' idealist positions. As Ronald Christ summarizes it, "Berkeley...denied matter; Hume denied matter and spirit; Borges denies matter, spirit, and time."⁶⁰ Borges plays out this idea in a great number of parables and short fictions, including his famous "The Circular Ruins."

⁵⁷"La naderia de la personalidad." *Inquisiciones* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1994) 93-104. qtd. in Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: Lumen Books, 1995) 25.

⁵⁸Borges. "La encrucijada de Berkeley." *Inquisiciones* 117-28.

⁵⁹Borges. *Other Inquisitions* (Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1964) 171-88.

⁶⁰Christ 27.

In this story, a man whose supernatural task it is to dream another man and insert him into reality, discovers (along with the reader) that he is one of an infinitely long line of dreamers repeating the same act. When, in his final moments, he steps into the flames that await him and notices that they do not bite into his flesh but "[caress] him and [engulf] him without heat or combustion," he understands that he too is "a mere appearance, dreamt by another."⁶¹ This thinning out of present subjectivity is a consequence of what Eliade calls "eternal return," the present behavior as identical repetition of an act that has occurred for thousands of years.

We have already seen this kind of movement towards uncovering universalizing atemporality in the present moment in Jensen. However, rather than focusing on an explicit problematization of the subject, Jensen concentrates on discovering the ancestral and originary meaning in all that surrounds us, on bestowing cosmic – mythic – meaning to the sensible objective present. Contrasting him with Borges therefore allows us to infer that a natural result of Jensen's various forms of abolishment of time is that the object or person situated in the present – and, significantly, this is most often Jensen himself – can also be understood as a weakened, if not entirely arbitrary, construct. If so many of the facets of the natural world Jensen observes are indeed reincarnations of processes that have governed the earth for thousands or even millions of years, and, on a less cosmic scale, if the human behavior he witnesses in others and in himself turns out to be a faithful echo of the past, it follows that the subject observing at the present moment – either Jensen or, for that matter, his readers – are diminished in their subjective uniqueness, in their hold on a fixed and individualized identity. This dispersion, it would seem, is an integral part of the explosion of genre Jensen has perpetrated on the notion of "myth." It reduces the preeminence of Jensen's genre and of his own selfhood, both in keeping with his naturalistic universalizing beliefs. In addition, such dispersal also seems to provide a kind of artistic redemption. Although Jensen may feel the relief, humiliation, and terror of Borges's dreamer, his diffusion of genre serves to encompass the depths of his own private life and creative remembrances into the broader scope of human evolution. This in turn may help

⁶¹Borges, *Labyrinths* 50.

comfort him in the face of the “stormende Smerte” (“storm of pain”) which he feels in several myths as he beholds the “svundne Aar” (“waning years”).⁶²

⁶² These are the closing words in “Det gamle Ur” and “Pause” respectively. *Tretten* 28, 38.

CHAPTER 4: A BORGESIAN PERSPECTIVE OF MYTHIC
CREATION/DECREATION IN WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* AND *THE WAVES*

...with this random flicker of light in us that we call brain and feeling,
how can we do battle against this flood; what has permanence?
Our lives too stream away, down the unlighted avenues,
past the strip of time, unidentified.

I, carrying a notebook, making phrases, had recorded merely changes;
a shadow, I had been sedulous to take notes of shadows.
How can I proceed now, I said, without a self, weightless and visionless,
through a world weightless, without illusion?

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

She swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out
of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

A. WOOLF'S ATOMISM VIEWED THROUGH A BORGESIAN PERSPECTIVE

“Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.”¹ Virginia Woolf's central metaphor for our experience of the world, one that recurs in different but related guises, describes it as a negotiation, a need to continually give coherence and meaning to a constant onslaught of scattered fragments. This atomized view of life is abundantly portrayed in her work, most explicitly in her famous essay “Modern Fiction”:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this.” Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there...Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and eternal as possible?²

Many of Woolf's characters are cognizant of this “luminous halo,” and confront it head on, attempting to give life's myriad sensations cognitive and philosophical significance (often expressed as artistic coherence), most notably Lily Briscoe and the Ramsays in *To The Lighthouse*, and Bernard in *The Waves*. Artists in particular, in Woolf's universe, seem to have a special responsibility in gathering up the bits and pieces of experience and sensation to form patterns that hopefully can endure. They are, in a sense, the fictional counterparts to Woolf's own efforts at mythopoesis through her novels, her reconceiving

¹ Virginia Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958) 23.

²Woolf, *Common Reader* 154

the particularities of present social relations and conceptions of the world in broader, more universalizing and timeless patterns. Woolf's atomistic conception of our apprehension of external reality and the way our consciousness enfolds and manages its variegated features is similar to Jensen's and Proust's portrayals of the complicated internal worlds of their characters in response to a fragmented conception of life. Woolf in fact expresses her admiration for Proust in her essay "Phases of Fiction," where she notes that his accumulation of ordinary objects makes them "a part of life and transparent," so that they form "a whole series of thoughts, sensations, ideas, memories which were apparently sleeping on the walls of the mind...their abundance must be shaped."³ Both Jensen and Proust harness these fragments for their capacity to offer transcendental insights into their narrators' own pasts, and into the world of universal or essential truths; Jensen calls such scrutiny "mythic", while Proust uses these fragments to drive his analogies and metaphors, as well as his major instances of involuntary memory. Borges's approach to a fragmentary conception of reality is mathematically – and ontologically – radical, for every single minute object contains, through his vision, infinite possibilities, each existing in infinite universes. A coin in "The Zahir," for example, is, "strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures;"⁴ the small disc Borges discovers in "The Aleph" is only an inch wide, but it contains all space and time.

Borges's oeuvre frequently operates at such an overarching level of philosophical speculation and metaphysical detachment that one might legitimately claim affinities with all literary forms and categories. The thematic connections between Borges and Woolf, however, are both profound and far-reaching when it comes to issues of mythmaking. We recognize in her work many of his favorite themes functioning in ways so remarkably concordant that a combined analysis can crystallize important dynamics in Woolf's work – and indeed strengthen our understanding of Borges's. Both authors, for instance, express the difficulty of distinguishing the illusory and imaginary from the physical and external; of understanding the relationship and priority between the internal and the private on the one hand, and the external and communally constructed on the other;⁵ of ordering and interpreting signs and sensory stimuli to attain absolute

³Woolf, "Phases of Fiction," *Granite and Rainbow* 123-4.

⁴Borges, *Labyrinths* 159.

⁵This difference is expressed as the dialectic between the "Borges" and the "I" in "Borges and I", *Labyrinths* 246-7.

knowledge of people, events or objects; of struggling with the power of a single fragment to provide hopes of wholeness, interpretive fulfillment, and even transcendence.

Woolf's novels often blur the distinction between the imaginary worlds of her characters – their impressions, thoughts, and struggles with understanding – and the objectively "real" world in which they navigate. Like Borges, Woolf believes that every aspect of our life, whether imagined or real, abstract or concrete, involves ordering the endless cascade of atoms that land every second upon our consciousness. Borges is famous for portraying the overlap and gradual indistinguishability of the imaginary and the "real." As we saw in Chapter 1, Borges observes in "Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote" that time has gradually "[worn] away the disharmony" between the world in which Cervantes lived and wrote, and the imaginary world he created. In concluding aphoristically that "Myth is at the beginning of literature, and also at its end," he intends a significance not merely confined to literature: everything shall ultimately be consigned to myth, because all elements of life, whether imagined or objectively "real", are essentially alike: timeless and archetypal, but also dream-like, evanescent, and miniscule, mere atoms in the cosmos.

Woolf reinforces this view both inside the world of her novels, and from the broader standpoint of her narrative and its inflection of myth. We must remember, however, that Woolf portrays a more complex and rich emotional picture of her characters as they seek to control the dispersal of their perceptions. The emotional range in Borges's characters is rarely very complex; indeed, emotion often seems impossible, even irrelevant, in the face of the vastness and relentlessness of the paradigms that dominate the stories. Ireneo Funes in "Funes the Memorious," for instance, seems devoid of feeling, being entirely consumed by the vastness of his perfect memory, while the only emotion Erik Lönnrot feels as he is about to be executed in "Death and the Compass" is an "impersonal – almost anonymous – sadness."⁶ Borges's main characters' emotions will often be delayed as the mechanics of the story play themselves out, after which the affective response is mentioned only very briefly, and is usually polarized. Yu Tsun, for example, forced to kill Stephen Albert in "The Garden of Forking Paths," feels "innumerable contrition and weariness" (29); John Vincent Moon's confession in "The Shape of the Sword" that he is in fact the traitor whose story he has just told, elicits from

⁶Borges, *Labyrinths* 59-66, 86.

him a "sob," "weak gentleness," and a stammering voice (71). Other stories such as "The Immortal" or "The Secret Miracle" go a little further, showing characters going through emotional stages corresponding to the challenges at each stage, but even here, the highly allegorical quality of Borges's style and themes greatly restrict the range of possible affective responses.⁷ Borges's characters are most often archetypalized, and this naturally narrows and simplifies their emotional responses into categories such as "terror," "hope," or "yearning."⁸

Although Woolf's novels confront epistemological and ontological issues of similar scope, she traces more carefully the cognitive *and* emotional journeys of her characters as they struggle to localize meaning, and to weigh their objectively "real" environment with the world of their imagination and consciousness. In fact, Woolf's characters' emotional lives seem in large part to drive their cognitive apprehension of "reality," and to help dictate how they go about negotiating more abstract metaphysical concerns. Two scenes that frame *To The Lighthouse* vividly illustrate this interplay. As Lily considers the colors on her canvas early in the novel, she realizes that as soon as she seizes her brush, the picture in her mind changes:

It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against the terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see."

She remembers that when she begins to paint, she begins to feel "her own inadequacy, her insignificance" over her situation in life, and must control an impulse to "fling herself...at Mrs. Ramsay's knee" with a bold declaration of love. "It was absurd, it was impossible" (19). This passage expresses Lily's desire to perceive and express "reality" as faithfully as possible (a reality which she will soon describe in atomistic terms as a "company of gnats"), while simultaneously revealing a rich emotional vocabulary for that struggle, including child-like fear, courage, self-doubt, and reckless expressiveness. Much later in the novel, we see a more explicitly speculative dimension to Lily's

⁷Borges, *Labyrinths* 105-118. 88-94.

⁸These are the emotions briefly mentioned or conveyed in the final moments of "The Circular Ruins," "The Library of Babel," and "The Zahir" respectively. *Labyrinths* 50, 58, 164.

emotions, specifically in terms of her need to recover the image of Mrs. Ramsay. Her artistic impulses gradually become a project of memorial recovery. As Mr. Ramsay and the children approach the lighthouse, Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay on the beach years ago, and wonders why that particular memory has survived the years. She asks herself "Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy. This is knowledge?" As she dips her brush into the paint, "she dipped too into the past there." Lily realizes that imagination and "making scenes," or in her case, the act of painting, becomes "what we call 'knowing' people, 'thinking' of them, 'being fond' of them"; despite the fact that these are imaginary constructs which we make up about people, they are what we know them by "all the same. She went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past" (171-3). Lily's need to reconcile herself with the overpowering legacy of Mrs. Ramsay finds its expression through her art. Ellen Rosenman in this regard points out that "Lily recovers and celebrates" Mrs. Ramsay by painting her, and that she, in turn "'makes' Lily an artist by providing her with subject matter and, to some extent, a model for creativity."⁹ Reconceiving the past is therefore, in a sense, an emotional mythopoetic act for her, a rewriting of the "myth" – that is, the powerful memory – of Mrs. Ramsay. It can in this regard be read, I would argue, as the fictional counterpart to Woolf's broader narrative project of mythopoetic recovery and reordering of "reality," that is, the meaningful fragments of memory.

The symbolic possibilities and mythic allusiveness in Woolf's novels has received much critical attention.¹⁰ I would like to focus more specifically on the ways in which her narrative acquires the kind of mythopoetic form and patterning just illustrated through Lily. Woolf achieves this principally by moving outside chronological time to capture and reorder the brokenness of experience into new meaningful and emotionally restorative wholes, by depicting (as a consequence) a kind of coming-into-being of individual and communal meaning-making consciousnesses, and by using a web of metaphors invoking natural cycles of waves, water and light, all of them reminiscent of mythic symbolism. As in Borges, her characters come to acquire archetypal significance,

⁹Ellen Bayuk Rosenman. *The Invisible Presence* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana-State UP, 1986) 107.

¹⁰See, for instance, Avrom Fleishman's use of Frye's theory of modes in *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), and N.C. Thakur, *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* (London: Oxford UP, 1965).

however their efforts at comprehending their worlds, and most significantly, at recovering key elements from their own memories in order to attain that comprehension, is bound up with particular phases in cognitive and emotional response. We must also note, however, that Woolf simultaneously *undoes* that very mythopoetic mode of discourse, principally by breaking apart the fixity of meaning, by thinning out her characters' sense of cohesive subjectivity, and by demonstrating that a mythic sensibility is no longer to be attached to "important" people and events, but can be attached to any of the millions of atoms (i.e. impressions) we experience every minute as "reality." These fragments are by definition incidental and modest, and the manner in which they are ordered quite personal, even arbitrary. Traditional mythic hierarchies are thereby dispersed. As a consequence, subject-object and even subject-subject distinctions are erased,¹¹ character and narrator subjectivity is dissolved, and the continuity of narrative structure is broken up by interruptions, unresolved spaces, and epistemological gaps. As in Proust and Jensen, myth achieves ubiquity in Woolf; her highly idiosyncratic perspective reveals once again the infinite applicability of a mythopoetic gaze, an infinitude whose terrifying arbitrariness Borges helps crystallize. Woolf's novels, particularly *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, present characters struggling to find patterns of order in the complex stimuli of daily reality, but these patterns continually face waves of dissolution that threaten to pull meaning, identity and the certainty of knowledge back into the universal scatter of atoms. Consequently, all cognitive, personal, and emotional constructs risk becoming relativized in an extreme transcendentalist sense, appearing as no more than constructs, brief flashes of a lighthouse beam in the infinite darkness. Interpreting truth becomes temporary and private, at times even arbitrary, as revealed through Borges's most famous and unsettling fictional constructs.

Because of the potentially unwieldy range and magnitude of issues surrounding mythopoetic creation and decreation, I have schematized the parallels between Borges and Woolf by identifying and harnessing two sets of themes associated with mythmaking on the one hand, and the unraveling of myth through fragmentation and discontinuity on the other. Each set of three themes, moreover, demonstrates a viable

¹¹Jean Love identifies and summarizes a variety of features of a "mythopoetic cognitive style" in Woolf, including categories such as sensory diffusion, object diffusion, subject-object diffusion, and diffusion in Time and Space. *Worlds in Consciousness* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1970).

causal relationship from one to the next, as explained below. To help analyze the incidence of each set of themes in *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, I open each section with a close reading of two seminal short stories by Borges, "The Circular Ruins" for the first group, and "The Library of Babel" for the second.¹²

1. The first trio consists of (a) cyclicity of events, (b) timelessness, and (c) dissolution of subjectivity. Positing a theory of cyclicity in the sense of Eliade's notion of "eternal return" (the repetition of archetypal events) necessarily entails that the repeated event departs from the present ("profane time") and enters a realm of sacred or mythic time; this in turn implies that the person committing the most recent repetition is one of a long line of agents whose subjectivity is superseded – and indeed dispersed – by the archetypal ritual in question. Note that already here the mythic impulse necessitates an erasure of the mythmaking subject, which is already concordant with Modernist – and postmodern – narrative strategies of identity dissolution.

2. The second group of themes consists of (d) atomism, (e) ordering, and (f) interpretive relativism. William Everdell's recent survey "The First Moderns" identifies a broad range of fields, from brain research to probability theory, from pointillism to free verse, which, beginning already in the mid-nineteenth century, seemed increasingly dominated by notions of atomization, discontinuity, and uncertainty:

the atomism of chemistry came to find echoes in other sciences, in the arts, in philosophy...the atomic assumption in mechanics drove first scientists and then all sorts of thinkers to the conclusion that statistical and probabilistic descriptions of reality were truer than the old deterministic dynamics...Modern thought gave up the stubborn old belief that things could be seen "steadily and whole" from some privileged viewpoint at a particular moment. (10-11)

This conceptual fragmentation is in a sense the modern discovery *par excellence*, and Modernist literature has famously (and through a rich variety of strategies) embraced this trend to gradually dismantle old categories of thought and expression, including those dominating our mythic heritage. Thus, a view of life and the universe as an endless dispersion of discontinuous fragments puts us in the position (if we are to arrive at any truths) of seeking ways of ordering this chaos through a broad range of intellectual, sensual and emotional strategies and models, including art, mathematics, language,

¹²Borges, *Labyrinths* 45-50, 51-58.

science, and philosophy. At the same time, however, an atomistic model implies that any single interpretive act, any assignation of temporary coherence, is relative to other interpretations within that system owing to the absence of an inherent hierarchy of value. The danger, then, is the drift towards feelings of arbitrariness, a possibility which Borges confronts head-on.

A close reading of Borges and a thematically corresponding analysis of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves* offers a powerful symbiosis that, on the one hand, enriches the humanistic and emotional aspects of Borges's constructs, while on the other revealing how radical Woolf's mythic dispersal actually is.

B. CYCLES, TIMELESSNESS, AND THE DISSOLVING SUBJECT

The Circular Ruins

Borges's "The Circular Ruins" can profitably (and, I think, reasonably) be read as an allegory of mythopoesis, a process which involves (re-)creating a god (or some form of transcendent spirit) in narrative form. Here Borges continually associates his dreamer with the divine as he creates, in god-like fashion, another of his kind. Unlike Jensen's "Kondignogen," however, there seems to be no possibility of redemption-through-creation in Borges, only the realization of one's infinitesimal role in a universal scheme. Borges's dreamer has the supernatural task of dreaming a man and inserting him into reality (with strong qualification on the term *reality*, naturally), suggesting an artist struggling with a creation of mythic (or at least epic) proportions. Once the monumental task is accomplished, the dreamer discovers that he is himself an integral part of the mythic cycle he has just wrought, merely one link in an infinite chain of dreamers. His realization that he too is a dream is consistent with Borges's proposition in "Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote" that the real world of the artist and his or her imagined world will merge, before long, into myth. The dreamer's meticulousness, his sense of mystery and historical purpose, and the difficulty of his task all suggest an artist's challenge: he must invoke traditional forces to "mold the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of," (47) but he discovers that he is the victim of another dreamer's mythmaking. Such metaphysically speculative schemes can also circle back and enfold the original creative impulse in Modernist literature. Despite their deploying a

dizzying array of metafictional escape routes, Modernist mythmakers are also at risk, through the very act of mythopoesis, of falling prey to their own claims of transcendent awareness. A mythic world where identity is an illusion necessitates the erasure of the author him or herself. The dream can indeed become reality.

Three important themes interweave in this story: cyclical repetition, atemporality, and, ultimately, the dissolution of subjectivity. Borges attacks notions of linear temporality in "New Refutation of Time" by summarizing and extending the idealist positions of Berkeley and Hume. Berkeley, Borges reminds us, denies objects behind sense impressions, and Hume denies subjects behind perceptions of things. Borges concludes:

having denied matter and spirit, which are continuities, and having denied space also, I do not know with what right we shall retain the continuity that is time. Outside of each perception (actual or conjectural) matter does not exist; outside of each mental state the spirit does not exist; nor will time exist outside of each present instant...the chronological determination of an event, of any event on earth, is alien and exterior to the event.¹³

The conjunction of repetition, timelessness and the absence of a subject have also been dramatized in Borges's fictions. The short parable "The Plot," for instance, juxtaposes the circumstances of Caesar's murder with a gaucho dying under very similar circumstances. "Destiny takes pleasure in repetition, variants, symmetries," Borges writes: "nineteen centuries later," this gaucho "does not know he is dying so that a scene may be repeated."¹⁴ Once again we have an elegant dramatization of Borges's famous dictum, that "[i]t may be that universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors."¹⁵

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche characterized eternal return as "the greatest weight," an idea with which Milan Kundera opens *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, itself an apt subtitle for "The Circular Ruins." In the work of Borges, the idea of eternal return and its effect on time and subjectivity is explored with greatest force in "The Circular Ruins," as it involves a determined creative act in the face of an intractable and only vaguely visible legacy. The tone of Borges's story does seem overshadowed by the

¹³Borges. "New Refutation of Time." *Other Inquisitions* 183-5

¹⁴Borges, *Dreamtigers* 36.

¹⁵Borges. "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal," *Labyrinths* 189-92.

feeling that the dreamer's ritualistic, mythic reenactment is a burdensome purpose ("He knew that this temple was the place required by his invincible purpose"). The suggestive titular adjective, in addition to numerous images and clues early in the story, sets up our three themes and foreshadows the (in)famous final discovery. We learn, for instance, that the dreamer is an "obscure man" who comes from "one of the infinite villages upstream," arriving by canoe "probably without feeling" brambles stinging his flesh. He sees "without astonishment" that his wounds have closed when he awakens, and, more importantly, knows that the circular temple where he has arrived "was the place required by his invincible purpose; he knew that, downstream, the incessant trees had not managed to choke the ruins of another propitious temple, whose gods were also burned and dead" (45). Borges's careful choice of adjectives (*infinite, invincible, incessant, propitious*) suggest an ancient tradition, endless ritualistic cyclicity, despite the dreamer's apparent obliviousness to his exact heritage. The dreamer's supernatural task defines him wholly: "if someone had asked him his own name or any trait of his previous life, he would not have been able to answer" (46). The most important rule in Borges's construction here is that each dreamer must remain ignorant – until the very last moment, the point of dissolution – of preceding acts, lest he discover his own phantom existence: "all creatures except Fire itself and the dreamer" must believe that the dreamed creation is flesh and blood (48). Only when each dreamer steps into the final flames does he see for only an instant that he is himself the product of another's dream.

Initially, the man dreams he is in the center of a circular amphitheatre ("which in some way was the burned temple"), lecturing "clouds of silent students" on anatomy, cosmography and magic (a trio of subjects suggesting the mysterious nature of human physicality and spirituality). The students, however, remain passive, and therefore "could not rise to the state of individuals." Only those who "venture a reasonable contradiction" seem to "pre-exist somewhat more" (46). The dreamer dismisses this vision (and the subsequent one of a single student) as failures, and, after meticulous purification and preparation, he dreams of a beating heart. Little by little, he constructs the body of a youth in minute anatomical detail, "perceiv[ing] it, liv[ing] it, from many distances and many angles." This process suggests that succeeding with an imaginative construct, particularly, as concerns us here, in the realm of mythopoesis, requires not the passive reception and retranslation of an aesthetic legacy, but rather a *becoming*, an implosion and meticulous reworking, atom by atom, of the mythic subject itself. The

manner in which this construction proceeds, though surreal and mystical, applies to mythmaking in general in interesting ways: the dreamer dreams the heart as "active, warm, secret, the size of a closed fist," images that all suggest an intimate emotional process that reflects back on the creator's own vitality and sense of fulfillment. The dream proceeds organ by organ, survives the dreamer's impulse one day to destroy the work, and is completed finally through a series of mystical communions, including "supplications to the numina of the earth" and praying to "the effigy which was perhaps a tiger and perhaps a horse." Borges continually reminds us of the divine nature of the task, referring to the demiurgi of the Gnostic cosmogonies, to the "Adam of dreams fabricated by the magician's nights of effort," and to the multiple god named Fire who orders the dreamer to "instruct his creature in its rites" (48). We must remember, however, that this divinity extends itself to include the dreamer himself. Borges's dreamer cannot merely play the lecturer to an audience, handing on inherited knowledge with only the occasional exchange of ideas with one of his imagined students: he must perceive *and* live his dream to attain the necessary transcendent vision. This two-fold approach suggests a vital cross-over between craft and artist: the mythmaking process allows for privileged vision, but the creation seems to extend its influence to the point of infiltrating the mythmaker and turning him also into myth. As Borges writes elsewhere: "Through the years, a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face."¹⁶

The conclusion of "The Circular Ruins" reinforces the infinite cyclicity of the creative process: the dreamer's child awakens and is taught "the arcana of the universe"; the dreamer is "troubled by the impression that all this had happened before," imagines that his "unreal child was practicing the same rites, in other circular ruins, downstream" (49); and he realizes that "what was happening had happened many centuries ago." Finally, in one of Borges's most celebrated passages, the dreamer walks into the flames of the fire god's sanctuary, but observes that they do not burn him; rather, the fire "caress[es]" and "engulf[s] him," and he understands "[w]ith relief, with humiliation, with terror...that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another" (50). The dreamer, to read this experience as a model of mythopoesis, must him- or herself

¹⁶Borges, *A Personal Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 203.

become myth in order to create, and the consequent discovery seems to throw the concreteness of experience and the viability of subjectivity into question. There is, in other words, a necessary self-destructiveness in mythic creation, if for no other reason than the heightened artistic act producing a privileged moment of vision that reveals the illusory nature of existence. As he declares poetically at the end of "A New Refutation of Time," "Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me but I am the fire."¹⁷ But the cyclicity within the story and between the artist and his or her creation also has a counterpart on the *outside*, at the level of narrative and its contact with the reader. The dreamer can therefore stand both for the mythmaker and for the spectator (or reader) of that supernatural process. Borges explores this inversion between the work of fiction and the reader in "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*," asking why we are troubled by the presence of 1001 nights in *The Thousand and One Nights*, of Don Quixote as reader in *Don Quixote*, and Hamlet as spectator in *Hamlet*. "Those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious." He concludes with Carlyle's observation that "universal history is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they too are written."¹⁸ Mythmaking, in other words, pushes the writer and reader into myth. When Borges says that myth is "at the beginning and end of literature" he therefore means not only that history erases distinctions between an author and his or her real life; literature is also mythic throughout its journey from the author's mind to that of the reader.

Before looking at this story's relation to *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, a brief excursion into Woolf's essay "The Moment: Summer's Night" can help clarify the parallel dynamics between both authors.¹⁹ Borges's fictions are essayistic and intellectually speculative, dramatizing philosophical and metaphysical concerns about human existence. "The Circular Ruins" bears an uncanny resemblance to "The Moment: Summer's Night" in terms of a progression from the attempt to give coherence to sense impressions, to feelings of detachment, and ultimately to an awareness of the dissolution

¹⁷Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 187.

¹⁸ Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 46.

¹⁹Woolf, "The Moment: Summer's Night," *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 3-8.

of the self. Woolf begins by describing an evening in a garden, asking "what composed the present moment?" With her first answer, that it is "largely composed of visual and sense impressions," she mentions the heat of the day, the wafting air and shivering leaves, the light falling into darkness. But her observations soon acquire broader philosophical significance, a feeling of detachment and a sense of inevitability, of being part of a vast unknowable mechanism:

this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth...Then changes, unseen in the day, coming in succession seem to make an order evident. One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch.

Upon observing this "wider circumference of the moment," her only solace is the feeling that at the center of these disparate events there is a "knot of consciousness; a nucleus" composed of the four bodies sitting together on this summer evening. These bodies are somehow "not subject" to what she calls "the law of the sun and the owl and the lamp," that is, the surrounding sense impressions. The moment "quivers" with conversation and feeling, but the four people gathered hover above the scene and "survey the quietude" below, and Woolf wonders whether they could "be all one wing; all embracing, all gathering...Ah yes, if we could fly, fly, fly." Her musings are interrupted by a sneeze which shakes "the whole universe"; now the moment acquires feelings of self-assertion, it becomes "harder...intensified, diminished" by personal feelings and desire for love. Ultimately, she wants the moment to break; the strike of a match gives way to the sounds of cows lowing in the surrounding fields and to the blackness of the trees:

Nothing can be seen. We can only see ourselves as outlines, cadaverous, sculpturesque...Then comes the terror, the exultation; the power to rush out unnoticed, alone; to be consumed; to be swept away to become a rider on the random wind...he who gallops for ever, nowhither traveling, indifferent; to be part of the eyeless dark, to be rippling and streaming, to feel the glory run molten up the spine down the limbs, making the eyes glow, burning, bright, and penetrate the buffeting waves of the wind.

Borges's dreamer can also be understood as carefully creating a "moment," combining sense impressions, feelings and personal will to form a "knot of consciousness." At the same time, the dreamer can, like Woolf, detach himself and observe his own creative

process; he is relentlessly driven by his purpose, and is thus in a sense also a "passive participant" in the long line – Woolf's "pageant" – of dream-creators. And like Woolf, the dreamer finally also sees himself as a mere "outline," part of the "random wind," feeling relief, humiliation and terror where Woolf feels terror, exultation and power.

A useful interchange occurs between these two stories because they give different treatment to similar ideas regarding our perception of the nature of reality, and our role when faced with that perception. Both stories present the rather bleak understanding of existence as the brief moment of coherence between scatters of atoms on either side of life; as Beckett's Pozzo formulates it, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."²⁰ According to Borges, we inherit a dream-state, "vertiginous matter," (47) out of which we must, like his dreamer, mold what Woolf calls a "knot of consciousness." Borges shows this as the painstaking construction beginning with the heart, fiber by fiber, of a whole individual body, a process which seems to symbolize both our gradual understanding and order-making of the world around us, as well as our concomitant incremental self-creation. By understanding the myriad sensations and thoughts of which we are composed, we can hope to form a temporary but coherent selfhood. Woolf's essay suggests that we perform such Borgesian dream-creations every day, or at least each time we can focus our energies enough to "hover" above the "weavings to and fro" of our impressions. Comprehending the relationship between passing time and the present – the "moment" – involves, like in Proust and Jensen, the awareness of sensations simultaneous with an ability to step outside ourselves and see ourselves experiencing those sensations. This acute vision therefore involves a split self, a domain both of agent and observer. The capacity to see the fractured nature of reality and our role as gatherers of fragments is portrayed here as a process that can potentially be self-destructive, as though we risk becoming part of the very fragments we posit are the building blocks of our experience of reality. This potential self-destructiveness is expressed as terror in both stories, for Borges suggests life itself is merely a dream, while Woolf says we shall inevitably be swept away by the wind. Once again, however, Borges is more extreme, for while Woolf's characters will resist their own dissolution – "Against you I will fling myself,

²⁰Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954) 57B.

unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"²¹ – Borges most often leaves his characters no avenue of escape.

Many of Woolf's novels present characters engaged in artistic struggles not unlike that of Borges's dreamer, if perhaps in less radical form. Lily Briscoe and the Ramsays in *To The Lighthouse* and Bernard in *The Waves* often perceive their surroundings symbolically, and interpret the world with idiosyncratic visionary modes (painting, phrases, metaphors, philosophy, emotions, imaginative constructs, social events, common objects) and artistic and personal agendas. As in Borges, Woolf's characters fall into patterns of endless cycles, notions of time are distended and exploded for very specific narrative effects (particularly to release the flow of consciousness from the limitations of external linear chronology), and individual identities are subsumed in the universal scatter of Woolf's atomistic vision of existence. Her experiments with narrative time have received much critical attention; in his famous essay on *To The Lighthouse*, for instance, Erich Auerbach demonstrates the manner in which Woolf stylistically distends the chronology of events to depict Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts in a way that expands the actual time required to (in this case) measure a stocking against James's leg.²² Woolf attempts a heightened, more intense view of the quotidian by exploring the unstoppable flow of her characters' mental worlds, thereby stepping outside the confines of a grid whereby a fixed number of narratable events are to be assigned a corresponding quota of narrative space. Harvena Richter, pointing out the link between Woolf and Bergson, explains that her "moment of being, with its diversity in unity, resembles his concept of duration (*la durée*) in which time is qualitative, nonspatial, real, vertical, and always present." As in Proust, time in Woolf incorporates "aspects of thought, emotion, perception, memory, and even the personality itself, whose states of consciousness were mysteriously bound up with the moment."²³ As a counterpart to narrative expansion, Woolf also portrays temporal cycles, and I shall examine in particular the relation between cyclicity, atemporality and the dissolution of subjectivity in the Borgesian sense.

²¹Bernard's final declaration in Woolf, *Waves* 297.

²²Erich Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957) 525-53.

²³Harvena Richter, *The Inward Voyage* (Princeton UP, 1970) 38-9.

To The Lighthouse

In his well-known study of Virginia Woolf, David Daiches declares that "To reach the lighthouse is, in a sense, to make contact with a truth outside oneself, to surrender the uniqueness of one's ego to an impersonal reality."²⁴ I want to examine this movement towards impersonality through the lighthouse's cyclical structure. Cyclical patterns are readily apparent in Woolf's novels, either in natural forms or as repeated social behavior, but the principal cyclicity in *To The Lighthouse* is the endless "stroke" of the lighthouse beam that Mrs. Ramsay so powerfully identifies with, and this regular pattern mirrors the paroxysms of meaning and the occasional clarity of vision Woolf's characters attain, as well as the periodicity of the family's journey to the Hebrides. At night, Mrs. Ramsay welcomes the chance to be silent and alone, feeling all the energy of the day "evaporat[e]" until "one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness." Meditating thus, she understands the infinite permutability of existence, that her core of darkness can travel anywhere imaginable: "the range of experience seemed limitless...Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by" (62). This model of the self recalls Borges's frequent dramatizations of the infinite possibilities we face, that every conceivable series of events exists in some universe.²⁵ In "Funes the Memorious," for instance, Borges suggests that all possible permutations reside in a single individual: "The truth is that we live out our lives putting off all that can be put off; perhaps we all know deep down that we are immortal and that sooner or later all men will do and know all things" (64). In the face of such infinitude, Borges's characters understand that their own subjectivity is at risk (to say the least). At the close of "The Library of Babel," for instance, he declares that "[t]he certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms," (58) and Mrs. Ramsay too, in her moment of calm reflection, sees herself "[l]osing personality." As Mrs. Ramsay stares at the "long steady stroke" of the lighthouse, Woolf's passage becomes infused with rhythm and repetition: we learn that "this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking...until she became the thing she looked at." The regular sweep of the light beam somehow takes up a random phrase in

²⁴David Daiches. *Virginia Woolf* (New York: New Directions, 1942) 86.

²⁵See in particular "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "The Zahir," *Labyrinths* 19-29 and 156-64.

Mrs. Ramsay's head – such as "Children don't forget, children don't forget" – and induces her to repeat and add to it: "It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come." When she looks into the light, "it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes": she seems to have fused with an inanimate object which she feels somehow "expresse[s]" her (63).

Among the many possible readings of this symbiosis, the most important in the context of the present discussion relates to the desire to escape temporality. Mrs. Ramsay meditates on the darkness within us, and notes the loss of personality in solitude. At such times "there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity" (63). The lighthouse beam can symbolize, therefore, the periodic (though rare) moments of cohesiveness when Mrs. Ramsay can step outside the ceaseless flow of time by holding onto a specific object or event that can "par[take]...of eternity" (105). The lighthouse has revealed to her that life consists for the most part of a dark, indistinguishable chaos of temporal experience, with short bursts of timeless order that small objects can inspire. Although individuality may be a mere illusion, Mrs. Ramsay seeks to find order (and hence meaning) in life by picking out "one particular thing; the thing that mattered; to detach it" (112), most significantly the dinner of *Boeuf en Daube* and the fruit dish in the middle of the table she hopes no one will touch (108). The banquet enables her to find something "immune from change" that "shines out...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby." When musing on the possible match between William and Lily, she feels that "Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right." This brings her feelings of control and relief, which Woolf renders through images carefully suggestive of fixity: she has "reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy." Everyone at the table also "seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together" (104-5). This stability reinforces a slightly earlier passage characterizing the dining room as an "island" surrounded by the "fluidity" outside, that "reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily" (97). The banquet is therefore the temporary "flash" of eternity that resists, in Mrs. Ramsay's mind, the onslaught of temporal flux. Norman Friedman has, in this regard, usefully identified the lighthouse as being symbolic of the necessity to balance subjective involvement in and objective detachment from life in order to achieve

happiness.²⁶ As she meditates on the importance of the lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay seems to arrive at precisely such a balance, observing the beam until she becomes it, and feels, as a consequence, a "summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability" (63). The self-examination that the lighthouse inspires in Mrs. Ramsay provides her with temporary "peace" and "rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures" (105). But during the banquet (as in many other scenes), Mrs. Ramsay also plays the role of beacon for those around her: the dinner fades into the past, "[a]nd directly she went a sort of disintegration set in" (112). The darkness of disorder and temporal decay resumes for everyone present, and we see its destructive work in the famous following chapter ("Time Passes") where Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast must in their own way rescue each object in the decaying house from the "pool of Time" (139). Their physical restoration of the house acts as a symbolic counterpart to Mrs. Ramsay's attempts to fix moments in time, and to Lily's memorial reconstructions of her time spent with Mrs. Ramsay. Where Mrs. Ramsay seeks coherence and stability, Lily wants to restore the house's historical and imaginative dimensions in order to resolve her dependence on the Ramsays' hold on her persona, and reach artistic and personal independence.

Woolf's lighthouse, therefore, corresponds to Borges's circular ruins as an emblem of the cyclicity of existence. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Borges's dreamer identify with this symbolism, come to realize the vast sweep of eternity they face, and both engage in acts of imaginative cohesion as a way of attaining a brief moment of intensified, timeless meaning. As we saw in Jensen and Proust, the belief in the power of an object to stand outside time and acquire eternal significance is a mythicizing act: both the dreamer's and Mrs. Ramsay's impetus is charged with a mythic sensibility because the repetition of an archetypal event (as we know from Eliade) signifies its acquiring atemporal significance, that is, *reality* out of the chaos of profane time. This is particularly important for Mrs. Ramsay to achieve, as her panic over the flow of time is expressed, for instance, through her worrying about possible matches to be made between the various men and women in her circle (104). She identifies herself with the lighthouse because its repetitive rhythm suggests to her her own continual search for such paroxysms of affective and intellectual order and life-long – even timeless – meaning, locatable in the people, events, and even objects that surround her, and requiring a concerted act of will

²⁶Norman Friedman, "Double Vision in 'To The Lighthouse,'" *Beja* 155.

and perception on her part that we see so colorfully and meticulously elaborated in Borges. At the same time, however, she understands that her own personality is merely the temporary construction of her social self by others and her perception of that construction, what she calls "our apparitions, the things you know us by,"²⁷ and that when the busy activity of life disappears in solitude, that personality also disappears. Borges's intensified portrayal of this theme, that his dreamer is himself dreamt by another, finds an interesting parallel in Mrs. Ramsay in that she is herself, in a sense, composed of the many consciousnesses that surround her. As Auerbach has phrased it, Mrs. Ramsay is "encircled by the content of all the various consciousnesses directed upon her (including her own),"²⁸ and one might in this regard characterize her in similar terms to Borges's dreamer as being herself "dreamt by others." In addition, the parallel to Borges's cyclicity can be located in Lily's memorial reconstructions in Part III, her constant attempts to resurrect Mrs. Ramsay from oblivion. Lily, like the dreamer – and indeed, like Proust and Jensen – is also involved in an act of mythopoesis, of recreating a private myth through a memorial quest.

The perception of a dissolving sense of subjectivity is reinforced in the "Time Passes" chapter which depicts the passage of ten years at the Ramsays' holiday house, and can also be understood as the dark chaos of time Mrs. Ramsay constantly strives against. For ten years, the house experiences "a downpouring of immense darkness...Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood." Most importantly, we learn that "[n]ot only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, 'This is he' or 'This is she'" (126). The relentless flow of time, therefore, produces a terrifying erasure whereby even objects and people become indistinguishable, as though they had begun to merge with one another like clouds of atoms. This blurring of distinctions even takes on a metaphysical dimension when Woolf famously evens out traditional hierarchies of value. Thus, at regular intervals throughout a chapter devoted largely to describing an empty house, we are given tragic events in brief parenthetical asides: Mrs. Ramsay has died (a death itself diminished by giving priority to a description of Mr. Ramsay's empty arms), Prue has married, and then died during childbirth, and Andrew is killed by an exploding shell. Equanimity of description

²⁷Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* 62; this corresponds to the "Borges" in "Borges and I."

²⁸Auerbach 536.

is therefore obtained by devoting very few lines to "tragic" events while allocating considerable narrative space to describe "certain airs...[creeping] round corners," "random light...upon stair and mat," and "some door in the kitchen" swinging wide, "admitt[ing] nothing; and slamm[ing] to" (126-7). By deliberately averaging out the importance of events, Woolf highlights the arbitrary value we assign to individual events in a similar fashion to Borges with respect to words in "The Library of Babel," and objects in "The Zahir." Woolf's preoccupation with the arbitrary assignation of meaning, particularly by nineteenth-century novelists, emerges most succinctly in her essay "Modern Fiction" where she praises Chekhov's short story "Gusev" for the way it radically understates the death of the two main characters. Woolf therefore seems to offer a view of existence as a homogeneous scatter of largely indistinguishable events and objects, and if we are to achieve any insight into the true nature of existence, to try to know the things and people surrounding us at each moment as fully as possible, we must "rescue" these objects, these emotionally charged events from the sweep of time, and work hard at seeing them with an aestheticized, universal, and timeless perspective. This approach bears an uncanny resemblance to Proust's view that habit blinds us to the realities of life, and that it is necessary to step outside time, through even the most modest of objects, to gain access to the realm of essences and truths to which we are, for the most part, completely blind.

In order to crystallize this need to find moments of escape from the decay of time into a more "real" dimension, Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with a symbol of circularity. In this sense, Woolf's novel illuminates the situation of Borges's dreamer, suggesting that his supernatural task can also be understood as an attempt at creating a small island of stability that, like Borges's circular ruins, might achieve permanence amid the vast expanse of eternity. Interestingly, both Mrs. Ramsay and the dreamer are both outside and part of – both witnesses and agents of – the symbolic systems that dominate their lives. Mrs. Ramsay's perspective on life involves a circular, rhythmical mode of thinking, but she also perceives herself to actually *be* the lighthouse. Her life can be said to move in circular patterns, with occasional moments of visibility at the "surface" of social life, yet she is also a beacon in search of paroxysms of fixity, as well as a guide to those around her. Similarly, Borges's dreamer is not only a worshipper at a holy temple where he must perform a sacred act: he is himself merely one of an infinite array of dreamers, and until his final moments he remains unaware that both he and his creation

are trapped in an eternally circular labyrinth. He too, therefore, is both outside the circular ruins, and metaphysically an integral part of their mysterious spiritual structure.

Lily Briscoe's struggle with painting can also be compared to the task of Borges's dreamer in that she is explicitly preoccupied with a specific creative act, carefully weighing and collecting the fragments of her impressions and thoughts to acquire knowledge of those around her, to reach a sense of artistic wholeness. I shall return in the next section to the various complex ways in which Lily meditates upon the fragmentary nature of cognition and feeling. In terms of the theme of cyclicity, however, Lily provides useful additional observations that can supplement the mythicity observed so far. She recalls, for instance, her time with the Ramsays with a "[constant] sense of repetition—of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations" (199). Lily demonstrates this cyclical behavior herself in the sense that she repeatedly dwells on the problem of her painting at various instances throughout the novel, and returns to the house after the ten year interruption of the second chapter to finish the painting. Interestingly, she perceives the timeless importance of her task in terms reminiscent of a mythic creation: near the close of the novel, as she faces her canvas in a moment of heightened inspiration, she feels as though "everything this morning was happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time...The lawn was the world; they [she and Mr. Carmichael] were up here together, on this exalted station" (194). This feeling of timelessness is foreshadowed early in the novel when she ponders how we understand and organize our own feelings and perceptions. Impressions "poured in upon her," her mind races at breathtaking speed, and she realizes that the rapid voice of her thoughts "was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity" (24). Once again, a heightened sense of reality is associated with timelessness, and in Lily's case, this will come to be reflected in her act of artistic creation which the final line of the novel famously calls her "vision" (209).

Just as Mrs. Ramsay in solitude perceives the loss of personality, so Lily, in her act of creation in the third chapter, seems transported into a kind of mythic trance suffused with the rhythm initiated by her brushstrokes. After being confronted by Mr. Ramsay's need for sympathy, Lily faces the "formidable" space of her canvas, and, significantly, this long passage becomes infused with water imagery, thereby connoting

not only themes of creation and cyclicity, but also associating her creative process with the ocean and lighthouse nearby: with her brush she makes a first quick stroke, and then "attained a dancing rhythmical movement," painting "brown running nervous lines" (158); her hand "quiver[s] with life," and the brush movements again suggest a wave-like motion with the phrase "hither and thither," the resulting rhythm "strong enough to bear her along with the current." At this moment, Lily observes:

Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues. (159)

In this inspired state, Lily feels the transitoriness and superficiality of personality consistent with mythopoesis. Her mind sweeps back in time to remember Charles Tansley's pusillanimity, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting under a rock to write letters, and she credits Mrs. Ramsay with enabling these scenes and moments to "surviv[e], after all these years complete," allowing Lily to "[dip] into [them] to re-fashion her memory of him" (160). Her memory of Tansley is so clear and powerful as to affect Lily "like a work of art," and cause her to characterize the meaning of life with a metaphor that relates directly to Mrs. Ramsay's self-identification with the stroke of the lighthouse: there are no great revelations, Lily realizes; "[i]nstead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark...this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here" (161). As we have seen with Mrs. Ramsay, this image reinforces that Lily too is governed by a cyclical rhythm in her approach to her art and the memories that feed into it, and the belief that the occasional flash of memory and insight can provide her with an instance of timeless significance. In the turmoil of such meditations, all aspects of reality seem to have been lifted to a new state: as she observes a little later, "the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality" (179). This recalls the idealist realm of Borges's "The Circular Ruins" in which all levels of reality are solely the creation of the mind. Every object, sensation and truth are all aspects of a "pool of thought," and Borges's dreamer must also, like Lily and

Mrs. Ramsay – and even Mrs. McNab – extract and shape a particular form from the universal scatter.

The Waves

The Waves lends itself particularly well to a Borgesian thematic grid, suggesting similar kinds of mythic, metaphysical, and subjectivistic dispersals. We find, first of all, a many-layered cyclicity in the nine much-discussed interludes describing a beach scene at various times of the day. Here the cycle is natural vis-à-vis the movement of the sun during a single day, the continual approach and crash of waves, as well as the symbolic correspondence between a day and a human life. But in addition to such broad symbolism, a more exact parallel to "The Circular Ruins" occurs, for instance, in the numerous references to former lives, to a character identifying immediately with past figures. Early in the novel, Percival's magnificence is "that of some mediaeval commander," and Rhoda imagines herself as a Russian Empress as she washes herself, her fist waving defiantly at both Miss Lambert and "at an infuriated mob" (37, 56). Louis extends this vision of former lives to incorporate all of history; he feels that in his present identity he is merely a temporary agent who must shape his own existence out of the fabric of a long continuum. As he rides home on the train for the holidays, he "seem[s] already to have lived many thousand years...I am the ghost of Louis, an ephemeral passer-by, in whose mind dreams have power" (67). In an image with uncanny resemblance to the idea of Borges's dreamer burning up through his reincarnation, Louis feels as though he has "lived a thousand lives already...What you see beside you, this man, this Louis, is only the cinders and refuse of something once splendid" (127). Later, when he signs his name, he feels "compact; now I am gathered together...I have fused my many lives into one" (167-8). In mentioning Percival's death, Louis steps even further into a belief in a timeless, pantheistic universe: "Percival has died; (he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death)" (170). This harks back to Borges's observation on the universality of identity in "The Shape of the Sword," that "[p]erhaps Schopenhauer was right: I am all other men, any man is all men, Shakespeare is in some manner the miserable John Vincent Moon."²⁹ Shortly after his statement regarding Percival, Louis observes that daily life is making order from chaos: "Meeting and parting, we assemble

²⁹Borges, *Labyrinths* 70.

different forms, make different patterns." This need to form an identity in the temporary present echoes throughout many of Borges's stories including "Ruins," and finds broader and more focused applicability in Bernard who declares:

We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road. (146)

John Graham has described this kind of agency as a "communion" between the six characters who forge the significance of their farewell dinner with Percival.³⁰ Borges's dreamer achieves this coherence through dream, Bernard through phrase-making; both seek to mold what Bernard calls "the nebulosity of my own life blurred with all these phrases" (276). Bernard's key metaphor for this process is more precisely the image of time as a drop falling. He imagines time as a series of drops forming on the roof of his soul and mind. A drop gradually forming represents Bernard's awareness of "the merely habitual nature of my action," but when a drop falls, "[t]hese are the true cycles, these are the true events...I see what habit covers" (184-5). Cyclicity for Bernard thereby resembles Mrs. Ramsay's occasional clarity of vision represented by the flash of the lighthouse, Lily's painterly impulse, Mr. Ramsay's self-heroizing invocation of certain lines of poetry, as well as the dream-task (also brief on Borges's cosmic scale) enacted by one of Borges's infinite row of dreamers. In each case, order is, in myth-like fashion, temporarily restored. When life seems to slip into chaos, or as Bernard later terms it, when "[t]ime has given the arrangement another shake," he can "[net it] under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words" (270-1). Cyclicity therefore has both a private, meaning-making function, as well as broader metaphysical significance: there are both the periodic flashes of insight when life attains clarity and temporary "reality," and at the same time the more overreaching life-cycles in which these characters express an awareness of an ancestral heritage. In a phrase that echoes the conclusion of "Ruins," Bernard declares late in the novel that "the whole of life, its master, its adventurers then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor" (253).

³⁰John Graham, "Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf," *Aspects of Time*, Ed. C.A. Patrides (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1976) 194.

Despite the chronological arrangement of the nine episodes, showing the seven characters growing from childhood to middle age, Woolf achieves a sense of timelessness by introducing each episode with the natural backdrop of a corresponding interlude of a beach scene. Rather than highlighting our isolation from the non-human realm, as one critic has argued,³¹ this framing device invites symbolic interpretation of the various details from the interludes, and therefore calls attention to the broader significance of the characters' experiences. T.E. Apter has in this regard argued that the interludes "present the whole world – the sun, sea and sky – in terms of various stages of perception and various stages of the ego which...influence what one perceives and how one arranges one's perceptions."³² Likening a human life to a moment in nature produces an archetypalizing effect: suddenly we are encouraged to draw analogies between the beach scenes and every detail from the interior monologues. In the first interlude, for instance, the rising sun produces a "haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the wollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue" (7). This suggests the brilliant novelty of experience from the perspective of a young child discovering the world. At the mid-point of the novel, however, immediately preceding the news of Percival's death, the glare of the sun intensifies contrasts of light and dark, presaging the emotional turmoil into which the characters will be cast: "the heat of the sun made the hills grey as if shaved and singed in an explosion" (149). In the final interlude, the description of light reflects the personal dissolution into which the characters will fall, both cognitively and emotionally; here, light has "faded," colors have "overflowed their banks," and "cupboards and chairs [have] melted their brown masses into one huge obscurity" (236). This symbiosis between the two narrative layers produces a continually working metaphoric effect. The presence of a group of images suggesting an analogical relation with a second group creates the kinds of reflections, interactions and fusions of meaning one finds in metaphor. We have already observed how metaphor is the traditional language of myth, and how Proust felt that the "miracle of analogy" allowed one to identify timeless essences. Woolf's alternating between interludes and monologues similarly charges *The Waves* with a metaphoric-mythic timelessness.

³¹Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979) 146-7.

³²T.E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of her Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1979) 115.

Within these overarching structural dynamics, Woolf's characters express directly their resistance to temporal flow. A desire similar to Mrs. Ramsay's search for that which can endure, i.e. the association between cyclicity and timelessness, comes early in *The Waves* when Neville sees the whole world "flowing and curving." In a trance-like state, he gazes at clouds which – significantly – are becoming "dishevel[ed]" by the wind. In the face of such imminent dissolving, he says: "If that blue could stay forever; if that hole could remain for ever; if this moment could stay for ever—" (38). Shortly thereafter, Louis too wants to "fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavor. This shall endure." Once again, the desire for transcending the passage of time is associated with a need to collect the fragments of an imminent chaos: "my shattered mind is pieced together by some sudden perception. I take the trees, the clouds, to be witnesses of my complete integration" (39).

The characters' desire for fixity soon gravitates around the admirable figure of Percival, whose much anticipated presence at the dinner in his honor causes everything to quiver, kindle and burn clear (140). Echoing Mrs. Ramsay's fear over the imminent dissolution of her banquet, each character here expresses their anguish over the importance – and evanescence – of this moment. Louis says, "Before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in a vice"; and a little later, "Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here...do not go. Hold it for ever." Jinny restates this desire, saying, "Let us hold it for one moment...love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival" (145). The image of a globe used to describe Percival suggests a small sphere of control and timelessness that encircles all seven characters: "We are walled in here. But India lies outside" (135). This dialectic resembles the image of the banquet in *To The Lighthouse* as an island of stability against the wavering flux outdoors. As Percival finally steps into a taxi, Neville is seized with horror, wondering how the "fire" of Percival might "blaz[e] for ever" (147). Interestingly, each character mentions the small detritus left behind at a dinner: Susan notices how strange "little heaps of sugar look by the side of our plates"; Bernard wonders about the future while "brushing the crumbs from [his] waistcoat"; Louis wants fixity "among these lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing." These images accentuate the emotion felt by each character: while Percival was in their company, everything basked in his radiance; now, the crumbs and peelings are merely themselves, scattered and

unwanted. In a sense, they represent the six characters who themselves feel like the humble leavings of a noble banquet.

Bernard notices this importance assigned to mundane objects after his marriage proposal has been accepted. Initially, the glee causes him to be "charged in every nerve with a sense of identity" such that he "could not see a tooth-brush in a glass without saying, 'My tooth-brush.'" But his arrival at Euston station makes him realize how attaining desire deflates this sense of identity, and allows him to become aware of the quotidian accoutrements of our everyday existence: "Over us all broods a splendid unanimity," he declares, "We are enlarged and solemnised and brushed into uniformity." No longer driven by desire, he can "sink down, deep, into what passes, this omnipresent, general life," (112) and through this more abstract perspective, step outside time: "People might walk through me. And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught?" At this moment, even the sounds of traffic "might be any uproar – forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled." This connection between human activity and the natural world (one we often find in Jensen) echoes the broader analogy Woolf draws between her interludes and the main progression of her characters' monologues, and it once again lends timeless, naturalistic significance to daily affairs. With this perspective Bernard reduces human identity to its crude components, and reminds us once again that we are but the latest layer of humanity atop endless strata of past generations: "our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones, silence" (113).

The final step from cyclicity and timelessness to the awareness of a dissolving subjectivity is taken most clearly by Rhoda and Bernard. At the end of Section Three, Rhoda deplors her insecurity among people and laments the "immense pressure" on her, that she "cannot move without dislodging the weight of centuries." She moves swiftly through a range of colorful metaphors to describe her personal anxieties, including the assertion that she is "broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one." She is aware that "there is a world immune from change," but every time the door opens and she is confronted by someone new, "[t]he wave breaks. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room." Each of our main themes are here given a particularly powerful reinterpretation in terms of personal insecurity. Like the other characters, Rhoda is aware of the existence of a

timeless world where things can endure, but the wave-like cyclicity of events does not give her access to that world; instead, waves are here given treacherous connotations: she feels "cast up and down among these men and women...like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far." She feels as though she is the victim of an overarching cyclicity, the "weight of centuries," which breaks her adult subjectivity and makes her feel dissolved into a little girl (105-7). This presents an interesting reversal of symbolism: waves, which Woolf typically associates with life-cycles and vitality, are here used as a vehicle of destruction; similarly, fire in "Ruins," which aside from its traditional symbolism of life and protection, is introduced as a "multiple god," becomes that which finally consumes the dreamer.

Subjectivity is also dissolved in the sense that Bernard, already in college (Section Two), does "not believe in separation. We are not single" (67). Initially he understands this multiplicity in terms of his link to great artists ("I am, in some ways, like Byron" (79)), but near the end of the novel, he reiterates and elaborates upon this idea in terms of his immediate friends, feeling that he is "many people," that he does not know exactly who he is, that he could be either Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis. He does not know "how to distinguish [his] life from theirs" in part due to his sense of the "nebulosity" of his life, dominated as it is by phrase-making (276). Bernard's only weapon (as we shall see in the following section) against "the roar of time" is his ability to change experience into discourse, but this also implies transforming life into a homogeneous – if temporarily controllable – medium. As Neville observes, "We are all pellets. We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B" (70). Individual identity is therefore constantly under fire. Neville feels his identity bleeding into others, that when someone approaches he becomes not himself but "Neville mixed with somebody" (83). In Section Nine when Bernard remembers the whole group having dinner, he recalls that "we felt enlarge itself round us the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not. The wind, the rush of wheels became the roar of time, and we rushed – where? And who were we?" (277) This beautifully phrased question is fundamental to much of Woolf's work, expressing the constant struggle with shaping identity, fixity and meaning against the continual chaos of temporal flux. Just as Borges's dreamer must finally concede his own illusory nature, so Woolf's characters (with Bernard as their most eloquent spokesman) must finally realize

the thinness of who and what they are, and that they will ultimately become one with the natural world that served to frame their interior monologues.

The uncertainty about selfhood also carries over to all aspects of sensory apprehension. Like the indistinguishability of objects in "Time Passes," Bernard here must "begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now," and once again muses on the possibility that he may be all of his friends: "I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them" (288). This dissolution of borders between objects and identities is reminiscent of Borges's idealism, whereby the uniformity of all matter implies that a belief in separate identities is but a fiction, a temporary and illusory construct that allows us to make some sense of ourselves and the world around us. The daily progress of Woolf's characters' ephemeral lives appears therefore as dreamlike as Borges's. Where the dreamer in "Ruins" observes "without astonishment" that his wounds have healed, so Bernard, in the grey uniformity of his apprehensions, seems mentally detached from, and therefore quietly surprised by, his physical experience:

I cannot keep myself together. I shall sleep. But we must go; must catch our train; must walk back to the station – must, must, must. We are only bodies jogging along side by side. I exist only in the soles of my feet and in the tired muscles of my thighs. We have been walking for hours it seems. But where? I cannot remember. I am like a log slipping smoothly over some waterfall...Houses and trees are all the same in this grey light...Here is the station, and if the train were to cut me in two, I should come together on the further side, being one, being indivisible. But what is odd is that I still clasp the return half of my ticket to Waterloo firmly between the fingers of my right hand, even now, even sleeping. (235)

Belief in the uniformity of matter and existence ("being one, being indivisible"), and the consequent loss of identity, causes Bernard to navigate life as in a dream. Out of this dream he must fabricate, like his counterpart in "Ruins," a sense of mental cohesiveness, of life-progress, but because this process reveals a lack of selfhood, his quotidian existence is dominated by a feeling of detachment, of loss of control, of strangeness. Physical functions therefore seem automatic, instinctive, or driven by others, and awaken Bernard to the odd contrast between modest but continual bodily progress and the terrifying dissolution of subjectivity. In the broad sweep of history, as Louis observes,

"our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness" (225).

C. ATOMISM, ORDERING, AND RELATIVISM

The Library of Babel

Borges's "The Library of Babel" is an unsettling hyperbole of human ignorance. Despite the library's mathematical purity, its overarching principle is one of remorseless chaos owing to its size. A universe of books containing all mathematically possible combinations of 22 letters of the alphabet, the space, the comma and the period, all in uniform 410-page books (40 lines per page, 80 characters per line), would yield 1,312,000 character spaces per book, i.e. $25^{1,312,000}$ (or approximately $10^{1,845,281}$) volumes.³³ As Daniel Dennett reminds us, Stephen Hawking has recently estimated the universe to contain 10^{80} particles; the library, therefore, is "not remotely a physically possible object, but...we can think about it clearly."³⁴ To characterize such vastness, Borges must borrow a description of the universe from Pascal: the library, Borges writes, is a "sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible" (52).³⁵ Every possible book is here, in all possible languages, including "the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue...the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books" (54). The vast majority of books, however, are

³³Borges provides sufficient information to calculate the possible number of books, contrary to John Sturrock's assertion that the library "exceeds our capacity to compute its size." He meant perhaps that we cannot *conceive* of the library's size. Sturrock, *Paper Tigers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 101.

³⁴Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 107-11. Dennett uses Borges's library to help explain the magnitude and complexity of the human genome. In a useful description of the library, Dennett imagines traveling to a *Moby Dick* "galaxy" containing virtually indistinguishable copies of Melville's novel (i.e. the original version with a few typos per page), but this galaxy would already be "Vastly larger than the whole physical universe."

³⁵Pascal describes the universe as "une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part" [an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.] *Pensées* (Mercure de France, 1976). Interestingly, Borges translates the French *infinie* as "fearful" in "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal," *Labyrinths* 189-92.

incoherent jumbles of letters, and the librarians – who symbolize mankind: "Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the product of chance" (52) – frantically search the shelves for meaning, or for the "catalogue of catalogues," a divine text believed to be the perfect synthesis of the entire collection. Meanwhile, in the face of "leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences," one particularly noteworthy book in the narrator's district has received great attention because on the penultimate page, after "a mere labyrinth of letters," one finds the phrase *Oh time thy pyramids* (53). The famous hypothesis whereby a million monkeys each seated at a typewriter will produce, one day, the works of Shakespeare³⁶ takes the form, in this story, of a "blasphemous sect suggest[ing] that the searches should cease and that all men should juggle letters and symbols until they constructed, by an improbable gift of chance, these canonical books" (55-6).

The desperate desire to extract any information from these cryptic volumes leads us to a Borgesian joke: at one time, two pages of apparently "homogeneous lines" were judged, after a century of research, to be written in "a Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabian inflections. The content was also deciphered: some notions of combinative analysis, illustrated with examples of variation with unlimited repetition" (54). Even this most erudite analysis contains the library's chaos in miniature: like these two pages, the library is itself based on combination, variation and (almost) infinite repetition. We remain as ignorant as before. In Borges's universal system of fragments, any interpretation is doomed to be absolutely arbitrary, perfectly relative to any other interpretation, and hence as "valid" as the next. If any relief is to be attained from deriving meanings, it can only come through the temporary relief of process, never the satisfaction of closure in a solution.

Because all combinations exist, the library contains all possible languages and alphabetical orderings, and for every imaginary language one could find (if one were immortal) corresponding dictionaries, encyclopedias and literary works. Therefore, any single permutation of letters, even "dhcmrlchtdj," can mean anything in one of the "secret tongues" of the "divine" library: "No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god.

³⁶The contemporary version of this hypothesis would be a computer's random-number generator producing endless printouts of random letters.

To speak is to fall into tautology" (57). Every word is a microscopic unit that contains endless permutations and possibilities; this presents in different form the same potentially vast suggestive power of small objects we observed in Jensen, Proust, and Woolf. As a result, the librarians, understanding that "everything has been written," see themselves "negated" or inexorably "turned into phantoms." The plenitude of possibility is so overwhelming that the countless books remain "perfectly motionless...useless, incorruptible, secret," while those who roam the endless corridors simply fade into nothingness (58).

As is customary with Borges, this diabolical library was inspired by a broad network of ideas, belief systems and images from literature, religion, and philosophy. Umberto Eco has recently shown that Borges follows in the footsteps of several seventeenth-century linguists who imagined (or created) language machines capable of producing endless combinations of letters and words. This was part of the ongoing search for a "perfect" language, one as close as possible to god. As in Borges, the possible permutations these devices offered soon swelled to impossibly huge numbers. Paul Guldin, for instance, calculated in 1622 the number of possible locutions generated by 23 letters, and Father Marin Mersenne added musical sequences to this process in 1623. Their results were 70,000 billion billion, and 1.1×10^{21} respectively. "Mersenne and Guldin," Eco writes, "were anticipating Borges' Babel Library *ad abundantiam*." ³⁷ Borges mentions these kinds of linguistic experiments in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" and "For Bernard Shaw,"³⁸ but in "On the Cult of Books," he enumerates a subtler and richer group of influences that each depict the world as a text. These include the Moslem belief that "The Book, Al Kitab, is not merely a work of God, like men's souls or the universe; it is one of the attributes of God"; that according to cabalists, the *Sepher Yetzirah* reveals that God "created the universe by means of the cardinal numbers... and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet"; Francis Bacon's claim that

³⁷Umberto Eco. *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 140-1.

³⁸"The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" involves a division of the universe "into forty categories or classes, which were then subdivisible into differences, subdivisible in turn into species. To each class he assigned a monosyllable of two letters; to each difference, a consonant; to each species, a vowel." In "For Bernard Shaw," Borges mentions Raymond Lully's system of concentric disks, John Stuart Mill's fear of the number of musical combinations becoming exhausted, and Kurd Lasswitz's idea of a universal library with all variations of the alphabet. *Other Inquisitions: 1937-52* (Austin: UT Press, 1964) 101-5, 163-6.

God offered us two books, the Scriptures and the natural world, believing that "the world was reducible to essential forms (temperatures, densities, weights, colors), which integrated...in an *abecedarium naturae* or series of the letters with which the universal text is written"; and a particularly rich passage from Léon Bloy that deserves full citation:

There is no human being on earth who is capable of declaring who he is. No one knows what he has come to this world to do, to what his acts, feelings, ideas correspond, or what his real name is, his imperishable Name in the registry of Light...History is an immense liturgical text, where the i's and the periods are not worth less than the versicles of whole chapters, but the importance of both is undeterminable and is profoundly hidden.

Borges paraphrases and interprets: "that incessant book is the only thing in the world: or, rather, it is the world."³⁹

Critics have identified a variety of established concepts and truths that "The Library of Babel" seems to target. To John Sturrock, for instance, it challenges Romantic notions of authorial control over language, and the idea of inherent limits to what is expressible in language.⁴⁰ Gene Bell-Villada provides a more emotional reading: the story is "a parable of human history since the Renaissance," a "symbolic look at man's intellectual exertions," and ultimately a commentary on our sense of anguish, futility, and disillusionment over our ignorance.⁴¹ Donald Shaw confirms how the story satirizes the futility of religious, philosophical and scientific inquiry, but he also notes that the library highlights "the contents of our lives, our own inner experiences, [as] in fact a jumble of sense-impressions, different in every individual and irreducible to any immediate comprehensible pattern."⁴² It is precisely this atomized view of life as a series of impressions that require negotiation and interpretation that Woolf describes in her essays, particularly "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "Modern Fiction," and develops extensively (and beautifully) most notably in *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.

When humans are seen, from Borges's idealist and highly symbolic perspective, as merely perceiving, interpreting, and seeking redemption (what Borges

³⁹Borges. *Other Inquisitions* 116-20.

⁴⁰Sturrock 102.

⁴¹Gene Bell-Villada. *Borges and His Fiction* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1981) 112-4.

⁴²Donald L. Shaw. *Borges' Narrative Strategy* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992) 142-3.

calls "Vindication"), they become archetypalized, mythicized, for they become abstractions operating in a timeless, surreal space. The concrete individualism we assume and rely upon gives way here to a condition in which we float about the labyrinth of signs that is our world, ethereal and fleeting. Borges's construct is fueled in particular by an unsettling double-movement one also finds in "Funes the Memorious"⁴³: it is a world that bears the promise of unlimited possibility, but that opportunity is carried to such calculating and frustrating extremes of equanimity that all literary, interpretive, and epistemological categories are rendered impossible – and indeed meaningless – through a vast averaging mechanism not unlike Woolf's dispersal of "importance" in her atomistic view of existence. Borges's model denies us even the possibility of a unique individuality. His librarians are therefore archetypal agents in a mythical world who discover that their very existence in myth implies their own dissolution. While Borges's library is finite, it is nevertheless incomprehensibly vast: "The Vindications exist...but the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a man's finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero" (55). Knowledge comes at great cost, as the main protagonist in Borges's "Death and the Compass" discovers,⁴⁴ and as we saw with the final revelation in "The Circular Ruins." In "Babel" again the narrator must confront the terrifying truth of his exploration and assessment: ultimately, he suspects "the human species...is about to be extinguished, but the Library will endure" (58). A mythic worldview can reveal the manner in which the mythmaker him or herself is a very small part of that universal scheme, and consequently that he or she must recognize their own infinitesimal role. The very nature of mythopoesis thereby implies its own dissolution.

To The Lighthouse

⁴³Funes "was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence." *Labyrinths* 59-66.

⁴⁴After a series of three murders in "Death and the Compass," the detective Erik Lönnrot predicts, through an extremely astute series of deductions, the time and location of a fourth murder. When he arrives at the appointed place, it turns out that he is himself to be the victim. The murderer, Red Scharlach, seeks revenge on him, and has anticipated that his analytical skills would bring him there. The most telling line with regard to the theme of the dangers of knowledge comes after Lönnrot's assistant provides a neat explanation for the first three murders; Lönnrot's response: "Possible, but not interesting." Borges, *Labyrinths* 76-87.

Mythic narratives are widely regarded as originating out of a desire to subdue and organize the overwhelming natural world into a group of stories, deities and rituals. As Hans Blumenberg notes, myth rationalizes anxiety, substitutes the familiar for the unfamiliar, and names the unnameable: "What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories." He goes on to define "*Homo pictor* [man the painter]" as "the creature who covers up the lack of reliability of his world by projecting images."⁴⁵ Myth, then, is mankind's quintessentially anthropomorphic response to confusion over universal disorder. Both Borges and Woolf explore an ongoing dialectic between chaos and order, between cohesion and dispersion of meaning. Lily's observation late in *To The Lighthouse* that "the whole world seemed to have dissolved in this early morning hour into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality" is reminiscent of Borges's elaborate models for the universe which, like the Library of Babel, are composed of a uniform matter from which its inhabitants seek to derive meaning about the world and their own lives (179). From a variety of perspectives, Woolf and Borges mirror each other's broader intentions of conveying an impulse of mythic ordering, while simultaneously showing the impossibility of universal order, thereby dissolving and dispersing this mythicity. Just as Borges's librarians move from a state of enthusiastic exegesis to an awareness of the absolute futility of such an endeavor, so Woolf's characters, particularly Lily and the Ramsays, are caught between brief moments of unity and a more general feeling of unnegotiable chaos.

Early on in Woolf's novel, Lily's view of existence skips across several different naturalistic metaphors that each characterize our apprehensions (in the Kantian sense) as an expanse of fragments requiring organization and coherence before dispersing once again. At first, she observes that the many thoughts and impressions pouring in on her

danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net—danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree...until her thought which had spun quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off close at hand, and

⁴⁵Blumenberg 6-8.

there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings. (24-5)

Shortly thereafter, she uses an image that provides yet another link in the symbolic fabric of the novel by comparing cognition to the gradual rising and crashing of a wave. Life, she feels, "from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" (47). Life's continuous flow of fragments requires some kind of order or pattern ("In the midst of chaos there was a shape" (161)), and she expresses this desire for order most pragmatically and concretely through her decision-making regarding her painting, in particular where to place the tree in order to achieve balance: "I must move the tree to the middle; that matters – nothing else" (86).

As a counterpart to this continual artistic speculation, Lily often expresses fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge, emotion and the meaning of life in broad atomistic terms. In a particularly rich image early in the novel, Lily links fragmentation to the blind workmanship of bees as well as to ghostliness:

How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (51)

The hexagonal columns and rows one finds in a beehive recall the structure of Borges's library, "an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between...From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of galleries is invariable" (51). Such a link invites a reading of Borges's librarians as mere worker-bees scurrying ignorantly through a uniform structure for a larger purpose of which they are ignorant and over which they have no control. It therefore suggests the idea of an animalistic drive and drone-like instinct in Borges's librarians, which in turn enhances the pathos of their (our) condition. On the other hand, reading Lily's image through Borges's model reinforces the absolute impossibility of her discovering or "knowing" anything about anyone else with any

certainty.⁴⁶ Although we already gain some measure of this impossibility in Woolf, Borges's mathematical approach clarifies the sense of futility Lily feels and often expresses. Borges's model also finds an interesting counterpart in Mr. Ramsay's professional career which, in an alphabetical progression, has reached Q, and which may or may not ever attain the letter R. We now have a curious crossover of letters whereby the infinite possible number of readings of any word or letter in Borges now illuminates the tremendous futility of Mr. Ramsay's metaphysical speculations, and the complete irrelevance of having reached Q, R, or any other letter. This futility is suggested by Woolf by comically juxtaposing Mr. Ramsay's self-aggrandizing meditations about his career with, for example, qualities of resourcefulness under trying conditions at sea: "endurance and justice, foresight, devotion, skill, came to his help. R is then—what is R?" (34). Finally, Lily's image of "haunting" also occurs in Borges, as his narrator surmises that he and his colleagues become mere "phantoms" in a place where everything has been written. Both authors therefore express the relation between human existence and the fabric of the universe, and how the undecidability of the latter can impinge upon the integrity and substance of the former.

In Hermione Lee's useful characterization, Lily's various attempts to paint encapsulate "the immense difficulty of connecting the life of the mind and the world of external signs in any way that is at all meaningful." She goes on to say that "[b]ecause the appropriate utterances or signs are usually so much simpler than the complex of meanings they contain...it is always necessary to understand that 'Nothing was simply one thing.'"⁴⁷ The relativity – and even the sense of arbitrariness – of interpretation that comes from ordering the many fragments of our impressions and thoughts manifests itself particularly when Lily expresses astonishment over the serendipity of her observations. While Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay look at their children playing before dinner, Lily suddenly sees them as "the symbols of marriage, husband and wife." Interestingly, she prefaces this by saying she is surprised such a vision should descend at precisely that instant:

And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them

⁴⁶We must also remember that "certainty" in this context signifies *lasting* and *universal*, for a private interpretation, as Borges shows, is completely personal, arbitrary and temporary in a monistic universe.

⁴⁷Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977) 125.

symbolical, making them representative, came upon them...Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again...and they became...Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. (72)

This moment reinforces Woolf's attempt at equalizing or dispersing our pre-conceived notions of "symbolism" and "importance," whereby certain traditional events, figures or forms are to receive enhanced attentiveness from the author and the reader, to the exclusion of quotidian "trivialities." Lily assigns the Ramsays transcendent meaning at that random instant, but, she reminds us, it is as fortuitous as the meaning we might assign the most trivial of occurrences. Much later in the novel, Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay on the beach, and wonders "Why, after all these years had that [memory] survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank and all after it blank, for miles and miles" (171). Again, the manner in which she expresses surprise at finding a flash of meaning amid long stretches of chaos is reminiscent of Borges's books, and a juxtaposed reading humanizes the librarians' experience while intensifying the sense of arbitrariness in Woolf. As we have seen extensively developed in Proust and Jensen, mythic significance can be ascribed to any object through an act of personal, artistic will, and an emotional need for memorial recovery that traces particular paths, depending on certain aesthetic and philosophical agendas. Borges's extreme model radicalizes the belief in Woolf (which Lily discovers) that there are no preexisting hierarchies of universal meaning anywhere. As Woolf shows through the opposition between Mr. Ramsay and Charles Tansley on the one hand, and Mrs. Ramsay and Lily on the other (and as she brilliantly explored in *A Room of One's Own*), the only pre-established epistemological categories are those imposed by male-dominated academic and political establishments.

The most famous instance of ordering in *To The Lighthouse* occurs in the closing moments of the novel where Lily seems to combine rigorous preparation with impulse to finally make a mark "[w]ith a sudden intensity" down the middle of her canvas (209). Borges's parallel example helps understand Lily's attitude – declaring she has had her vision – as combining resignation and self-conscious irony. At the close of his story, Borges's narrator speculates that the library is unlimited and cyclical: "If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope" (58). There is, needless

to say, little to be glad or hopeful about here. The narrator's final pathos cannot redeem us: the library (i.e. our world) remains an inaccessible and infinitely cryptic assortment of fragments that continually casts our efforts at interpretation back onto our own selves. Like any of Beckett's characters, the only thing to do is to simply continue, and where Borges's narrator finds "elegant hope," Lily has her "vision." Both characters, however, visibly understand the discontinuity, uninterpretability, and arbitrariness of the worlds in which they operate. The closure they offer is therefore a gesture of optimism that is finally self-defeating.

The Waves

Earlier, in discussing cycles, timelessness and the dissolving subject in *The Waves*, we already started encountering instances of atomism and the need for order. Focusing on this issue more specifically, particularly through the lens of Borges's eternal library, reveals a carefully woven structure of interconnected strands of fragmentation which each character in one way or another is intent on negotiating. *The Waves* is particularly well-suited to an assessment of the characters' modes of apprehension, thinking and interpreting the chaos of life given the richness of interior monologue as narrative form. While the three themes in question here – atomism, ordering and relativity – often occurs in discrete stages in *To The Lighthouse*, as though they were incremental realizations in a gradual cognitive/emotional process, *The Waves* offers instead many instances where these themes are encapsulated in a virtually simultaneous movement. One very good example demonstrating this tendency shows Bernard assessing his daily routine with the same detachment Camus used to depict the absurd by describing the mechanical gestures of a man in a telephone booth.⁴⁸ Late in the novel, Bernard remembers the mechanical routine of his life, and being interrupted by the telephone while having breakfast with his wife. He "[takes] up the black mouth," and

⁴⁸"Les hommes aussi secrètent de l'inhumain. Dans certaines heures de lucidité, l'aspect mécanique de leurs gestes, leur pantomime privée de sens rend stupide tout ce qui les entoure. Un homme parle au téléphone derrière une cloison vitrée; on ne l'entend pas, mais on voit sa mimique sans portée: on se demande pourquoi il vit. Ce malaise devant l'inhumanité de l'homme même...c'est aussi l'absurde." ("Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes everything that surrounds them stupid. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; one cannot hear him, but one sees his inconsequential dumb show: one wonders why he is alive. This malaise in the face of the inhumanity of Man himself...is also the absurd"). Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) 31 (my translation).

remarked with what magnificent vitality the atoms of my attention dispersed, swarmed round the interruption, assimilated the message, adapted themselves to a new state of affairs and had created by the time I put back the receiver, a richer, a stronger, a more complicated world in which I was called upon to act my part.

As he leaves his house clapping on his hat, he is conscious of "[striding] into a world inhabited by vast numbers of men who had also clapped their hats on their heads" (261). In this single passage, then, Bernard characterizes his sensations as atoms, marvels at the manner in which he automatically orders and reorders them, and is aware that he is but one of an endless number of similar men, that his assimilation must therefore be merely one of many possibilities: "There are many rooms – many Bernards" (260). This moment combines observations of a metaphysical nature with mundane details of an ordinary routine, a contrast we also find in "Library" with, in contiguous phrases, the conjecture that the library is "the work of a god," and the detail that the library contains "latrines for the seated librarian" (52). With gentle humor, both authors seem to want to call attention to the crude physicality of daily realities that inexorably move us along in life, despite our most lofty spiritual realizations or existential debates. Woolf, however, seems to gravitate more willingly towards the importance of the fixity of the physical, of individual objects, while Borges's quotidian details serve more as vehicles of verisimilitude, only to be ultimately swept away in the whirlwind of his metaphysical dispersal.

There are moments throughout the novel when each of the characters run through their confrontation with the three themes that concern us here. At the opening of Section Six, Louis sits at his workplace feeling "compact," "gathered together," loving office technology for its ability to connect him to cities around the world and "[fuse his] many lives into one." Louis is interested in raising his professional rank and social status, but he also clearly understands his business affairs as the means to forming his own identity and interpreting the meaning of the world: "My shoulder is to the wheel; I roll the dark before me, spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world. If I press on, from chaos making order, I shall find myself where Chatham stood, and Pitt, Burke, and Sir Robert Peel" (167-8). Like Bernard, Louis sees the fragmentary nature of his existence (principally through the nature of his work), understands his role in continually giving it coherence, and then realizes that he will in so doing resemble any number of great forerunners. The more figurative and universalizing counterparts to this passage come in the last two sections. In Section Seven, Louis feels that his destiny "has

been that I remember and must weave together, must plait into one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day. There is always more to be understood" (202). This approaches Borges's symbolism, with Woolf's "threads" as a parallel to his letters and punctuation marks; Louis is yet another librarian, believing there is "always more," understanding his role in relation to the expanses of history. Woolf here accumulates a sensual set of metaphors for what is to be woven, in contrast with the cold abstraction of Borges's sign system, although in Section Eight, Louis's images sound more Borgesian: he asks, "What is the solution...and the bridge? How can I reduce these dazzling, these dancing apparitions to one line capable of linking all in one?" (219) This last desire is reminiscent of the librarians' search for a universal order, for "the catalogue of catalogues," (52) or the "perfect compendium" of the entire library (56). In both cases, the act of seeking out an order comes at the cost of understanding the arbitrariness – even immateriality – of identity. Faced with absolute relativism of interpretation, Borges's librarians see themselves as phantoms, while Louis feels he has "a vast inheritance of experience" packed in him, that he has "lived thousands of years" (167). Once again Borges highlights the arbitrariness of the particular life-trajectory taken by Louis, while Woolf accentuates the microcosmic nature of Borges's librarians, that each one of them individually contains, in a way, every other librarian.

Jinny's apprehension of the world is expressed, at one point in particular, as an interpretation of signs, but her metaphor is a more humanistic counterpart to Borges's in that she understands people's faces as hieroglyphs to be deciphered. Using an image suggesting the crash of a wave continually depositing life-fragments, she says that "[h]ere, in this room, are the abraded and battered shells cast on the shore. The door goes on opening. The room fills and fills with knowledge, anguish, many kinds of ambition, much indifference, some despair." This parallels closely the experience of Borges's librarians, for they too experience a surfeit of knowledge, which exacts a considerable emotional toll: where Jinny sees anguish, ambition and despair, Borges relates that "[w]hen it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books," this produced "extravagant happiness," greed and "vain intention," "inordinate hope," and "excessive depression" (54-5). But while these emotions are in a sense crushed by the metaphysical weight of Borges's system, by his abstract mythicity, Woolf elaborates here the various kinds of emotional responses to this surfeit of knowledge. Jinny realizes that "[t]he

common fund of experience is very deep" and that "[i]n one way or another we make this day, this Friday...The activity is endless. And tomorrow it begins again; tomorrow we make Saturday." The arbitrariness of any individual existence, which in "Babel" is expressed as an infinite number of possible interpretations for any group of letters, finds its counterpart in Jinny's mind as the various paths each person takes in the collective pool of human activity which she here localises in a single room: "Some take train for France; others ship for India. Some will never come into this room again. One may die tonight. Another will beget a child. From us every sort of building, policy, venture, picture, poem, child, factory, will spring. Life comes; life goes; we make life" (176).

As we have seen in "Ruins" and "Babel," when Borges's characters face such a multiplicity of possible orderings they feel their existence thinning out, even disappearing. His story "The Garden of Forking Paths" comes closest to Jinny's observations, in that the main character (a German spy named Yu Tsun who must murder Stephen Albert, a British sinologist) feels that "the humid garden that surrounded the house [where the murder will take place] was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time" (28). Borges and Woolf express similar ideas regarding the infinite number of permutations contained in every moment of life, but Borges locates these variations in separate dimensions (though they can converge on an object in the present), with characters only briefly or vaguely aware of the other realms. Woolf's characters, however, enumerate specific examples of those possibilities, and instead of taking the major metaphysical leap into parallel universes, she steps into the atemporal realm of consciousness; parallel to, but simultaneously outside chronological narrative. Paradoxically, Woolf intertwines her characters' elaborate mental and emotional worlds with their intensely physical self-awareness. Immediately following the above-cited passage, Jinny, as if in need of some specificity, some solidity, must "jump and go...must push out into the heterogeneous crowd...to be buffeted; to be flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea" (176). Her body is her "companion," and although it will be tossed upon life's waves, it provides the security of specific and strong sensations, the smell of roses and violets, the sight of red and blue, the feel of gravel under her shoes. Vivid sensations have a restorative effect for Jinny: "velvet flowers and leaves whose coolness has been stood in water wash me round, and sheathe me, embalming me" (177). The final verb is carefully chosen here, for it can suggest either that these sensations give

fragrance, that they preserve her memory (or the memory of her), or that they are merely slowing down the decay of her body. All three readings, of course, convey the gentle sadness of ephemeral physical beauty. Our bodies may be our only certainty, but even they are part of the atomism of existence.

In strong terms that might easily come from Borges's librarians, Neville feels we must "[o]ppose ourselves to this illimitable chaos...this formless imbecility" (226). Like Jinny, he localizes his thoughts on this chaos in a room which "seems to [him] central, something scooped out of the eternal night." It is a place where he feels "centred" and can be silent, listening to other voices. Where Jinny speaks of "making life," Neville here combines images of a cocoon and of building, saying "we spin round us infinitely fine filaments and construct a system." This system is also life in the broadest possible sense, for it includes Plato and Shakespeare, but "also quite obscure people, people of no importance whatsoever." Woolf again presents life as being composed of infinite pieces – filaments – which, once assembled, highlight the arbitrariness of life's various arrangements. Averaging Plato and Shakespeare into the pool of ordinary humans is reminiscent of the parenthesizing of tragic events in the "Time Passes" chapter of *To The Lighthouse*. "The emphasis," as Neville says, is "always on the wrong place," and later, Bernard will declare: "to see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realise their beauty in itself – how strange!" (179, 263). Borges also uses Shakespeare, as we have seen, to present the theory of pantheism whereby "any man is all men."⁴⁹ In "Babel," every librarian has an equal chance of success at deciphering any book, and Woolf clarifies the idea that the impossibility of literary greatness in Borges's universe is symbolic of the broader equivalence in the "importance" of every human life.

Rhoda's approach to these themes is extremely interesting in the particular cast – the deviance – of her interpretations. Like the other characters, she sees people around her "embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together," but her self-regard is so bleak and diminished that she feels as though she has "no face." Her idiosyncratic interpretation of reality becomes clear when, sitting in a dining-room with the other characters, they see antlers, tumblers and salt-cellars, while she sees "the side of a cup like a mountain and only parts of antlers, and the brightness on the side of that jug

⁴⁹Borges. "The Shape of the Sword," *Labyrinths* 70.

like a crack in darkness with wonder and terror." The striking vividness of her vision soon gives way to more universal, even timeless images. First, as with Jinny's wave metaphor, Rhoda sees behind her companions "a white crescent of foam, and fishermen on the verge of the world are drawing in nets and casting them," an image which concretizes, for instance, Neville's depiction of life as the weaving of filaments. Rhoda even intensifies the idea that the manner in which we gather meaning reaches not only across all forms of experience, but across all time. She hears wind ruffling "the topmost leaves of primeval trees. (Yet here we sit at Hampton Court.) Parrots shrieking break the intense stillness of the jungle. (Here the trams start.)...That is the circumference that I try to grasp as we sit together. Thus I must undergo the penance of Hampton Court at seventy-three precisely." Her gaze is so all-encompassing as to juxtapose (with ironic effect) ordinary contemporary details with images suggestive of ancient myth. And just as the "circumference" of Mrs. Ramsay's desire for fixity is focused for a moment on the dish of fruit in the middle of the dinner table in *Lighthouse*, Rhoda needs the "rolls of bread and wine bottles" and her friends' beautiful faces "with their hollows and prominences" (223). But like the words in Borges's books, these objects of experience yield no meaning, do not bespeak a universal significance, offer no Vindication: they are "far from being allowed to spread in wider and wider circles of understanding that may at last (so I dream, falling off the edge of the earth at night when my bed floats suspended) embrace the entire world." Rhoda must resign herself to going "through the antics of the individual," that is exposing herself to the superficiality of her friends' comments and questions which each "pluck" at her. Rhoda's sense of isolation is self-destructive, even nihilistic, but given the example of the other characters, we can read Rhoda's feelings as an important expression of frustration over the irreducible chaos of existence. "I am not deluded," she declares, and then, echoing the dreamer in Borges's "Ruins," adds: "After all these callings hither and thither, these pluckings and searchings, I shall fall alone through this thin sheet into gulfs of fire" (224).

Bernard clearly plays the dominant role in *The Waves*, particularly with regard to perceiving reality atomistically and continually brooding over how to order and interpret it. Bernard's principal vehicle for organizing his apprehensions, as noted earlier, is phrase-making. He retrieves his experiences "from formlessness with words," (270) converting life into language by cataloguing experience in his ever-present notebook: "under B, butterfly powder, under D, ways of naming death" (291). But he is fully aware

of the arbitrariness of any single reading. Midway through the final section, for instance, Bernard uses images related to the novel's title to express his helplessness over the overwhelming richness of life. First, he opposes internal and external states, overlapping the idea of a room and the mind as that which is inside: "[o]utside the undifferentiated forces roar; inside we are very private, very explicit, have a sense indeed, that it is here, in this little room, that we make whatever day of the week it may be. Friday or Saturday." And then he describes the human soul as "soft," and says that a shell "forms upon [it], nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain" (255). (This connects to a slightly later image of being (or the mind) "grow[ing] rings" and identity becoming "robust" (257, 262).) Bernard believes that his soul was protected by this shell before others, giving him early abilities with language. But he soon warns against the "lure" of perfection, the way we compartmentalize our engagement books and organize our clothes on our bed. Reality is in fact a chaos of fragments that belie such old-fashioned categories: "It is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it...a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights...that rise and sink" (255). The consequence of such an atomized view of life is first a radical sense of undefinability: the "globe of life...has walls of thinnest air," and "[t]here is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream" (255-6). The radical claim that no assemblage of reality-fragments can cohere to form an event is reminiscent of Woolf's admiration for Chekhov's short story "Gusev" in which the reader is hard put to identify the main characters' deaths. The second consequence of Bernard's atomized perspective is arbitrariness, and his terms connect aptly to Borges's library:

Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. Faces recur, faces and faces – they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble – Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole.
(256)

This sounds uncannily like an author lamenting the difficulty with portraying her characters in a manner faithful to her vision. We have seen how Lily expresses this early

in *Lighthouse* in terms of “demons set[ting] on her” (19). The most important difference between Woolf and Borges in this instance is that Woolf makes explicit the symbolic and humanistic value of language by linking Bernard’s “sentence” to the six other characters – the “little fish.” For Bernard, phrases represent the reality around him (perhaps the *only* reality), they become a substitute in his mind for objects and his friends’ identities, to the point where he arrogates himself god-like powers: “Let me then create you” (85). But every time Bernard depicts a part of his experience with a phrase, here expressed as seizing upon a single “catch” – what in Borges is a particular reading of a few letters – implies that countless other aspects of the reality he wants to describe are not included. He cannot find the right order, nor can he find the single example that can represent the whole; in “Babel” this same frustration appears as the conviction that there are an infinite possible number of readings of any word, and that the “catalogue of catalogues” is also inaccessible. Bernard must resign himself to an inevitable sense of incompleteness.

Can life, then, be told? “Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it,” and “if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning?” (267) Both Woolf and Borges present worlds in which the chaos of existence has the potential of being rendered in minute detail through words, but they also call attention to the limited, sequential, and relativistic nature of language. If it cannot render the most ordinary daily activity with satisfactory faithfulness, as the various characters seem to deplore, then it certainly – and tragically – cannot hope to reach into “that which is beyond and outside our own predicament...that which is symbolic, and thus perhaps permanent” (248-9). Faced with such impossibility, Bernard begins “to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement” (238). Moving down the chain of linguistic meaning, Bernard approaches the condition of a librarian in “Babel,” willing to read any incoherent fragment in the hopes of reaching “something unbroken,” (266) the truth or full reality he seeks. Woolf foreshadows such a condition in Section Seven when Bernard, longing for the “one story” to which his thousands of phrases refer, begins to wonder whether there *are* stories. Such a question belongs also in the Library of Babel, where literary genre has no meaning, and where the only order the narrator can find is that the universe repeats itself. Bernard, seeing the limitations of language even when it has been pushed to the extreme point, after a life of dedication and toil, must question the very nature of the story, of the group of phrases we use to make sense of the world. This calling into

question of linguistic form is the radically reductive end point of Bernard's meaning-making explorations. Near the end of the novel, he finds that "the wave has tumbled [him] over," leaving him to "assemble, to heap together, summon my forces, rise and confront the enemy" (293). Again we see images of brokenness, but this time there are no more words. Bernard "ha[s] done with phrases"; he "need[s] a howl; a cry," then silence. Solace finally comes to Bernard in a modest, barren simplicity reminiscent of Beckett: "How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself" (295). This seems a far cry from Borges's repeating universe of books, but the reassuring realm of small things and the solidity of the body are also, as Beckett has also amply shown, endlessly repeating.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: ITALO CALVINO

ay, lo que mi corazón pálido no puede abarcar,
 en multitudes, en lágrimas saliendo apenas,
 y esfuerzos humanos, tormentas,
 acciones negras descubiertas de repente
 como hielos, desorden vasto,
 oceánico, para mí que entro cantando,
 como con una espada entre indefensos.

*ah, what my pale heart cannot embrace,
 in multitudes, in tears scarcely shed,
 and human efforts, anguish,
 black deeds suddenly discovered
 like ice, vast disorder,
 oceanic, to me who enter singing,
 as if with a sword among the defenseless*

Pablo Neruda, "Galope muerto" ["*Dead Gallop*"]

A. MODERNIST MYTHOPOESIS

One of the central overarching mythopoetic threads running through these authors, expressed in simplest form, seems to be that, through their narrators or characters, they each want to recapture the brokenness of their perceptions and memories in order to make them their own. Modernist mythopoesis seems, in fact, to have achieved the paradox of operating privately while seeking to make universal truths emerge. This form of mythic rewriting is less an invocation of ancient traditional stories, and much more a recovery of the fragments of life, personal experiences, memories and emotions

which, in the present (and particularly through the Modernist worldview), seem scattered, unknowable, and fleeting. Through such a perspective, each individual contains leagues of the unknowable, old memories and perceptions that evoke nostalgia or mystery, the promise of understanding or of renewed passion. The Modernist self seems to have exploded into such a vast and timeless multiplicity of images and feelings that the process of recovery seems as important a task in giving meaning to the present as recapturing ancient history is to modern thought. Modernist mythopoesis might therefore be characterized as the act of rewriting – that is, rediscovering and reconceiving – the "myth" of the self.

In a study devoted to Virginia Woolf, T.E. Apter associates Woolf's metaphoric approach in *The Waves* with Proust's on the question of how to capture the beauty of the world while protecting oneself "from the nightmare of looking upon that which is totally distinct from one's self." The answer in Proust, as we have seen, is through the process of making analogies: "The beauty of external objects must be made part of one, not by mitigating the magic of the objects through habit, but by making that magic part of one's self." Drawing comparisons, seeing one object through another, creates what Apter very usefully calls a "process of internal imitation" that effectively draws the external world into one's consciousness.¹ This process of making "reality" one's own through a careful, artistically governed excavation, appears, for instance, in Marcel's need to maintain himself in a state of aesthetic idealization that must continually overcome its cycles of disappointment. Jensen can make the evolutionary logic in nature part of his own sense of selfhood by creating cyclical patterns from his own life, and by locating correspondences between similar kinds of objects or events widely separated in time. Woolf's characters, particularly Lily and Bernard, use their craft (paint and phrases respectively) to reorder and express the flood of images in their minds in order to find contentment, the peace of mind that comes with understanding through creativity. Borges usually depicts this process as one of interpretation, but in several stories his characters also seek to repossess their memories through a careful cognitive and creative act: in addition to the meticulous life-giving task in "Ruins," we also find that Funes, endowed with perfect memory, reconstructs some of his dreams and past days. Similarly, in the second before Jaromir Hladik is executed in "The Secret Miracle," he receives an entire

¹Apter 112.

year from God to rework and complete a drama in verse which he had hoped would redeem him.² In each author, then, the mythopoetic recovery is driven by a sensibility that has fundamental personal meaning to the narrator, a mode which immediately shapes the recovered fragments of experience into meaningful shapes or groups of meaning. In Proust and Woolf, this sensibility is primarily aesthetic, in Jensen it is closer to evolutionary theory and naturalism, and in Borges it is primarily ontological. By whatever means, these journeys through the self maneuver in each case according to "mythic" parameters, primarily in an atemporal, figurative, and atomistic mode of discourse that harks back to ancient narratives while remaining purely modern in its approach.

POSSIBLE COMPARATIVE READINGS

One can envisage many different combinations of authors to illustrate the Modernist mythmaking strategy of rhetorical engagement and self-resistance. While Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges may engage in mythopoesis using many similar narrative techniques, and covering very similar thematic territory, they complement one another by each prioritizing a different narrative vehicle for resisting the epistemological dispersal revealed through that mythic discourse. As we have seen, Proust stresses and problematizes figurative language, while Jensen foregrounds and disperses the notion of a mythic genre, and Woolf and Borges atomize and relativize both meaning and subjectivity. In addition to these features, the great number of often surprising parallels between these four authors invites us to speculate on the consequences of reading one author's strategy across into its neighbors. I shall briefly explore three such possibilities.

Jensen's challenge to genre, for instance, suggests a new way of understanding the difficulty of categorizing *The Waves*. The generosity of Jensen's appellation "myth" provides a structural exemplification of his notion that every facet of existence is worthy of genealogical recovery through the process of remembering and/or reimagining origins. Many of his "myths" do in fact portray such a leap into the past, and when we encounter short stories or journalistic vignettes among them that undertake no

²Borges, *Labyrinths* 88-94.

such "mythic" quests, we must understand this tension in genre as the expression of how Jensen intends his mythic gaze to be universally applicable. The mythic tradition and its awesome legacy can overpower an artist such as Jensen; by thinning out the genre of "myth," he diffuses and democratizes that tradition in order to remain a "mythmaker" while maintaining his own self-worth as an individual and as an artist.

The highly experimental character of *The Waves* might also be read as a deliberate means of resisting the dissolution of selfhood and of knowledge which it so richly portrays. Woolf's novel of interior monologues defies easy categorization. It portrays characters and their psychological and social development in chronological life-stages. At the same time, it is deeply allegorical, both through the symbolic interplay between the interludes and the main chapters, and the abstractness of its meditations on the nature of life. This multiplicity or uncategorizability serves the purpose of distancing this work from traditional aesthetic boundaries, and may reflect Woolf's desire to remain free to engage in mythopoetic themes and discourse without having to adhere to certain (or indeed any) preestablished narrative parameters. Its uniqueness from the point of view of genre seems to fulfill the important function of keeping it epistemologically elusive, that is, safe from the essentializing and reductive modes of thought which Woolf's characters quite clearly want to avoid.

Another possible intersection occurs between the fragmentation of meaning in Woolf and Borges, and the several instances of multiple selves in Proust. We have seen how Proust's multiplication of Albertine exemplified the problem of metaphoric dispersal. With this comparative reading, however, Proust's multiplicity of the self seems to manifest a disintegration of meaning at its most fundamental level, namely at the level of the self. Proust is not as extreme as Borges in dissolving subjectivity: while Proust certainly casts us into a realm in which the present must continually be weighed against the past, the hypothetical, or the imaginary, Marcel is no dreamer from "Ruins" suddenly believing himself to be but a fiction, a projection in someone else's mind. However, juxtaposing *the Recherche* with Borges and Woolf suggests that Proust is moving towards a similar kind of deep attack on epistemological and subjectivistic certainty. Marcel's "plusieurs mois" and "dix Albertines" are more than an attempt to split the individual into a series of different impressions and interpretive possibilities which collectively might, like an accumulation of analogies, render the person more fully. They seem rather, in this context, to produce a more profound atomizing effect that destabilizes

the cohesiveness not only of interpretation (Proust shows ample evidence of the relativity of perspectives, particularly across time), but of the interpreting subject him or herself. Marcel may therefore be in as fragmented a state as Bernard or Rhoda from *The Waves*, aware not only of the fleeting nature of his perceptions and interpretations, but of the deeper unknowability of his own consciousness.

Finally, one might also approach figuration in Jensen or Woolf with the skepticism of Proustian double-play. In what sense are their metaphors (or metaphoric structures) like Proust's, intended to appear to reach towards their rhetorical "goal," while undercutting their own intentions, and could such duplicity reflect a self-conscious deflection of mythic chaos? Woolf's larger metaphoric structure of the beach interludes in *The Waves*, for instance, does seem to open such an avenue of interpretation. The interludes are set against each of their nine respective chapters, acting as a wonderfully complex interpretive platform from which to draw analogies to the experiences of the six main characters. The interludes, in other words, encourage a metaphoric pairing between the natural scene and the characters' lives. Proust's figurative resistance, however, calls attention to the fundamentally open-ended aspect of this textual interplay. The reader is inspired to find meaningful interpretive links between the two narrative tiers, to find, in a sense, a fusion between nature and the characters that might support – even redeem – those characters in their struggles. But we end up somewhat adrift, owing principally to the dissolution into which the characters' own perceptions gradually fall: the promise of stability of meaning suggested by the nature of metaphor thereby falls away. The breaking of the wave at the close of the novel can in this sense signal the final impossibility of fixing interpretation, of arriving at a neat sense of fusion between nature and humanity. The waves will continue to break on the shore, and the sun will rise and set again, all with perfect equanimity. The pervading mood at the close of *The Waves*, then, is one of a feeling of impossibility, of resignation, and of a final challenge to mortality, to the final breakup of the self. Woolf's metaphoric device can thus be read as appearing to offer interpretive resolution and aesthetic fixity, but reveals itself to be fundamentally dispersive in a way that, like in Proust, can only push us forward to additional cycles of creative and meaning-making acts.

B. ITALO CALVINO: TOWARDS A POSTMODERN MYTHOPOESIS

The changing role of myth from ancient times up to the Modernist era is aptly represented by changing conceptions and interpretations of the labyrinth. The classical labyrinth, the oldest image of which stems from ca. 1200 B.C., is a circular or square geometrical shape with a single entrance, a path leading inevitably to the center, switching back and forth past the center several (usually either seven or eleven) times, and a single way out. Beginning in the 15th century, labyrinths were depicted in sculptures, gardens, or allegorical images as more complex mazes with multiple pathways and dead ends in which travelers could easily lose their way. The significance of labyrinths also developed, in that the image of the Cretan labyrinth from the myth of the Minotaur appeared in cathedrals throughout Europe (including Chartres, Reims and Ravenna) as symbols of spiritual quest and rebirth. During the 17th and 18th centuries, images of labyrinths were also used as symbols of the complexity of the world, and allegories of the journey towards matrimony.³ In the Modernist era, labyrinths are both alluded to explicitly, and reimagined as mental constructs. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus is of course aptly named after the original Cretan labyrinth builder, but in Joyce the labyrinth is primarily linguistic, conceptual, and textual. Kafka imagines labyrinthine paradigms on both a concrete and a mental plane of meaning. In the maddening court system in *The Trial* and the endless passageways in "The Burrow," the physically maze-like translates into the tortuous psychic and emotional landscape of the main characters. *Death in Venice* illustrates the cognitive dimension of this physical structure particularly well when Gustav von Aschenbach is led, out of desire for the young boy Tadzio, to pursue him through the hot streets of Venice. Von Aschenbach loses his way in the city of canals and bridges, of cul-de-sacs and obscure passageways; he is "intoxicated in head and heart, and his steps followed the instructions of the demon whose pleasure it is to crush under foot human reason and dignity." When a gondolier's cry receives a "distant answer from out of the silent labyrinth as if by mysterious arrangement," we know that the maddening topography of Venice has become a map of von Aschenbach's obsession: "That was Venice, that coquettish, dubious beauty of a city, half fairy tale and half tourist trap" (46-7).

³See Jaskolski.

It is in part because of their brilliant and highly self-conscious narrative reimaginings of the labyrinthine that Borges and Italo Calvino have rightly been singled out and admired in many discussions of postmodernism. One of the key strategies of Modernist authors was to foreground the artistic devices they used to create their work; in a postmodern mode of writing, however, that theme explodes into what Matei Calinescu has called "epistemological nihilism," whereby the work of art *and* the "real" world are each portrayed as contrivances of one kind or another.⁴ In Brian McHale's useful formulation, the move from Modernist to postmodern writing has shifted the dominant from epistemological ("what is there to be known? who knows it?...how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another and with what degree of reliability?") to ontological ("what is a world? what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?...what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?")⁵ Despite a degree of epistemological and narrativistic elusiveness challenging attempts at a rigorous separation, I would like to briefly examine the possibility of reading Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as a successor, in the context of the progression this study outlines, to Borges's elaborate labyrinthine constructs.

Although known for the metafictional and metaphysical extremism of his models, Borges has been characterized as a "transitional figure between modern and postmodern literature. Whereas determinism, manifesting itself in his work as closure and textual unity, connects him to literary modernism, his self-conscious narrative convolutions point toward postmodern literary techniques."⁶ Though this division between literary movements should be understood in relative rather than absolute terms, Borges's work does in fact maintain a paradox between a more tradition-bound narrative closure and a radical thematic and narrativistic openness. Indeed, Borges seems to have cast mythmaking (to name only the theme that concerns us here) into its extreme endpoint by equalizing the potential meaning of every facet of experience, both ancient

⁴Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1987) 305.

⁵Brian McHale, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing," *Approaching Postmodernism*, Ed. Douwe W. Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986) 58, 60.

⁶Thomas P. Weissert, "Borges's Garden of Chaos Dynamics," *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, Ed. N. Katherine Hayles (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1991) 224.

and modern, both "symbolically charged" and trivial. In *Invisible Cities*, published sixteen years after Borges's *Ficciones*, Calvino seems to offer the quintessential postmodern expression of the kind of mythopoesis I have traced here. *Invisible Cities* is highly experimental and epistemologically dispersive, and yet Calvino seems (perhaps inevitably) to pull the mythmaking pendulum back slightly from the extremities of Borges's investigations.

Borges, we have seen, sets up mechanisms that prove to be so daunting and inscrutable as to leave no possibility of egress for those trapped within. Though he frequently invokes names of famous (and less famous) men and women, his main characters are most often anonymous victims of vast paradigms who become archetypal. The organizing principles behind *Invisible Cities*, however, are more narrowly mythopoetic: Calvino's work is a kind of elaborate reconception of Thomas More's *Utopia* as well as of Marco Polo's *Il Milione* (Trans. *The Travels of Marco Polo*); *Invisible Cities* is also structured around reimagined meetings between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. Like Borges, Calvino invokes their image, using them as figures, as symbolic narrative devices around which to build his fantastic imaginings. Yet Calvino maintains his focus on them at great length, and seems to weigh quite heavily on their historical currency, on the ways in which they provide a conduit for meditating on the nature and historical progression of cities. As we soon discover, everything in the Khan's empire, including himself, is only an "emblem among emblems,"⁷ a notion that certainly harks back both to Borges and to Emerson.⁸ But Calvino is interested in reconceiving the historical "myth" of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, who become both god-like arrangers and mere shadows in the maelstrom of imaginary reconfigurations in their mental "empires." Their explorations constantly pull them towards the inferno of the Final City, intended to symbolize the end of our modern cities as well as the end of knowledge. And while Borges offers few (if any) control mechanisms against the increasing atomization of our worldview, Calvino offers the possibility of resisting the inferno through careful scrutiny, through play and imagination, and through instinctive human energy and effort. There is, it seems, a sense of balance between a "mythic" insight into the nature of the

⁷Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974) 23.

⁸ "We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; women, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays and Poems*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: J.M. Dent, 1992) 189.

universe, and a constant need for controlling the spread of the unknowable by emotional and cognitive means. In this regard, Calvino, while unquestionably postmodern, is closer to Woolf in terms of the continual need for cycles of mythopoetic re-creation, and, hopefully, recuperation.

Like Jensen, Marcel, Lily, Bernard and Borges's librarians, Calvino's two main characters, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, are here cast into a mythic realm of privileged vision which they too must seek to manage and comprehend. Through this work, Calvino provides appropriate symbolic continuity from Borges's labyrinths to the City as metaphors for human cognition and consciousness in both Modernist and postmodern texts. In Borges, cities often become synonymous with labyrinths, particularly in a story such as "The Immortal."⁹ *Invisible Cities* moves further into the specific mechanics of cities without losing any of Borges's metaphorical power. In Calvino, architecture blends with the abstract, and human desire, emotion and imagination with the metaphysically detached. The "escape clause" we have observed in the previous authors appears here as a complex self-deconstruction by anticipation; at the end of his sojourn through the Khan's empire of signs (to borrow Barthes' titular phrase), Calvino leaves the reader with oversimplified and hence deeply ambiguous advice for evading the inferno into which our cities and our minds seem to be disappearing.

C. *INVISIBLE CITIES*

In *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, Calvino states that of all his works, *Invisible Cities* is the one where he feels he has been able to say the most, to "concentrate all my reflections, experiments, and conjectures on a single symbol."¹⁰ A few years earlier, in a lecture given at Columbia University, Calvino called this work

something like a last love poem addressed to the city, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there. It looks, indeed, as if we are

⁹ Borges, *Labyrinths* 105-18.

¹⁰Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (Harvard UP, 1988) 71.

approaching a period of crisis in urban life; and *Invisible Cities* is like a dream born out of the heart of the unlivable cities we know.¹¹

Invisible Cities consists of two parallel narratives: the frame story tells of an old Kublai Khan whose empire has become too vast, and who needs Marco Polo as his emissary to travel and report what he sees. Their exchanges are first conducted with hand signals and objects, then words as Polo gradually masters the Tartar language, then back to hand signals and finally silent meditation. These "conversations" are woven into the second tier, short vignettes of fifty-five fantastic cities in eleven groups of five, which alternate and interlace in descending spirals of 5-4-3-2-1, ever approaching the void – what later becomes the Dantean inferno – of zero. The eleven groups are named after particular themes: in order, they are Cities and Memory, Desire, Signs, Thin Cities, Trading Cities, Cities and Eyes, Names, the Dead, the Sky, Continuous Cities, and Hidden Cities. Calvino's unsummarizable work (an elegy? parable? novel?) acts as a prism for many conceptual, architectural, and imaginative questions about the City, moving effortlessly from the allegorical to the philosophical to the whimsically surreal. But *Invisible Cities* is most fundamentally a profound meditation on the nature of thought and our capacity to make meaning of the universe. Kublai Khan is old and wants to distill his vast, crumbling empire into patterns that would allow him to finally "possess" it, as he says. He seeks to understand his domain as well as his own mind, and represents not only our own sense of bafflement inside our cities, but our most fundamental need to make meaning of the chaotic conditions we have inherited. Most significantly, he is, like all the various main characters we have examined here, intent on recuperating an ordered sense of the "reality" that now seems too fragmented, too vast in its possibilities. Like Marcel, Jensen, Lily, and Bernard, the Khan is old and looking back over the "endless, formless ruin" of his experiences, his life's empire, to see what can be understood, what can "escape the termites' gnawing" (5-6). In a sense, he must revisit the myth of his own empire, and distill from it patterns of meaning that can resist the decay and corruption of his own mind.

Stepping into *Invisible Cities* is like walking into a childhood dream. It is most importantly a work of great imagination and fancy, of the instinctive and creative impulses of humanity that by the end of the work will surface as perhaps our only means

¹¹Italo Calvino on *Invisible Cities*," *Columbia*8 (1983): 40-1.

of redemption. Three of the finest examples: The city of Armilla (Thin Cities 3) is without walls, ceilings or floors, only water pipes that "rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the floors should be: a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts, overflows... You would think the plumbers had finished their job and gone away before the bricklayers arrived" (49). In Ersilia (Trading Cities 4), people attach strings of different colors from building to building to denote relationships of blood or trade or authority; when the strings become so dense as to impede movement, the city is dismantled and the inhabitants leave only the strings behind on their supports, "webs of intricate relationships seeking a form" (76). And Despina (Cities and Desire 3) can be reached in two ways, by ship or by camel. Because the city is built between two hills by the ocean, it looks like a camel if you arrive by ship, buildings draped across the valley like a saddle; from the opposite side, a camel driver sees the city's skyscrapers "at the horizon of the tableland," and the swaying of the camel makes the city seem like a ship. "Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts" (18).

Through these wonderful fantasies, Calvino (and the Khan) is troubled by the labyrinthine aspect to cities (and, by extension, to thought), namely the threat of dispersal and uniformity of meaning, of the dangers of uninterpretability we saw particularly acutely in Woolf and Borges. Several cities depict a realm of frightening homogeneity, particularly among the Continuous Cities. When one arrives at Trude, for instance, it appears identical to the city one has just come from. Any traveler soon realizes that "the world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes" (128). The last city in this group, Penthesilea, is reminiscent of the permanent disorientation one finds in Kafka: "You advance for hours, and it is not clear to you whether you are already in the city's midst or still outside it." Penthesilea's architecture is bland and uncertain, its inhabitants self-contradictory when asked for directions. The traveler finally gives up wondering whether, "hidden in some sac or wrinkle of these dilapidated surroundings there exists a Penthesilea the visitor can recognize and remember, or whether Penthesilea is only the outskirts of itself." The final question in this section, aptly expressing the postmodern urban dilemma, is reminiscent of science-fiction landscapes one finds in films such as Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, George Lucas's *THX 1138*, or Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*: "outside Penthesilea does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass

from one limbo to another, never managing to leave it?" (156-8) Postmodernity refracts reality – both textual and urban – into networks of signs so dense and kaleidoscopic that we too must look for "wrinkles" or "edges" in the hope of finding human movement, shape and direction. Since we cannot encompass the system as a whole, just as Kublai Khan cannot embrace his empire in his mind, the shadowy divisions and interrelations within a small sub-section, it would seem, are all we have.

Many of Calvino's imaginary cities are binary, either in physical structure or according to a traveler's perceptions and interpretations. There are cities whose definition – their "reality" – changes according to the viewer's attitude. If one enters the city of Zemrude (*Cities and Eyes* 2) looking up, for instance, one notices window sills, flapping curtains, fountains; sooner or later, however, one's gaze will be pulled down to the gutters, manhole covers, fish scales and wastepaper. "It is the mood of the beholder which gives the city...its form" (66). Other cities have clear physical demarcations. Sophronia (*Thin Cities* 4), for instance, is half amusement park and half stone, marble and cement – the banks, factories and schools. Every year, half the city relocates to another place, but it is the amusement park that stays, and the businesses, hospitals and refineries that are dismantled and loaded onto trailers (63). The city of Moriana (*Cities and Eyes* 5) is more familiar to us because it suggests socio-economic or racial divisions: on one side there are beautiful glass villas, coral columns and alabaster gates; on the other, rusting sheet metal, sooty pipes and fading signs. Moriana "consists only of a face and an obverse, like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can neither be separated nor look at each other" (105).

As *Invisible Cities* progresses, the polar oppositions in the cities become enmeshed, dialectical, as if *resisting* a deconstructive reading. In Raissa (*Hidden Cities* 2), city of sadness, for instance, an "invisible thread...binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence" (149). Another city, Marozia (*Hidden Cities* 3), is poised between two ages, the age of the rat and the age of the swallow, and sometimes, "if you move along Marozia's compact walls, when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear. Then, an instant later it has already vanished." One of Marozia's two cities is always about to free itself from the other (154-5). This question is complicated when we consider the tighter weave of opposing forces in Berenice (*Hidden*

Cities 5), the last city, in which, layered like an onion, the just and unjust city continually alternate and move forward by harboring the seeds of their own negation. If one looks closely enough, one can see the first tiny point of the opposite city beginning to expand. But Berenice is not merely a back-and-forth sequence of opposites: "all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable" (163).

It is of great significance that spying Marozia's other side – that is, learning how to disentangle a thickly intertwined reality – depends on spontaneous and collective behavior, the appearance of nonchalance:

Perhaps everything lies in knowing what words to speak, what actions to perform, and in what order and rhythm; or else someone's gaze, answer, gesture is enough; it is enough for someone to do something for the sheer pleasure of doing it, and for this pleasure to become the pleasure of others: at that moment, all spaces change, all heights, distances; the city is transfigured, becomes crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly. But everything must happen as if by chance, without attaching too much importance to it, without insisting that you are performing a decisive operation. (155)

Within Calvino's magisterial mathematical and metaphysically speculative text, the best way to locate meaning in a city may simply be through fundamental human impulses, emotions, instincts, and communal feelings, rather than exhaustive and perhaps overwrought interpretive modes, with their restrictive or reductive categories. "Meaning" as I have just used it acquires a double sense of both contributing to our knowledge, as well as being an integral part of the way we live. This attitude is reflected in the famous exchange between Polo and the Khan in which Polo describes a bridge stone by stone, saying that it is not supported by any individual stone but by "the line of the arch that they form." When Khan tells Polo that he does not want to hear about the stones, that it is only the arch that matters to him, Polo replies: "Without stones there is no arch" (82). Polo, in a sense, reminds the Khan of the importance of the particular – the detailed, the accidental – in attaining a higher cognitive and emotional awareness of the whole.

Invisible Cities is aptly named, for it depicts the irreducibility of patterns. We have, in a sense, the double-bind of a mind trying to define and control the infinite permutations of a creation – the City – itself a quintessential manifestation of human thought. The mind is therefore faced with itself, but after having been translated into and

back from an extremely complex language. Kublai Khan's attempt to find, in his empire, "the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing" (6) seems impossible not merely because of the endlessly rich variety of cities in his realm, but because neither signs nor referents can be trusted. In Hypatia (Cities and Signs 4), every word denotes its opposite: if you want the sage, you will be shown children playing, if you want music, you must go to the graveyards, and to leave by ship, you must climb the citadel's highest pinnacle. "There is no language without deceit" (48). And the next city in this category, Olivia (Cities and Signs 5), undercuts even the reliability of objects, where the need to describe something beautiful requires "metaphors of soot, the creaking of wheels...sarcasm. Falsehood is never in words," we are told, "it is in things" (62).

The Khan's search for a system that can synthesize the endless concatenation of signs in his empire – i.e. his mind – or indeed all possible empires, leads him to the game of chess. This episode is absolutely central not only to this work, but in the sense that it encapsulates – and accentuates – the dynamic of Modernist mythmaking I have traced in this study. In the first half of this exchange (which frames the penultimate chapter of *Invisible Cities*), the Khan, a keen chess player, reasons that a game with a fixed system of rules can control the dispersive process that his meditations have set in motion: "If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains." Every position of the pieces on the chessboard, he reasons, can symbolize a particular city: "a knight could stand for a real horseman, or for a procession of coaches, an army on the march, an equestrian monument: a queen could be a lady looking down from her balcony, a fountain, a church with a pointed dome, a quince tree." At first, therefore, each time Marco Polo returns from one of his journeys, he arranges the chess pieces in a way that seeks to represent the cities he has just visited. The Khan then "contemplat[es] these essential landscapes, [reflecting] on the invisible order that sustains cities." Soon, Polo no longer even needs to travel (or the Khan no longer needs to imagine Polo traveling): they must merely play endless games of chess to reveal the city's possible forms. This soon leads the Khan to wonder about the closure in the process:

Each game ends in a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the true stakes?...By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform

treasures were only the illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness...(121-3)

In this first movement, an attempt at controlling the disarray of the Khan's thoughts appears to work, until its overreductiveness is revealed as an emptiness when its logic is played out.

In the second movement, this overreductiveness explodes towards its opposite pole when Marco Polo points out an additional – and terrifying – problem with the Khan's generator of patterns. The chessboard is inlaid with ebony and maple, and every square of wood on the chessboard has miniscule flaws and features that bespeak a particular history behind the tree from which it came: "The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed," says Polo, "was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist..." Polo continues this train of reasoning a little further until "The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows..." (132). Where the game of chess first seemed to provide order, it soon reveals two opposing forces: the enigma of emptiness, that is, the indeterminacy of overreductiveness, and the mere illusion of order masking a return to chaos. The impossibility of the chessboard as controlling device was foreshadowed in at least two ways: the progression of themes from Memory and Desire to Continuous and Hidden Cities, and the changing mode of the two men's conversations, moving from pantomime to articulate language and finally back to silent meditation. The truth of the city, indeed the larger Truth we seek, seems to be made of too fine a grain to be caught in the web of words.

This moment is in many ways similar to confrontations with chaos in Proust, Jensen, Woolf and Borges, only it accentuates and clarifies the dilemma in some important respects. In each of the works we have examined, characters sought solace in the fixity of a single object, attempted to forestall the disintegration of their perceptions by focusing on a small fragment in the hopes that it might solidify and synthesize their worldview. As we progress from one author to the other, the fixity of that still point is increasingly unstable, and suggests that the fixed point is itself on a spiral of indeterminacy. In Jensen, certain personal experiences or events in nature reveal that they

are part of a universal cycle of movement that reaches back into prehistory. Despite the element of chance behind the points of origin, and the cyclicity of some of his temporal structures, he generally conveys the sense of a stable point of origin connecting to one or several other distant points, many of them equally stable. The depth and ungraspability of the world within the object that underlies Proust's involuntary memory finds its expression in the almost obsessive multiplicity and excessiveness of his analogies. This signals that in addition to establishing links across time, each object is *in itself* fundamentally unknowable, at least to a depth Marcel believes is desirable or possible. Woolf's characters fight against the flux of time that threatens to continually undo and disperse the daily elements of life. In a sense, however, they are already aware of the infinite multiplicity of "reality," and they do their best to gather these "gnats" (as Lily Briscoe calls them) into wholes which they understand are temporary. Borges reveals the extreme endpoint of such a progression, from the Aleph that contains all space and time, to the Zahir that embodies the infinite possible trajectories of every object and being in the universe.

Calvino situates his response to the chaos of apprehension which I have called "mythic" in a zone which might justifiably be placed, on the continuum outlined above, somewhere between Woolf and Borges. Despite a radical Borgesian dispersal of time, subjectivity, and fixed meaning, there is in Calvino the desire and the possibility of embracing and attempting to reorder – or at least control – the multiplicity of experience. In Calvino's rendition of the problem, the elements of the empire in question – the cities of the Khan's mind – are in a sense to be textualized and read with great perspicacity, dedication, and imagination. Every city in this work is bipolar, either structurally or thematically, suggesting a constant need to balance interpretation between opposing sides. In the closing moments of *Invisible Cities*, all Kublai Khan has is an atlas showing not only cities in his empire, but future cities, from Constantinople to Amsterdam to New York. The atlas, reminiscent of Borges's library, reveals that the "catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins." In the final pages of the atlas, Polo sees "an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without shape" (139). The atlas reinforces the link between cities and human imagination, showing New Atlantis, Utopia, and Oceana; it even contains "cities that menace in nightmares and maledictions:

Enoch, Babylon, Yahooiland, Butua, Brave New World" (164). Calvino's vision climaxes in a whirlpool suggested by Dante, closing with an oft-cited passage characterizing the modern condition as an inferno, and that we have two ways of escaping it:

The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (165)

Calvino shows that learning to make this distinction comes from an awareness of oppositionalities in the city's substructure, not just physically, but more in terms of modes of meaning and emotion that can be recognized. In the postmodern era, relations between signs supercede pre-established origins and meanings. Calvino's work exemplifies this condition, and eloquently and poetically maintains the Modernist mythopoetic desire for a deconstructive reading of the quotidian, for reexamining the self-enfolding dynamics of our lives which, paradoxically, seem to gravitate around the simplest things. For all of Calvino's brilliant and highly abstract metaphysical manipulations, he seems to value most fundamentally the power of our basic humanity: the value we place in serendipity, our humor, our imagination, our creative impulses, our instinct for play and for creating emotional meaning in the world. Calvino has already deconstructed and reconstructed his cities for us, leaving us to behold the poetry of forms and ideas. Despite the unspeakability of the answers we seek, it may be that continually mapping contrasts of desire, memory and feeling can help us understand urban progress and, more fundamentally, the geography of our own minds.

At one point, Polo and the Khan manage to prove, through logical inference, that their cities exist while they do not. The imaginary, in other words, has not only become equivalent to our material agency, but has supplanted it. We may ourselves feel so out of place in our postmodern spaces, our labyrinthine networks of relations and our mental topographies, that they seem to be dreaming us. If so, Calvino suggests, we may gain some clarity and reassurance through the fecundity of our imagination, and the continual tug of war between groups of atoms that, slowly, produce areas of coherence in our memories, wrinkles and lines we can actually read, pieces of ourselves we can actually recover.

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"The Beginning and End of Literature: Mythmaking in Johannes V. Jensen and Jorge Luis Borges."

Edda, University of Oslo, Vol. 4 (1998)

"Modernist Self-Management in Johannes V. Jensen's *Myter*."

Scandinavian Studies, Brigham Young University, Vol. 70 (Spring 1998)

"The Division of the Text: Folio and Quarto Versions of *King Lear*."

The Undermountain Review, Sheffield, MA (1991)

PRESENTATIONS

"Johannes V. Jensen and Marcel Proust In Search of Lost Time."

- Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study Conference, UW, Seattle, April 29-May 2, 1999.

"The Living Death of Narrative: Point of View Shifts in Duras's *L'Amant* and Ondaatje's *The English Patient*."

- "Living Narrative" Conference, University of Washington, April 16, 1999.

"Perpetuating Mythic Limbo in Proust's *Recherche*."

- Carolina Conference on Romance Literatures, University of North Carolina, March 14-16, 1999.

"Mapping the Mind in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*."

- "The Nature of the Literary" Conference, University of Oregon, Jan. 28-30, 1999.

"Vigilance Inside the Inferno: Some Lessons from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*."

- Western Humanities Conference, "Cities on the Edge," ASU, Oct. 22-4, 1998.

"Making 'Dry' English Material More Dynamic." Creative strategies for English teachers.

- 1998 PNAIS All Schools Conference, Bellevue, WA, Oct. 9, 1998.

"The Beginning and End of Literature: Mythmaking in Johannes V. Jensen and Jorge Luis Borges."

- Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study Conference, ASU, Tempe, AZ, April 30-May 2, 1998.

"I Do Not Know Which Of Us Has Written This Paper: Dissolution of Authorship in Roland Barthes and Jorge Luis Borges."

- Graduate Colloquium: "Dangerous Liaisons: Politics, Culture, Academia," University of Washington, April 17, 1998.

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Dissertation Fellowship, University of Washington, 1998-99

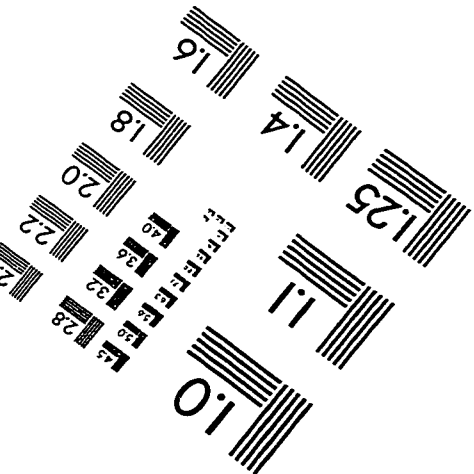
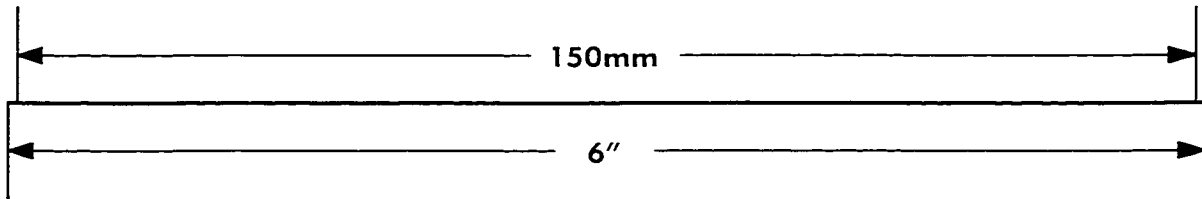
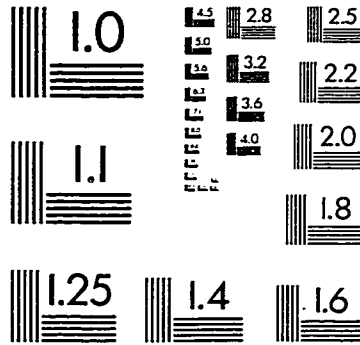
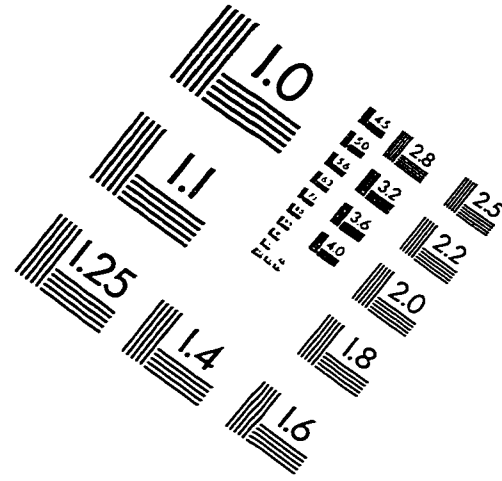
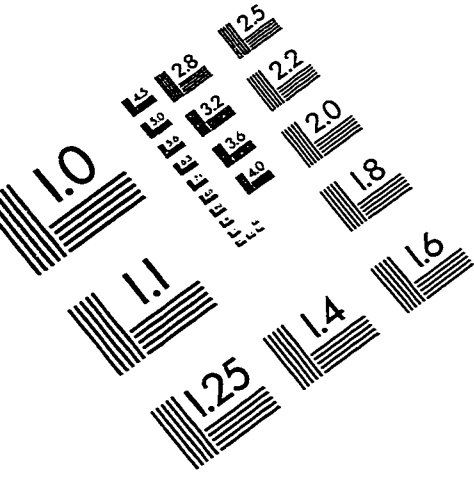
P.F. Decker Memorial Scholarship Award, Middlebury College, 1993

Standard Oil of California Scholarship, Stanford University, 1985, 1986

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