The war between the poets and the philosophers, out of which Western literary theory began, is with us still. Though it has taken many forms, it is there now, stimulating yet new varieties of dispute. As a war, it continues to partake of the oppositional force of the Platonic dialectic, forcing us to choose which of the two ways we will accept as a path of knowledge, or which of the two we shall reject for having no valid claim to lead us there.

In recent times we have become increasingly aware of that other enemy of the poet since antiquity—the historian. Plato himself saw the poet as substituting his illusions for empirical reality as well as for philosophical truth; indeed, if the phenomenal world of experience was an inadequate imitation of universal truth, still its small particularities required, as a first step toward truth, a fidelity that the distortions of the artist invariably thwarted. Thus, at the level of worldly experience, the poet had to overcome the empirical reality of the historian even before he came up

When I originally delivered a version of this paper in Evanston, Illinois, in spring 1981, at a conference celebrating the opening of the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University, it had the benefit of a stimulating, though not altogether friendly, critique by Paul de Man. This is probably what it deserved since it was in large measure aimed at him and his enormous influence on recent discussions of romantic and modern theories and literature. A second critique by M. H. Abrams completed the spectrum of alternative possibilities in recent considerations of this subject. These create extremes for me to try to stand between.
against the rational purity of the philosopher. We know that Plato had good reason to distrust the influence of the poet, whose readers would allow his authority to spill over into history and philosophy. What role could there be for those devoted to describing the experiential world around us or speculating reasonably about the ontological world beyond, if the mythologies of Homer were to serve also as both source of fact and guide to metaphysics and morality? For Aristotle, who had a greater commitment to worldly phenomena, the crucial line of distinction was that drawn between history and poetry, between the world of what is and the world of what (aesthetically) may be in accordance with the laws of probability and necessity.

In these distinctions and antagonisms we find the intense effort, arising out of a growing awareness of science and philosophy, of fact and metaphysics, to come to terms with and to limit the untamed realm of myth. The presumptuous attempt by the mythmaker to be our historian and philosopher can succeed only by precluding those rigorous disciplines that the demythifier among us must take to be history and philosophy. So demythification must proceed, in the name of discursive and rational progress, to reduce the leaps of the poetic imagination—no longer seen as a divinely sanctioned irrationality—to the rejected nostalgia of a romantic primitivism. Myth, like poetry (or as poetry), is to be accepted only as a projection of the human imagination—the shape that the imagination imposes on the flow of experience to make it conform to itself. From the perspective of its enemies, myth, in spite of its high-flying pretensions, is seen only as an untruth, a wishful projection out of accord with how things really are. One consequence of this attack on myth is the charge that its imposition of a human shape upon our experience is a deceptive spatialization of elements that are ineluctably temporal. It is charged that spatial form, as an anthropomorphic delusion, characterizes the way our minds work rather than the way the world does. Thus the denial of its authenticity shifts all interest away from the anthropological concern with how we envision our realities to the epistemological concern with what our existential destiny—controlled by the clock and beyond mythifying—really is.

As, through the history of Western thought, our philosophic interest becomes more riveted to our earthly existence, with methods that, accordingly, become more empirical, the emphasis falls more heavily upon the clash between myth and history (than upon that between myth and philosophy), and at the expense of myth. At stake is the concept of time that will govern our sense of experience: will our imagination confront and yield to the stark disappearances of all the moments of our time, or will it transform them into the comforting metaphors of space that allow us to
hold onto them? As man seeks—as seek he must—to dominate the history
of sensory events, to what extent should he distrust the forms he invents to
order the repetitions, the internal relations, which he finds (or creates)
among them? If he comes to cherish those fictions that he cannot help but
create to order his world, can he not set out, willfully and self-consciously,
to create special free-standing fictions that are unfettered celebrations of the
fiction-making power itself? He would thus be brought around to a new
affirmation of myth, of poetry, of the spatializing power of humanly
created forms: the romantic reassertion of his (momentary) power to
overwhelm his temporal destiny.

I have put the matter in this melodramatic manner in order to set the
scene for the emergence of the romantic doctrine of symbol, as it claimed
ascendancy over allegory, and to do so in a way that set it up for the
poststructuralist critique that would once more invert our comparative
estimates of the two. And I continue my narrative, still emphasizing the
spatial and temporal languages, the examination of which will concern me
later. The dream that myth had early inspired of subduing—by reread-
ing—the recalcitrance of our historical experiences, of unifying time and
the forms of the mind, was threatened with extinction first by rationalist
and then by empiricist forces in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centu-
ries. Psychological doctrines that related “sensations” to “ideas” and to one
another reminded us of the inevitably sequential nature of human experi-
ence and the equally inevitable “belatedness” between our experiencing
and our thinking. Language, seen as the words that represented our ideas,
was similarly belated—which is to say secondary—in its relation to the
mental recollections of sensory presence. As an idea was only the ghostly
memory of a sensation—in effect the remnant of a sensation with the
object removed—so the way was open for the notion of language as
essentially empty, pointing to the past and representing an absence. Lan-
guage, then, was in a tertiary position with respect to the immediacies of
sensation.

Here was an exaggeration of the dualistic character of the signifier
looking helplessly across the chasm of time at an unreachable signified.
Any attempt at a poetic representation that would accord with this notion
of language clearly had to stop at allegory, the modest device that permit-
ted no pretension on the part of the signifier to exceed its self-abnegating
function of pointing to an earlier and fuller reality outside itself. It is this
cursed principle of anteriority that governs the chain that links events to one
another, that links events to the language that seeks to represent them, and
that links the elements of that language to one another. It is this principle
that humanistic and romantic thinkers of the late eighteenth and the
nineteenth centuries saw as beating the human mind into mere passivity,
enslaving it into resignation to unelevated temporality. In reaction, the new metaphysic, with its consequent psychology and poetic, insisted from the outset on the unifying power of mind, a form-making power that could break through the temporal separateness among entities, concepts, and words to convert the parade of absences into miracles of copresence. The spatializing magic of human metaphor was again granted privileged status, and myth and poetry were returned to their place of visionary eminence. Where the incapacity of normal language to reach beyond belatedness was recognized, poetry could be given special powers to leap across the breach between word and meaning, achieving an identity between them and thereby establishing a presence and a fullness in the word.

It is no wonder that allegory, as dualistic and thus subservient to the normal incapacities of language, was relegated to an inferior place as a less than poetic device, and that the symbol was newly defined as a monistic alternative that became identical with the poetry-making power. From Goethe's early groping toward a definition of the distinction between symbol and allegory to Coleridge's firmer formulation (by way of Schelling), and to the systematic exposition in the idealism of Croce and the practical analyses of the New Critics, the dichotomy holds fast between the dualistic as the character of all our fallen language (including nonpoetry and allegory) and the monistic magic that poetry as symbol can accomplish. The union in the symbol between subject and object, man and nature, of which Goethe spoke, is extended by Coleridge into the statement that becomes characteristic of claims made for the symbol: that it "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is the representative." It is, of course, the participatory power of the symbol, partaking fully rather than pointing emptily, that allows it to overcome otherness, thereby distinguishing it from allegory. And "an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot" (p. 30).

In the many attempts to enunciate this distinction in a way that valorized the symbol (and poetry associated with it), we consistently

find allegory allied to the unexceptional way language functions as a dualistic instrument, while that something special beyond the normal incapacities of language—a power to participate in and thus fuse with its meaning—is reserved for the symbol. Obviously, what is being sought in the symbol is an alternative to the fate of words to be empty, belated counters (Coleridge’s phantom proxies) testifying to an absence, whose immediate presence would be beyond language, the instrument of mediation. If the language of these theoretical monists dissatisfies us, as we see it in Goethe or Schelling or Coleridge or Croce, we must acknowledge that there may be no discursive problem more difficult than the attempt to use our dualistic language to describe a monistic way of language-functioning—in other words, than the attempt to use a language that accepts its differential nature to define a language that functions in the breakthrough realm of identity. It is this difficult attempt that habitually seems to lead theorists into evasive mystifications or led Coleridge, for example, to resort to desperate terms like esemplastic or coadunative as he sought to find a way of making discursively credible the subversive verbal process of fusing many into one.

The difficulty of finding a formula for the unmediated in the language of mediation did not inhibit the continuing efforts of these theorists and their followers. One way or another, since the original attempt to achieve a special definition of symbol within a symbol-allegory dichotomy, this need to describe a manipulation of language that explodes its usual limits has extended this dichotomy to a number of others. The New Critics, concerned with a poetics demanding figurative unity, translate the opposition between symbol and allegory into a more observable opposition between functional metaphor and ornamental analogy. Further, members of this symbolist tradition, confronted by the challenge of structuralism, recognize elements of their pet project on the opposite side of the structuralist’s principle of verbal difference (their own commitment to identity) and on the opposite side of the structuralist’s interest in metonymy (their own interest in metaphor). So when the poststructuralist attacks the assumptions of

3. As in Goethe’s finding “true symbolism . . . where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.” This is from his Maxim No. 314. The translation is René Wellek’s.

4. In this essay I am using the word symbolist to designate the theoretical tradition (or a member of it) that seeks a separate definition of symbol and proceeds to claim it to be the defining characteristic of poetry. I mean to use the word here in this broad way, for purposes of shorthand, without intending to relate the word or this group of theorists in any precise way to French symbolists or their doctrine.
verbal presence in Western logocentrism, the symbolist's own theoretical need to find an alternative to the absence that haunts the usual process of signification leads them to embrace that very notion of presence.

As I have framed the problem here in its historical and problematic dimensions, underlying these several sets of oppositions are the alternatives of difference and identity. The dualistic conception of language, the language of rationalist or empiricist, of philosopher or historian, assumes its signifiers to be arbitrary in their relations to their signifieds, and hence utterly distinct from them and from all other signifiers with which they are joined in a system. In poetics the proponents of such a conception find allegory to be an acceptable device, one that does not violate this conception of language. On the other side, the symbolists, who seek in poetry the power of monistic breakthrough beyond the powers of differential discourse, try—however hedged in by their own discursive limits—to define a poetic symbol as a signifier that generates and fills itself with its own signified. The magic of poetry, for them, must begin only where prose leaves off, restoring man to the world around him (or rather making the world around him once again his) as if the effects of the Fall had been momentarily undone.

It is not surprising that theoretical movements of recent years have seen this symbolist aesthetic as being no more than an extravagant romantic mystification. With it the New Critics' theory of poetry as a unity of meaning within the functional metaphor has been similarly dismissed. For more than a century and a half, our most exciting theorists urged one or another variety of the claim that the poet could force his word to become privileged. Borrowed from our fallen language, that word was to be forced by the poet to become participatory, creating a union that filled gaps in the distances of time and otherness through the healing touch of human form. The plea for the poet to settle for nothing less required such a theorist to reject as unpoetic the practice of allegory in which, as in ornamental analogy, words settled for the arbitrary, differential role they normally had to accept. Through metaphorical union, words (and meanings) were to be manipulated into overrunning their bounds of property and propriety, overlapping—if not appearing to turn into—one another.

It is not difficult to view the monistic conception of metaphor as a romantic reversion to the sacramental union put forth in Christian theology. In Renaissance typology and in the Renaissance habit of verbal play borrowed from it, we can find a model for the way in which metaphor was supposed to work for the secular poet capable of creating symbols. The dissolution of distinctness into identity—in effect the
destruction of the logic of number—is the very basis of the divine-human paradox of Christ and leads to the miraculous figure behind such breakthroughs as the Trinity and the transubstantiation in the Eucharist. Further, through the typological *figura*, the unredeemed sequence of chronological time can be redeemed after all into the divine pattern, that eternal, spatial order which exchanges history for eschatology. With every moment existing doubly—both in the temporal order and in the timeless structure—history remains history even while it is rewritten as a divinely authored myth. Every act or person seems random, arbitrary; yet each is a necessary signifier that partakes of the single Transcendental Signified. In borrowed form, this paradoxical relation between what is in time and what is out of time is also turned into a model for poetic form. As in the special sequence of events that transforms history into teleology in metaphysics or transforms history into poetry in the proper Aristotelian tragedy, as in the manipulation of words into fully embodied metaphors by the symbol-making poet, so the rules of earthly time, which put the separateness of distance between isolated subjects, are suspended and transgressed by the divine Author as by the human author in imitation of Him. It is in this context that we perhaps better understand Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." 

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century we have been increasingly concerned about the extent to which these formulations in the realm of poetics require a metaphysic or even a theology to authenticate them. Whatever the sources of metaphor in the substantive miracles of theology, does the poetic production of a verbal identity between distinct terms and concepts or does the poem's overcoming of the disappearing sequence among verbal entities rest upon a substantive mystery that can be justified only by a literalizing faith? Or can verbal devices earn the aesthetic illusion of such identities and spatial forms—if only in the realm of appearance—in the secular precincts of a poetry without faith? The quarrel is essentially the one that was carried on against Matthew Arnold by his antagonistic follower, T. S. Eliot. In "The Study of Poetry," Arnold defined the need for poetry to serve as a substitute for religion, producing a psychological satisfaction that was the more secure and effective because it no longer rested on the "sup-

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posed fact" which had failed religion and undermined its capacity to function psychologically any longer in the way that poetry, in its absence, now could. Here was the call for a poetic ungrounded in any metaphysic—indeed, one that depended on our keeping it free of untenable truth claims. If myth was to challenge the dull factuality of history with its own man-made transformations of time into human pattern, it was to remain true to its own domain of psychology and emotion and was not to pursue its challenge into the verifiable realm of "what is." One might say that the verbal power of metaphor depended upon its resistance to "existential projection," upon the shrewdness with which it avoided becoming "a literalist of the imagination."

Eliot, who was not afraid of being literally devout, rejected making poetry a substitute for religion but rather—in a Christian fashion that recalled Renaissance typology with its literalizing of metaphor—saw the secular and sacred elements of metaphysics as one. His search in Four Quartets for the "still point of the turning world" was also a search through language for the still point of the moving words, which would transform them into the moving Word, a projection of the Unmoved Mover. The passages about human experience and the passages about the poet's struggle with words become increasingly reflective of one another, so that the poem's theological quest and its poetic quest to subsume human temporality within the divine should become for the reader a single, simultaneous quest. The poem's meaning is its method is its medium. Yet, of course, if we come to the poem with the cool, skeptical eye of an Arnoldian modernist, we can find its apparent religious doctrine utterly subsumed within its verbal metaphors, so that the resolution of movement in a stillness which is still moving is but a brilliant aesthetic effect whose theological extensions seem momentarily persuasive only because of the power of its dramatic resolution in words. The aesthetic effect may be a breakthrough within the realm of myth and may thus affect our vision, but it need not break through as a literal alteration of our external world and our beliefs about what can or cannot transpire in it.

Eliot is perhaps our ultimate modernist poet, and his efforts to dissolve time into his spatial forms, to press his language toward a filled presence, and to fuse his thematic problems with technical ones, are efforts we look for in modernism generally. The work of these modernists (think, among the poets, of Yeats and Stevens also, for example) seems continuous with the hopes for poetry of those who, distinguishing symbol from allegory, asked for the creation of symbols. Indeed, that work, shortly to be followed by poets writing to a different prescription, turned out to be the furthest realization of those hopes. In
addition, these poets seem to have sponsored their own criticism as a fulfillment of those critical notions that we earlier traced back to those writing in the wake of Kant, the fullest realization of which was the New Criticism.

Early in the heyday of the New Criticism, Joseph Frank provided, with his doctrine of "spatial form," a major notion to characterize its practices, as well as the practice of the modernist literary works which helped inspire it and which provided an endless field on which it could sharpen its instruments. It is in Frank that the "still movement" of Eliot is pressed into a candid insistence on simultaneity, a formal play that "dissolves sequence" by undermining "the inherent consecutiveness of language." In The Waste Land "word groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously" (p. 12). But Frank sees such formal devices as also altering our philosophical attitudes toward time and space, history and myth. It is as if, in modernist works, words can annihilate time thematically by destroying their own serial nature technically. The return of the supremacy of myth over history is the thematic consequence of the poet's overcoming verbal sequence by the forms of his spatial imagination. So the aesthetic devices reshape our sense of reality by reasserting the primary role of the mythic imagination over mere facticity.

The skeptical reader may worry about how easily Frank slips from formal to thematic matters, thereby literalizing his metaphorical insight. Thus, in joining together the Cantos, The Waste Land, and Ulysses as works which "maintain a continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and the present," Frank draws large conclusions about their effect on how we now apprehend time:

By this juxtaposition of past and present . . . history becomes ahistorical. Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out. . . . Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition . . . .

What has occurred, at least so far as literature is concerned, may be described as the transformation of the historical imagination into

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7. The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 15, 10. The essays on "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" originally appeared in 1945. Frank does not himself refer to Four Quartets but confines himself to Eliot's earlier works. For more recent discussions, by Frank and others, of the claims made in the original essays, see Critical Inquiry 4 (1977).
myth—an imagination for which historical time does not exist, and which sees the actions and events of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes. (*The Widening Gyre*, pp. 59–60)

Now, this is an extreme statement and smacks of a literalistic extension of the metaphor of spatial form. One of Frank’s central terms, *juxtaposition*, is seriously suspect. Having borrowed the term from Lessing (who reserved it for the spatial arts) in order to move the time art of poetry toward space, he seems to be begging the question in his use of it: as if the word itself could generate enough figurative force to persuade us of its literal applicability to modernist literature. After all, it does not seem that we can speak literally of juxtaposing passages of words that are widely separated—not unless we naively believe that the spatial copresence of books literally represents the copresence of discourse and our experiencing of it. So the word *juxtaposition* itself claims a reality that verbal sequence belies, as verbal sequence similarly belies any literal sense of simultaneity.

If we are talking about our response to a work and, in that response, about an illusionary impression of something for which we use the metaphorical notion of simultaneity, sponsored by something in the work that feels like juxtaposition, then we still are acknowledging the primary constitutive role of temporality in language and in experience, however strongly we entertain a momentary illusion of verbal stasis. But Frank, coming toward the end of the symbolist tradition and fixing its claims in their most uncritical and extravagant manifestation, would lose temporality altogether in the instantaneity of spatial form. This version of the symbolist aesthetic, so easily adapted to the objectives of the New Criticism, seems most exposed to the skeptic’s charge of evasive mystification. It is similar to the nostalgic celebration of sacramental presence in the work of the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade (mentioned favorably by Frank), who defines sacred time as time again and again redeemed, as the continuing recurrences of cut-off entities that take on the characteristics of objects in space.

Once we take the matter of juxtaposition less literally, we can accept repetition as the temporal analogue to juxtaposition and can see literary form—found in the many kinds of repetitious arrangements invented by the poet or his tradition—as that which returns time on itself, shaping temporality out of its nature as pure, unelevated sequence. In this sense we may define form (as I have elsewhere) as the imposition of

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8. Frank’s discussion takes off from Pound’s definition of an image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” The quote appears in *The Widening Gyre*, p. 9.
spatial elements on a temporal ground without denying the figurative character of the word *spatial* and the merely illusionary escape from a temporal awareness that is never overcome.

Granting that repetition of one sort or another constitutes the basis for our finding form in the temporal arts, once we begin to question the extent to which repetition can be seen in such works as equivalent to juxtaposition in the spatial arts, then the radically temporal character of moment-by-moment succession can no longer be altogether transcended, and the entire transformation of history to myth is therefore threatened. Paul de Man, profound enemy of the symbolist aesthetic as I have outlined it, hits precisely at this sense in which repetition is never a total return, as he attacks the spatial basis of the symbol and its claim to an achieved simultaneity: "Repetition is a temporal process that assumes difference as well as resemblance. It functions as a regulative principle of rigor but asserts the impossibility of rigorous identity, etc." In an earlier defense of allegory at the expense of symbol, de Man used *his* sense of repetition (which he says is Kierkegaard's) to justify the temporality of the allegorical process and to deny the feasibility of the symbolic process: "It remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."

De Man's stalwart attack upon symbol in the name of allegory is a climactic moment in the theoretical turnaround against the long and impressive development of organic poetics from the late eighteenth century through the New Criticism. After so long a period during which allegory was shunted aside as an unpoetic impostor while the symbol was held aloft in unchallenged glory, allegory began to have its good name reestablished as critics arose, beginning in the late 1950s, to push the New Criticism, and almost two centuries of organic theorizing behind it, from its position of dominance. After early signs of the


10. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 173-209. This quotation appears on p. 190. I should acknowledge at the outset that, in de Man’s more recent work, there are refinements and even changes in these claims that would have to be discussed if this were a study of his career. (I mention some of these changes in Chapter 3, above.) But in the study of the career of the relations between symbol and allegory, it is de Man’s work of the late sixties and early seventies that I find central.
reversal in Edwin Honig’s *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory*¹¹ and the development of it in Angus Fletcher’s monumental volume, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode,*¹² it was in de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” that the theoretical consequences of the resurrection of allegory and the casting out of the symbol marked out and grounded the theoretical revolution that had taken place. It is de Man’s formulation which my presentation here of the case that has been made for the symbol, as well as of the excesses and naïveté in the making of that case, has been intended to anticipate. For, however unsympathetic his response to the symbol, his is a most important response with which one must deal before being able to salvage any part of the symbolist tradition—as I wish to do.

We have seen that, in his concept of repetition, de Man insisted on retaining a residue of temporality and of difference, so that he could prevent the term from serving a sense of simultaneity, that which could achieve an identity of several moments that together would sacrifice the unique before-ness and after-ness of their relations to one another within a succession of unrepeatable moments. With that other, simpler notion of repetition from which—as in juxtaposition—time and its differences were purged, the infinite variety of time’s movements could be fused into a unity into which all would converge: an instantaneous emblem, the very essence of the romantic symbol, and of spatial form. De Man is too faithful to the need for existential authenticity, to the need for a demystified confrontation of the temporal conditions of the human predicament, to allow to literature the privilege of evading these through the romantic delusions of the symbol; so he denies the simpler sort of repetition. In the linguistic world of difference, the dream of identity is just such a delusion; in the fading-away world of time, the dream of true simultaneity (“which, in truth, is spatial in kind”) is, again, such a delusion: “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (“The Rhetoric of Temporality,” p. 191).

[In this quotation and elsewhere, de Man seems also to create spatial metaphors of his own (“distance,” “void”) for time: we might claim “distance” to be his spatial equivalent of “temporal difference,” much as symbolists treat juxtaposition as a spatial equivalent of repetition. But the antisymbolist would be quick to point out that, unlike “jux-

taption,” which—with its sense of simultaneity—adds elements which repetition, as a temporal concept, cannot warrant, the de Man equivalent (“distance” for “temporal difference”) is not misleading since it emphasizes those very attributes (void, hiatus) which characterize the temporal. So “distance” does not transfer to time for time’s benefit any privileged attributes of space (such as simultaneous form) but only suggests those attributes that space, as broken up, shares with time. To put it another way, we might say that de Man is giving us only an analogy or allegory, not a metaphor or symbol, in his use of spatial language for temporal claims.

It is the monistic pretense, the claim that in poetry sign and meaning can be made to coincide, that constantly bothers de Man about the symbolist aesthetic. And it bothers his existential sense as well as his aesthetic sense: indeed, for de Man, literature, as temporal, seems to enjoy a special mimetic advantage over the spatial arts in its relation to experience. Consequently, in the temporal extremity of language, whose signs seem to march in imitation of the temporal extremity of existence, there can be neither total repetition nor coincidence, these being other terms for simultaneity or identity, spatial concepts all. For sign and meaning to coincide, then, is for literature to evade “the fallen world of our facticity” (Blindness and Insight, p. 13). In effect, literature would be seeking to abrogate the terms upon which language serves as mediation; and “unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility” (p. 9). Instead, in obeying the dualistic conditions upon which mediation rests, literature can claim no privilege and must abandon the deluded hope of coincidence: “The discrepancy between sign and meaning (signifiant and signifié) prevails in literature as in everyday language” (p. 12). Thus literature should accept allegory as being as much of a device as it can hope for, if, as discourse (any discourse), it is to claim authenticity in its relation to existence. The rest—any notion of a separate definition and destiny for poetry based on a dream of unity that transcends time and difference—is at worst “an act of ontological bad faith” (“The Rhetoric of Temporality,” p. 194) and at best nothing but a delusion born of despair. It is tantamount to a denial of death and “the fallen world of our facticity”—and about as vain. In life and discourse, time is unredeemable, and any dream of redemption requires a mystification probably as inflated as the Christian myth, with its paradoxical extensions into metaphor, that I referred to earlier.

But it is quite evident that de Man does some privileging of his own—not of literature, but rather of the world of unredeemed time which all of us, all events, and all our writings serve as part of an egalitarian doom. The modestly dualistic role he assigns literature is

“A Waking Dream”: The Symbolic Alternative to Allegory
supposed to be standing on bedrock existential reality, calling back the more flighty among us, from our heady imaginings, reminding us that the one truth is below and inescapable and that our metaphors are mere dreams from which reality must awaken us. In “The Rhetoric of Temporality” de Man freely uses terms or phrases like “in truth,” “authentically temporal,” “actual,” to describe our “truly temporal predicament.” But is not this metaphysical confidence in time’s objective truth—the one reality from which delusions can be gauged—an extralinguistic dependence that stacks the deck in matters both philosophical and literary? Does it not also predispose us to valorize those literary works which, thematically, oppose facticity to dream, oppose the reality of death to our attempt at escaping it by means of mystification? Are we not being encouraged to valorize such works or, even worse, to interpret all works we wish to valorize as having this theme? We may ask, in other words, whether the defense of allegory on these grounds is an aesthetic claim or a thematic one, whether it is grounded in a semiotic or in an existential ontology of temporality.

After the long reign of a symbolist aesthetic grown too self-confident, de Man has performed an indispensable service in reminding us of the mystifications which that aesthetic too long assumed to be theoretical truths. He has helpfully warned against our reification of the literary object through taking the special metaphor of poetic form literally in a way that belies the serial nature of the medium and of our experiencing of it. This freezing of verbal sequences, he also reminds us, creates sacred objects whose spatial presence permits us to think we have found a way to transcend time through the unifying power of imagination; in this way we exaggerate unrealistically the human power to transform ineluctable fact. So, for de Man, this aesthetic has unfortunate, because delusive, existential or thematic consequences as well.

In warning us effectively against such mystification, however, does not de Man urge the other extreme too strongly? If the uncritical projection of spatial categories vitiates the authority of myth, does not the acceptance of the reality of temporal categories enslave us to history as facticity? My way of putting this question presupposes my answer, since in referring to time as no less categorical than space, I am not viewing spatiality exclusively as an empty metaphor constructed to evade a temporality that is viewed as unquestionably real. In recent linguistic theory, after all, the diachronic, no less than the synchronic, relates to, and can function only within, the arbitrary conventions of human creation; the temporal model is as much the linguist’s construction as is the spatial model. If, as we conceive it, the temporal shares with the spatial the state of being a constructed reality, then we cannot
easily find a point of privilege to justify a claim about which serves as a metaphor for which. It can go either way, depending upon the purposes of the discourse—whatever we may claim to know about the facts of clock-time and the inevitability of death. It may be that de Man implicitly concedes as much when—as I pointed out earlier—he himself is forced to resort to spatial language to portray man’s “truly temporal predicament.” Terms like distance, void, or even space itself in the phrase blank space, remind us that even the metonymic consecutiveness of existence and of discourse (of existence as discourse?) may require borrowings from the spatial realm to express our metaphorical understanding of it. Indeed, the myth of temporality may be the more insidious, may woo us the more seductively from our sense that it is but discursive, because of our lifelong obsession with the reality of death.

I want us to earn a chance to retain some of the symbolist’s ambitious hopes for what man, as fiction-making creature, can accomplish in language, without falling prey to the ontologizing impulse that symbolist theory has previously encouraged. To do so we must balance a wariness about projecting our myths onto reality with an acknowledgement that we can entertain the dream of symbolic union, provided it does not come trailing clouds of metaphysical glory. Within the aesthetic frame of a fictional verbal play, the poem can present us with a form that creates the illusion of simultaneity, though even as we attend it we remain aware of its illusionary nature. What else except such spatial relations have literary critics since Aristotle been celebrating in their celebrations of structural unity? It is only when an excess of enthusiasm leads some of them to reify these illusions that we must draw back to a more modest claim. On the other side, under the auspices of the same aesthetic occasion, the poem may well remind us of those temporal and decentering metaphors that threaten each moment to undo (or at least to “unmetaphor”)13 those spatial configurations that we conspire with the poem to create.

So I suggest that we can meet de Man’s concerns while still conceding—if only provisionally—the special unifying force that the symbolists have attributed to poems. If we are conscious of the provisional nature of the aesthetic dream that the poem nurtures, we also look for the poem’s own self-consciousness about its tentative spatializing powers. Its fiction, and our awareness of it, contain the twin elements of symbol and antisymbol, of words that fuse together even while, like

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words generally, they must fall apart in differentiation. Even further, the poem, together with our apprehension of it, combines its transform­
formula of time into myth with its resignation to the countermet­
aphor of time as mere historicity.

The poem and its fully attending reader are in the ambiguous posi­
tion of the speaker in Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale." What is the nature
of his illusion, or delusion? of the lasting or evanescent metaphorical
force of the bird or its song? of the residue of these after the vision or
dream passes? Are we, observing and listening, to consider the bird as a
true metaphor or as the speaker's mistaken metonymy: are we, that is,
to consider the bird as one with its voice and thus with all nightingales
that have lived, or are we to consider the voice as only a sign of the bird
and to be distinguished from it as it is distinguished from other night­
ingales? Or are we, somehow, to consider the bird both ways? and, if
so, at different times or simultaneously?

Indeed, the bird seems to function for the enraptured speaker as a
metonymic metaphor. The magic of the speaker's momentary indul­
gence leads him to identify the single, mortal bird with its voice and
song and to make the voice and song identical with those of the distant
past. All nightingales become one bird because the songs are one song,
heard but unseen. On the strength of this transfer Keats treats the bird
itself as immortal, in contrast to his own mortality and that of the
historical or mythological personages who earlier heard the same bird
(voice, song). Humanity's individual lives are tied together by the bird
once it has been turned into the all-unifying metonymic metaphor, so
that history across the ages has been turned into the instantaneous
vision of myth. Thanks to a repetition so complete that it achieves the
identity of eternal recurrence (de Man's objections notwithstanding),
time is redeemed.

This strange conversion of history reminds me of Keats ascribing to
the Grecian urn the role of "sylvan historian" in the companion great
ode. It is a historian which does not respond to the series of factual
questions put to it by the speaker. As "sylvan," the "silent form" is a

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14. I have shown elsewhere how romantic poets make use of their hearing rather than
seeing the bird to allow them to move from identity of song to identity of occasion (and of
bird), as they use their auditory (and blindly visionary) experience to collapse time. See
The Classic Vision: The Retreat from Extremity in Modern Literature (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 161-64. It is this swift—indeed immediate—movement ("on
the viewless wings of poesy") that causes the speaker's reason ("the dull brain"), trapped
in the empirical world that requires sight, to slow him down in confusion ("perplexes and
retards"). As we shall see, the struggle between poetic vision and the brain never
altogether lets up.

286

Reconsideration of Special Texts for Special Reasons
historian of another than historical kind—like the nightingale. The urn brings history together as myth within its own emblematic being. Cleanth Brooks thus chose just the right title for his essay on the "Ode to a Grecian Urn": "Keat's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes." But, like others I have noted in the symbolist tradition, Brooks is too unqualified in his commitment to myth:

Moreover, mere accumulations of facts—a point our own generation is only beginning to realize—are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its "history," in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth—not myth as pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality. (P. 151)

Associated with the urn as symbol here is an excess of romantic ontological fervor, to which (thanks to critics like de Man) we have, in recent years, had ample correction—and overcorrection.

It is the more balanced view of myth and history, one which can contain our skepticism without foreclosing our capacity for vision, that I mean to point out in my observations about the "Ode to a Nightingale." In that poem the speaker’s illusion of delusion is sustained only while he is simultaneously aware of his continued existence in the death-ridden world of the individual life that concludes by becoming "a sod." And when, in the final stanza, he returns from his all-unifying fancy to his "sole self," he looks back upon his momentary trance as mere deception ("cheat," "deceiving elf") as he bids it farewell with the bird. From his perspective as "forlorn" individual, isolated in time and space, there can no longer be any entertaining of his fancy’s visionary reality. Indeed he even awakens to his immediate role as poet, author of this poem, by having the word forlorn, once written (or sounded), serve as the bell tolling him back from the vision to that "sole self" of the writer. Yet the final words of his poem ("Do I wake or sleep?") suggest that the final moment of demystification is not necessarily privileged as the only authentic reality.

As the bird’s song leaves the speaker’s consciousness, it “fades” away, a very different fading—apparently—from what occurred early in the poem when the speaker sought to fade away into the world of the nightingale’s song. As before, seeking an act of self-dissolution, he tried to fade out of the world of human time, collapsing the distance between himself and the bird, so at the end the bird’s song fades away


"A Waking Dream": The Symbolic Alternative to Allegory
from the speaker back into the differentiated world of time and distance. Now, "buried deep" in the next valley, it is—separated by time and distance—an absent part of the speaker's dead past. Yet repeating the word jade suggests a similar activity in fading out of or fading back into the realm of worldly experience. The repetition functions at once to move us toward the identity of opposites (as in the symbolic aesthetic of spatial form) and to remind us of the unbridgeable differences between apparently repeated elements (as in de Man's definition of "repetition").

Consequently, the perspective that sees the fancy as cheating is itself not a final reality, and the magic of the fancy is not altogether dispelled. Even more, the experience itself is still cherished, even in the aftermath of loss. The struggle in the speaker between the poet's willed visionary blindness that has permitted the fancy and the mortal's dull, perplexed brain that has resisted it has not relaxed: once again—or rather still—the struggle between myth and history. The music has fled, we learn in the opening of the final line, though its continuing effects lead to the uncertainty about the present reflected in the question that concludes the poem ("Do I wake or sleep?").

Before he asks about his present state, the question in the preceding line suggests the double nature of his judgment of his magical episode now concluded: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" The second of these alternatives is not wholly a denial of the first: if the vision becomes a dream, it is yet the production of a waking consciousness. I have borrowed the phrase, "a waking dream," for my title because I find in the oxymoron the two sides of the dialectic I have been tracing. As in a dream, the symbol creates for us a surrogate reality, claiming the completeness of an irreducible domain within its eccentric terms, although it also stimulates a wakefulness that undercuts its metaphorical extravagances and threatens to reduce symbol to allegory. Whatever the incompleteness of the vision, later seen as such even by the speaker, the poem that contains it contains also the vision of that incompleteness. The poem unifies itself aesthetically around its metaphorical and its countermetaphorical tendencies, even as its oppositions remain thematically unresolved. It is, then, self-demystifying, but as such it does not fall outside the symbolist aesthetic so much as it fulfills what that aesthetic, at its most critically aware, its most self-conscious, is able to demand: nothing less than a waking dream.