

# The Death of Definition:

An Investigation Into the Relationship  
Between Attitudes Toward Afterlife and  
the Art of Storytelling

by  
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**Master of Arts**

**John Scoles ©1999**

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## Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgments</u> .....	2
<u>Abstract</u> .....	3
<u>Introduction: "The Death of Definition"</u> .....	4
<u>Chapter One: "The synnes that comen of the tongue:"</u> Afterlife, nominalism and literary conclusion in <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> .....	15
<u>Chapter Two: "You are my creator, but I am your master. Obey!":</u> Death, imagination and the voices of audiences and authors in Romantic literature .....	43
<u>Chapter Three: "dying is fine)but Death":</u> Conflict, death and storytelling in the Modernist period .....	72
<u>Conclusion: "Every story is over before it begins."</u> .....	103
<u>Works Cited</u> .....	111

"Life is short, art long." — *Hippocrates*

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother, Dianne Scoles, for providing me with a brain and teaching me how to use it.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Evelyn J. Hinz, for sharing with me her talent and passion for language and writing. A teacher and friend like Dr. Hinz is the greatest resource that any student could ever hope to have.

- John Scoles

## Abstract

Using Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller," as a starting point, I have endeavored to explain exactly what Benjamin meant when he wrote that "death authorizes storytelling." Using representative works from the Medieval, Romantic and Modernist periods, I have charted an important shift in storytelling strategies based upon the conflict between metaphoric and metonymic views of the death-event. Another way of explaining this shift might be to say that whereas Medieval storytelling focused on the relationship between God and endings, Romantic and Modernist storytelling methods highlight the human imagination and propose the "saving" grace of the work of art. While this study indicates a progression toward a metonymic view of death—that is, a view that precludes the possibility of an afterlife—it would be imprudent to suggest that the "death of definition" is any less cyclical than nature. The search for the limits of literary possibility as a metaphorical product of basic human thought systems that emerge from our sense of mortality is an ongoing process characterized by individual belief. Death translates each of our lives into one chapter in an unending story. Thus, this study can only be a perpetual work-in-progress.

## Introduction

# "The Death of Definition"

There is no concept that humans have tried harder to define, and with less success, than death. The overwhelming "absence" generated by death inevitably forces us into attempting to understand it via analogy, and indeed, few concepts elicit the use of metaphor more prolifically. Not only are there such classic examples as the various Shakespearean soliloquies of Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello, there is also a wide repertoire of contemporary euphemisms and idioms: passed on, departed, kicked the bucket, taking a dirt nap, or the current spoof of political correctness, "vitaly challenged." If death, therefore, is something that resists definition, what becomes particularly intriguing is the postmodern metaphoric invocation of death as a way of demonstrating the limits of definition—*i.e.* Barthes's "death of the author," Derrida's notion of "absence," etc. The easy juxtapositioning of figurative language taking the place of death and death acting as a metaphor for extensions in literary

interpretation raises the possibility that there is a powerful relationship between the two concepts. Through an examination of this relationship, that is, the "death" of definition, we may be able to see how the way that we talk about death corresponds to the issue of why we talk at all.

In his essay entitled "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin declares that "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (94). Benjamin's argument is, essentially, that it is the profound ability of the story to reveal death to us in a way that life itself cannot, and yet, it is the social drama of our own deaths that has, throughout time, empowered us to tell stories to others. But attitudes toward death have changed over the history of humankind, and Benjamin notes that "as the face of death has changed...the art of storytelling has declined" (93). Indeed, there has been a tremendous change in perception of death, as Benjamin observes, which is a result of the 20th-century proliferation of social institutions which enable the average person to live his or her entire life without having to experience the dying process publicly—in essence, to live in a much greater isolation from death than ever before in history. Correspondingly, storytelling has shifted from the oral intimacy of the Middle Ages to the distant remove of the novel and, most currently, to visual media such as film and television. Not surprisingly, with such a proliferation of varying storytelling modes, there are considerable problems as to what degree of objective "truth" we can find in mimetic reflection allegedly sanctioned by an unexperienceable concept such as the death-

event. Certainly, when one of our most pre-eminent literary theorists, Jacques Derrida, uses his own definition of dying (*mourir*), "awaiting (one another at) the limits of truth," as the opening epigraph to *Aporias*, it is a substantial indication of how intimately personal attitudes toward death must figure into a discussion of narrative and its precursor, definition.

Through their concern with both Benjamin's ideas about storytelling and Martin Heidegger's interest in the relationship between life and definition in *Being and Time*, postmodern European literary critics like Derrida and Barthes furthered the ontology of definition, as it were. But, to understand the act of defining as a manner of Being, we must, as Heidegger has done with "being" itself, attempt to discover the boundaries and limitations of "defining-as." Such an attempt must quickly lead us to "defining-toward-end," for it is with *fin*-ality in mind that we engage in the *de-fin*-ing process. In addressing the "death" of definition, however, we must recognize that we are going to be engaged in a process of infinite deferral. The perpetual problem of what Max Black calls "meaning transference"—verbal communication, literary evocations of lives, real or imagined, metaphoric "systems of associated commonplaces"—takes on a particularly illuminating quality when placed against a backdrop of representative responses to, and ways of thinking about death during the last six hundred years of English literature. Moving through key works in the genres of Medieval, Renaissance, and Romantic poetry, Modernist novels and "fictive" autobiography, and concluding with a look toward the possibilities of

Postmodernism, I hope to highlight at least a few of the important implications of the correspondence between death and the ways that we attempt to "storytell," that is, essentially, to define ourselves and our world.

Following Benjamin, I enter this study keeping firmly in mind that even the most well-intentioned theorists are products of times and cultures. Ideas have lifespans and locations of their own, and attitudes toward the purpose of literature have changed considerably over the past five hundred years. One way of understanding these changes is to consider the theories of experientialism and imaginative rationality advanced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal study entitled *Metaphors We Live By*. Refuting both objectivism and subjectivism, Lakoff and Johnson instead turn to metaphorical modes of conception as the foundation of understanding. These modes are founded not on absolutes nor arrived at intuitively, but rather through "interactional properties." "Truth," they write, "is relative to our conceptual system, which is grounded in, and constantly tested by, our experiences and those of other members of our culture in our daily interactions with other people and with our physical and cultural environments" (193). As they see it, imaginative rationality "involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing," an activity which stimulates changes in ways of thinking but which is ultimately "grounded in *correlations* within our experience" (155). Death, however, which for Benjamin "authorizes" storytelling, is the limit of being; it is beyond the scope of experience. How, then, do we attempt to understand

death, and how does such an understanding relate to storytelling and definition?

\* \* \*

Adequate explanations of definition and death have long been the bane of philosophers. The crux of this problem is that both concepts focus on exclusion: definition is a representation of limits and death is conceptualized as the exclusion or absence of being. Consequently, theoreticians have been forced into creating ways for us to understand death in terms of life. But we must be careful to recognize that "terms" are, in fact, words, the temporal art. Is it the temporal nature of the verbal arts, then, that puts the "death" in definition? That definition is the foundation of the verbal experience must surely be a given; words are the basic building blocks of language, and language can have no conventionality without the agreements that we arrive at through the construction of circumscribed meanings. Moreover, the stories we tell via words are in fact an elaborately constructed order of many smaller stories which we refer to as definitions. We are no more than that which we are able to realize through the words that we arbitrarily assign to categorize ourselves. In short, we are only what we are able to say that we are. Well, no. Not quite. We can see ourselves too. And we can see corpses as well, even if they are not our own. More than that, though, we conceive of both ourselves, as well as the words we use to describe our bodies, as containers. Additionally, as Lakoff and Johnson point

out, even time itself is imaged in spatial terms (*i.e.* "He did it *in* ten minutes."). So there is a spatial element to the relationship between death and definition as well.

In his essay, "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language," Michael Reddy discusses "the figurative assertion that language *transfers* human thoughts and feelings" (287). Using examples such as "Put your thoughts *into* words" and "The sentence was *filled* with emotion," Reddy points out that we have somehow arrived at the bizarre conclusion that "words have insides and outsides" (288). This notion of spatialization is furthered by Lakoff and Johnson in a discussion of how tropological thought most frequently emerges from our bodily relationship with the world:

We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. (29)

But, then, as Reddy has demonstrated, we also have a propensity for using the container metaphor for things such as words, which clearly do not have physical surfaces. If, however, we think of the "surfaces" of words as the limits of their meaning, then we can see more easily how the container metaphor comes into play, particularly in regard to the limitations imposed by death.

Lakoff and Johnson state that "[d]efinitions for a concept are seen as characterizing the things that are inherent in the concept

itself" (116). But what is inherent in the concept of death? In *Aporias*, Derrida addresses Heidegger's definition of death—"the possibility of the pure and simple impossibility of *Dasein* ["being-there"]—with some anxiety about Heidegger's concern with limitations and the possibility that "death depends upon language" (36). Using Seneca's epistle "On the Shortness of Life" as a starting point, Derrida reacts to the way that Heidegger has expanded the business of "dying properly" into an "ontological delimitation among the fields of inquiry concerning death. This delimitation seems...abyssmal because it concerns limits about questions of the limit, more precisely, questions of the ends, of the modes of ending, and of the limit that separates the simple *ending* (*enden, verenden*) from *properly dying* (*eigentlich sterben*)" (30). This concern with categorizing emerges from the problematic nature of translation, which in turn emerges from the spatial/temporal problem of words as containers for meaning, especially insofar as we use words to discuss non-experiential concepts—in this case, death.

Faced with the possibility that the language of death subsumes, as well as presents, a powerful conflict between, the concepts of space and time, I want to propose that one way of understanding this anomaly is to look at the idea of the competition between metaphor and metonymy. I want to explore how these two major tropes relate to temporality and spatiality, as well as to subjectivism and objectivism, as they arise in literature. In proposing that figurative language arises from our relationship with the limitations of our bodies, however, I must

emphasize that we, as humans, have the unique experience of being able to define our "selves"—a term which is the very epitome of subjectivity and which must serve as a reminder that ontology comes from within, never from without. And this perpetual sense of separateness and individual belief could not possibly emerge at all except in the form of storytelling, in all its estranging guises.

In *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, George Lakoff and Mark Turner engage in a study of the ways in which we can learn about modes of human thought via the way poets "speak" to us tropologically. In attempting to distinguish between conceptual and linguistic metaphors, they list three basic metaphors for death that "abide as a part of our culture": departure, sleep and rest. As they see it, this very small choice of basic metaphors "tells us something important about the nature of creativity. Poets must make the most of the linguistic and conceptual resources they are given....[Poets] may compose or elaborate or express them in new ways, but they still use the same basic conceptual resources available to all of us" (26). They note, however, that metaphor has a "power of revelation" in that it can "reveal hidden meanings to us [and can] allow us to find meanings beyond the surface" (159).

Extraordinary language, figurative speech, if you like, finds its power in something much like what Georg Lukacs has termed "transcendental homelessness," a concept that Benjamin paraphrases as the "separation of the essential and the temporal [wherein] a creative memory transfixes and transforms a

particular object...[with the intention of] a divinatory-intuitive grasping of the unattained and therefore inexpressible meaning of life" (99). If we can say that the ultimate meaning of life is death and the passage toward it (as Heidegger proposes in *Being and Time*), and we find that we tend to use figurative language to explain the death-event, we must then accept that our "definition," or limitation, is, for some of us, metonymic, focusing, through the idea of extension, upon our bodies—physical self-containers that have become empty corpses devoid of being—while for others, it is metaphoric, transformative in nature, a rite of passage, a departure from our base bodies. Moreover, we should see that stories, like bodies in the sense of being containers, are subject to the same, dramatically individuated, range of possible meaning—emerging from experience but paradoxically challenged and sanctioned by death.

Gilles Deleuze, discussing the way in which literature and life affect each other, claims that "writing is a question of becoming, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any lived or livable experience" (225). The storyteller, in essence, reaches beyond the confines of the known and attempts to convey to the reader a suggestion of the possibility of re-ordering nature into something higher. What better way to achieve this goal than by stimulating the reader to think in new categories about death? When Deleuze states that literature, "through the creation of a syntax...not only brings about a decomposition or destruction of the maternal language but also the invention of a new language within a language" (229), he uses

a death metaphor, decomposition, to explain how storytelling involves a re-ordering of words so as to estrange them from their everyday use. This estrangement leads to an evolution of thought that allows us to conceive of things in a richer manner than we might have previously. However, an expanded consciousness, as it were, does not necessarily indicate any degree of intellectual certainty—in fact, we shall see that the result of "decomposition" is a collective mentality fraught with doubt.

According to Derrida, "The belief in an experience of death as such, as well as the discourse crediting this belief to an experience of death itself, and *as such*, would depend...upon an ability to speak and to name....But instead of giving us added assurance about the experience of death as death, this discourse would lose the *as such* in and through the language that would create an illusion, as if *to say death* were enough to have access to dying as such—and such would be the illusion or the fantasy" (37). Derrida's concern about death and the insufficiency of language is seconded by Maurice Blanchot in his own discussion of the relationship between death and literature when he, following Benjamin, writes that "[w]hen we speak, we are leaning on a tomb, and the void of that tomb is what makes language true" (336).

But Blanchot, unlike Derrida, directs his study less toward an attack on theories such as Heidegger's and more toward the possibilities that connect death and the verbal arts:

[Literature] is negation, because it drives the inhuman, indeterminate side of things back into nothingness; it defines them, makes them finite, and this the sense in which

literature is really the work of death in the world. But at the same time, after having denied things their existence, it preserves them in their being; it causes things to have a meaning, and the negation which is death at work is also the advent of meaning, the activity of comprehension. (338)

Blanchot's focus, then, is firmly upon Benjamin's idea of death "authorizing" storytelling. But in order to get a sense of how this authorization has come to be, and the different ways in which it works, it is necessary to examine a range of representative literature with these ideas in mind. Through such a study, I hope to show just how strong a bond there is between death and storytelling, and how the concept of definition both informs and is, at once, informed by them.

## Chapter One

# "The synnes that comen of the tongue:"

Afterlife, nominalism and literary conclusion in  
*The Canterbury Tales*

In the current era, storytelling acts more like a security blanket against death than an opportunity to come to terms with it. These days, television images have become truth and somehow we have come to believe that our living rooms are located within battlefields or hospital emergency wards. We see images of death, and we are quite certain that we know it, but we do not smell and taste it. We think we understand the horror and the emptiness of the death-event because we have been moved by intricate flickerings of light on a television or movie screen. But this is all just a process of distancing. If we look back across history, back before the arrival of television, back even before the arrival of the printing press, we can discover how the degree of proximity between storyteller and audience relates to human attitudes

toward death. We can also discover that the amounts and kinds of knowledge that are accessible to us through available modes of communication have a remarkable interconnection with the ways that we conceptualize death.

The role of the storyteller in Medieval times was an important one. As Terence Hawkes has noted: "For a Christian society, in the Middle Ages, a fundamental metaphor was that the world was a book written by God. And like any other book, it could and did *mean* more than it apparently *said*" (17). Certainly when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in his (presumably deathbed) *Retraction to The Canterbury Tales*, "for our book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine'" (10.1083), he was well aware that his writings were going to be examined closely for homiletic content. This is typical of Medieval storytelling strategies: John Gower, Boethius, Alain de Lille, Dante and others wrote Christian allegories. But Chaucer's poetry can also be seen as arising from a sense of deep disturbance with Christian philosophy. Indeed, the whole of the Chaucerian canon can be seen as parable-like, emerging from a metaphoric, that is, a transformative view, of the death-event. Parables, states Sallie McFague in her examination of metaphorical theology, are "an assault on the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality." Reason and faith are both metaphorical in origin, and a theology influenced by the parables would have to be "open-ended, tensive, secular, indirect, iconoclastic and revolutionary" (44).

It is this sense of iconoclasm—coupled with the way that the *Canterbury Tales* utilizes storytelling itself as a structure as well

as a theme—that has made Chaucer a popular site for postmodernist criticism. My concern at present is with both the structural aspect of the *Canterbury Tales* as well as the way that nominalism and the religious and philosophical revolution it provoked may have influenced Chaucer's attitude toward storytelling. Moreover, I wish to explore these ideas by examining figurative descriptions of death as a way of understanding the limits of language.

\* \* \*

The Middle Ages were characterized by considerably different attitudes toward life and death than those found in the Western world in the 20th century. Mysterious plagues were commonplace, and life was short and harsh for most people. Death was something that everyone lived with on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, with the harsh reality of mortality so close at hand, religion and superstition were dominating factors for all human beings. The church was truly the ruling power of the day. But change was afoot. The long-held view of life as sin for which punishment was inevitable was beginning to be questioned more intently than ever. The late 14th century in particular was a time of dramatic philosophical upheaval. One thinker who played a particularly significant role in the changes in attitude that were occurring was William of Ockham.

Known best for the principle referred to as "Ockham's razor," essentially, the idea that less is more, Ockham promoted a

parsimony that led him away from metaphysics and toward a form of subjectivism known as nominalism. Ockham's philosophy of nominalism, described in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as a "refusal to construe terms as names of entities distinct from the individual things signified by absolute terms" (202) was primarily an attempt to demystify language, but it was an effort that emerged via a challenge to religious authority. That Ockham was struggling with concepts of definition and access to heaven at the same time is surely no coincidence. To demonstrate the correlation between the two ideas, however, requires some examination of Ockham's work. His writings may be divided into two separate categories: the later treatises, written between 1333 and 1347, were generally polemics directed against the relationship between church and state. Such dissertations as the *Tractatus de Imperatorum et Pontificum Potestate* were clearly motivated, however, by his earlier works: the *Summa Logicae* and his lectures on the *Sentences*. Composed between 1317 and 1328, Ockham's most important writings (the early ones) were concerned with philosophy and theology, the basic problem of which was finding a place for Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems within the structure of Christian doctrine.

The problematic quality of the ontological priorism encoded in the epistemological tenets of Greek realism prompted Ockham to develop a revolutionary empiricism which maintained that all knowledge is based in individuated experience and event. While the realists posited the grandiose concepts of universal forms

(Plato) and properties (Aristotle), Ockham's nominalist perspective insisted otherwise:

[A]ccording to him, universals are terms or signs standing for or referring to individual objects and sets of objects, but they cannot in themselves exist. For what exists must be individual, and a universal cannot be that; the mistake of supposing that it could was the fatal contradiction of Platonic idealism. And Aristotelian realism was no better, for it involved its own contradiction, that the identical universal should be present in a number of particulars. Real universals are neither possible nor needed. Rather, universals are predicates or meanings, possessing logical status only, required for thought and communication, not *naming* anything that could possibly exist. (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 203)

Such a view, John Gardner points out in his pseudo-fictional account of Chaucer's life, "leads to an interesting problem in which Chaucer would take great delight. If ideas are abstractions from the concrete, I can neither know that my 'idea' is right nor—since you too abstract from concrete particulars—can I meaningfully communicate my idea to you" (146). Such theorizing, however, when applied to theological arguments, implied a strong sense of anti-spirituality: if God is just a name, then the Bible may as well be discarded. Indeed, as May McKisack has asserted, "for religion, Ockham's teaching was deadly" (509).

But Ockham's mission was not to disprove the existence of God. He was, ironically, a devout churchman. He did not question the authenticity of Christian revelation; he merely made discussion of it preposterous. The existence of a deity cannot be proven or disproven, he reasoned, so there is no point in arguing

one way or the other. Declaring a reconciliation of God's ways and human understanding thereof to be impossible, he freed philosophy from its theological chains. The problem of authority was still unresolved, however. As Gardner observes: "Removed to the realm of the incomprehensible, God became a baffling Absolute Will bound by no human concepts of justice or reason" (147). Man's capacity for worthwhile inquisition and enlightenment was thereby demarcated solely by human experience. But along with such freedom came further questions about responsibility.

Ockham's later writings would logically extend to an exploration of the problem of religious intrusion in the matters of politics and government, a critical engagement rife with the reminder to those who would seek power that the law of God is the law of liberty:

As Christ did not come into the world to take away from men their goods and rights, so Christ's vicar [the Pope], who is inferior and in no way equal to him in power, has no authority or power to deprive others of their goods and rights. (*Tractatus* 2.12-15)

Ockham's concern with the legitimate ends of theocracy came in response to the dangers of absolutism. He proposed that the ultimate decisions regarding the Church's operational necessities be left not unconditionally to the papacy, but rather to the "discretion and counsel of the wisest men sincerely zealous for justice without respect to persons, if such can be found—whether they be poor or rich, subjects or rulers" (*Tractatus* 2.17-20).

Although Ockham never made clear just how his plan would work, nor who these "men" might be, one person who appears to have burdened himself with such a role was Geoffrey Chaucer, the quintessential storyteller of the Middle Ages.

It is important to understand that Medieval stories about death were figurative not in the sense of giving "a truthful report of individual experience," but rather one wherein "the poet's task is ultimately one of discovering God's meaning" (Hawkes 18). But it would be a severe error in critical judgment to assume that Chaucer had no interest in truth and individual experience. Quite the contrary, since we need point only to the *General Prologue* to see Chaucer's challenge to the Medieval tradition:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man  
He moot reherce as ny evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speche he never so rudeliche and large,  
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe. (1.731-35)

But then, it would also be unfair to say that Chaucer was merely trying to be an accurate reporter. I would argue that Chaucer's intent is to remain on the fence between experience and belief, a nominalistic position which challenges the idea of conclusion and absolutism by remaining perpetually in theological/philosophical purgatory.

As a whole, *The Canterbury Tales* is structured metaphorically like a life with a most troublesome ending. Commencing in springtime, "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote...." (1.1), and concluding with a nod toward "the day of

doom" (10.1092), the tales provide an invaluable opportunity to see how, recalling Benjamin, death authorizes storytelling. A story of pilgrimage as well as a competition amongst storytellers, the tales encode a progression from nobility (the Knight) through the "earthier" classes (*i.e.* the Miller, the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath) to the clergy (*i.e.* the Monk, the Nun's Priest, the Parson) before finally concluding with Geoffrey in competition with himself over his own storytelling abilities.

Abounding with images of life and death and the importance of "proper" living in order to reach salvation, the tales offer such a diversity of attitudes that one cannot help but sense a feeling of doubt in the author's mind as to which path of "being-toward-death," is necessarily the right one, or whether any such debate is resolvable. Chaucer's experience was shaded by the influence of philosophical revolution, and consequently, his writings are fraught with tension, contradiction, apparent un-endings, constant questionings of artistic responsibility, and, of course, extensive competitions regarding morality and attitudes about the relationship between God and humans, particularly as such issues relate to death.

In *The Pardoner's Tale*, an "olde man" wanders into the company of "riotoures" who are seeking "a privee theef men clepeth Deeth" whom they plan to "sley." The old man informs the debauchers that he too is seeking death and has heard that "he" can be found "up this croked wey" (6.761). The rioters promptly race away to find their prey, only to find a cache of gold instead. As the story goes, the rioters end up poisoning each other

inadvertently, all in hopes of gaining the prize for themselves—in effect, finding the death they were looking for. The Pardoner, whose dubious occupation it is to put the hard sell on forgiveness and eternal bliss, uses the tale/parable to do a little business:

Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,  
And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!  
Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice  
So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,  
Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges.  
Boweth youre heed under this hooly bulle!  
Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!  
Your names I entre heer in my rolle anon;  
Into the blisse of hevene shul ye gon. (6.904-12)

Of course, the irony in all this is that the Pardoner is guilty of avarice, the very sin that he purports to offer deliverance from; he is, in fact, his own metaphor. *The Pardoner's Tale*, then, becomes a figurative construction of Chaucer's concern with the ways and means of the church's manipulative use of the rewards and punishments of the afterlife. Additionally, the tale raises questions about the relationship between a story and its "ending" through its highlighting of a very significant Medieval attitude toward death.

According to W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster in their study of the sources upon which Chaucer based his tales, in none of the analogues for *The Pardoner's Tale* does the old man have a desire for death, whereas in Chaucer, this desire is placed at the very forefront of the scene. Indeed, when the "rioters" come across the old man, they comment on his "sory grace," the way

that he is "al forwrapped save [his] face, and why he has lived "so long in so greet age." His reply is that, much to his dismay, death will not have him:

Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat han my lyf.  
Thus walke I, lyk a resteles kaityf,  
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,  
I knobbe with my staf, both erly and late,  
And seye, "Leeve mooder, leet me in." (6.727-31)

Speculating on the possibility as to the old man's being perpetually "in death" (346), yet never able to rest in peace, L.O. Purdon has drawn attention to the Medieval concept of the "second death." The "second" death is an eternal state wherein those sinners who do not enjoy the peace of life everlasting in the City of God are doomed to the endless suffering of perpetual dying. In addressing the "experience" of second death, St. Augustine writes:

For the life of the bodies of the ungodly is not the life of their souls but of their bodies, a life which souls can confer even when those souls are dead, that is, when God abandons them; for their own life, in virtue of which they are immortal, still persists, in however low a degree....There, men will not be in the situation of 'before death' or 'after death,' and for this reason they will never be living, never dead, but dying for all eternity. (521)

Contending that Chaucer—by using the old man's being dead but unable to shed his body—suggests the agonizing future that awaits those who live as do the Pardoner and the three "rioters," Purdon thus draws the impact of attitudes toward afterlife into

interpretation of Chaucer's work. This idea of the second death can consequently be extended to include a perspective on literary endings as well as death.

As much as he may have wished for it, for Geoffrey Chaucer, no story could be said to have an "ending," because all stories were part of something larger than themselves via their connection with the meaning of life and death. Like any good storyteller, Chaucer does not inform. He suggests. And he leaves the idea of "meaning" most open when it comes to death. Thus, the old man can and should be seen as being as much a reflection of Chaucer's apparent religious attitude as his seeming literary goals. The open-endedness of the *Canterbury Tales*, the narrator's surrender to the larger will—"blameth nat me if ye chese amys" (1.3181)—like the old man's being helplessly and perpetually "in death," becomes just one of Chaucer's many ways of connecting God's will with the act of narrative.

Most significant in examples of Chaucer's attitude toward his role of "auctour" was his tendency to "surrender" his work in concluding retractions. In essence, he sought literary immortality not metonymically, that is, via the book as self-contiguity, but rather, transformatively, through interpretive judgment by God and his human audience. Peter Travis's statement that "Chaucer's clear understanding [was] the entente of one's poetry is defined ultimately by the creative misprisions of one's audience" (204), is equally applicable to the "creative misprisions" of humans as an audience to the workings of nature. Such a possibility can be confirmed by examining the relationship between death and

audience at work in *The Reeve's Tale*, wherein another old man, this time the teller of the tale, attempts unsuccessfully to reverse the role of author and audience.

Frequently using the words "oon" and "on" (Middle English for "one"), the Reeve attempts to connect himself closely with his audience, the other pilgrims, so that they might be convinced that his version of morality is superior to that of the more fun-loving Miller. The Reeve, himself, however, is an audience for another speaker and his story emerges from his hostile reaction to the Miller's story about the duping of another old man. What we can start to see here is the conflict between teller, tale and audience.

In his Prologue, the Reeve identifies himself with rotting fruit—"an open-ers"—and then goes on to describe his birth as the beginning of his death, again using the rotting fruit image, this time in regard to wine: "For sikerly, when I was bore, anon / Deeth drough the tap of lyf and leet it goon" (1.3891-92). He identifies with another metaphor of decay as well: a horse which has been relegated to the stable. Death and decay are serious businesses for the Reeve, and by having the Host, Harry Bailly, describe the tone of his speech as "sermonyng," the narrator directs the reader toward a recognition of this.

The Reeve's version of mortality is serious and resentful, whereas the attitude of the Miller, whose tale precedes that of the Reeve, takes a considerably more light-hearted stance. This playing of attitudes against each other forms the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* and it frequently comes to the fore as a confrontation between modes of living and responses to death.

What is particularly interesting about all this, though, is the way that the characters seem to be constructed in such a way as to demonstrate the similarity of opposites. The relationship between *The Miller's Tale* and that of the Reeve, then, becomes a critical juncture in recognizing the way that the competition amongst the storytellers is directly informed by their attitudes toward the metaphysical "game" of life versus death.

We can look back at the end of the *Miller's Prologue*, where the narrator provides a warning of the dangers of taking a game too seriously, a warning in which the Reeve is clearly implicated: "Blameth nat me af ye chese amys...And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game" (1.3181-86). The Miller's protestation and the narrator's speech are equivalent responses to the Reeve's anger. The Reeve obviously does not pay attention to either of them. Although the Miller and the Reeve are both "cherls," and both tell tales of "harlotrie," the Miller's version is comic and playful while the Reeve's is pure spite. In his own tale, the Reeve seems unable or unwilling to acknowledge that he is doing the same thing as the Miller but in a dramatically more severe way.

Misidentification is often equated with ocular inabilities, darkness and a consequent inability to see the body. Like the Reeve's intention of "bleryng of a proud milleres ye," his character, Symkyn, makes a declaration to "blere" the two philandering clerks eyes "for al the sleighte in hir philosophie" (1.4050). The clerks' revenge is utterly dependent on darkness and the problems of identification that it presents: Symkyn's daughter Malyne being unable to "espie" the impending violation

of her body, the wife groping away with her hand until she finds what she thinks is her bed, "for it was derk," and then, in the climax, even though she has a "litel shymeryng of light" to guide her as she wields her staff, she still ends up striking Symkyn by mistake, taking his bald head for a nightcap that she thought the clerk had been wearing. This use of darkness, or shading, can be seen both within the story, then, as a device for heightening the tension in the climactic scene, as well as outside of the story as a way of interpreting the Reeve's "spin" on morality.

Additionally, a metaphor can be seen at work here, a metaphor for the Chaucerian method of storytelling. As the "marvelously infidus interpres" (as John Fleming has called him), Chaucer must "quyte" (go one better than) his own sources. And we know that he does. And he encourages—in a rather Ockhamist way—his audience to do the same. Chaucer's audience is constantly being encouraged to find the sub-text, to "encrease or make dymynucioun" of the poet's language, to construct meanings from individual experience. Of course, even his Medieval audience would have known that Geoffrey's concessions were only a subtle way of asking them for the forgiveness he would hope of his own auctours. As a writer of fiction, re-interpretation was his *modus operandi*. The potential to enjoy his work depends as much on the ability to identify and consider the purposes of the changes he made to his source works as it does upon identification with the characters he creates on his own.

In the Reeve, Chaucer has produced a character with whom it is hard to imagine any reader wanting to identify, and yet at the

same time, the character is realized so thoroughly that many critics have wondered why Chaucer would have created such a mean-spirited man. It may be that the construction of mean-spirited characters is meant to be a way of using storytelling to provide the reader with an opportunity to see how not to live, and consequently, how to save one's self from second death. In essence, the story requires re-definition by the reader while at the same time asking that the reader re-define his or her own self in accordance with the reality that the story presents. I want to suggest that "the Tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (10.1085), are an attempt—via self re-definition of both the body and the words that emerge from one's relationship with it—to save both their reader and their author from eternal anguish.

*The Physician's Tale* offers an example of the way that the body acts as barrier between life and death, reality and nonexistence. In the tale, a knight is faced with losing his virtuous young daughter to a "fals" judge who has concocted a scheme to prove that the girl was stolen as a baby. Faced with a false story which will completely disrupt his reality, the knight turns to death as a way of rectifying the situation. Horrified at the thought of losing his beloved child, the knight decides that the only answer to the situation is for him to kill the girl, which he subsequently does, bringing the girl's head to the judge but leaving her body at home. The disturbing nature of the tale is highlighted by the response of the audience, particularly, the Host, Harry Bailly:

Wherefore I seye that men may see  
That yiftes of Fortune and of Nature  
Been cause of deeth to many a creature (6.294-296)

The idea that goodness can be a cause of death, coupled with the (somewhat) noble intentions of the knight in committing murder, is suggestive of an author who is intent on challenging simple attitudes toward morality. Moreover, there is a container metaphor at work here, since it is the girl's body that houses the goodness which the false judge is so interested in. If we can say that the body, as a container for meaning, is similar to what we think of a word to be, then perhaps we can also say that depending on how the body is altered, via death or other means, our personal meaning can be re-defined. Besides the tale of the Physician, however, these ideas are also emphasized in *The Clerk's Tale*. In the instance of the latter tale, however, the relationship between morality and death—particularly the idea of the body as a container for meaning—can be seen more clearly as a linguistic problem of attempting to extend definition.

*The Clerk's Tale*, like *The Physician's Tale*, is the story of another parent who is complicit in the killings of her children. Or so she thinks. In the end, it is revealed that the children are not dead and that the whole story was concocted by her husband, the Marquis, as a test of the loyalty of the poor, but seemingly virtuous woman, whom he takes as a wife. At issue is the matter of whether or not the tale is a Christian exemplum or nominalist metaphor for re-definition. Carolyn Dinshaw has called it "a story

of translation" (55), in terms of both words and bodies. Chaucer's English verse version of the folktale is derived from both Petrarch's Latin translation of the last tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron* as well as an anonymous French prose translation of Petrarch, *Le Livre Griseldis*. The tale's history of interpretation and the interpretive problems within the relationship between Griselda and Walter lead Dinshaw to state that "implicitly, Petrarch takes the thematic, domestic issue of the proper function of a wife and links it with a literary issue, the proper function of a text" (52).

Turning then to Chaucer's version of the story, Dinshaw explores the idea of *translatio* (interlingual translation, but also, more importantly, the substitution of an "improper" term for a "proper" one) in order to demonstrate the issues of interpretation and substitution that are the Clerk's explicit concerns even as he himself re-interprets Walter's behavior. Dinshaw then makes a study of the ways that Griselda herself is bodily translated primarily through the use of clothing, but also in regard to her whole station in life. Dinshaw also perceives a correspondence between Walter and Petrarch—both attempting to apply "heigh style" to Griselda in order to make her an exemplum rather than a human being.

In a reading of the tale which extends interpretation in a more Ockhamist direction, however, Robert Emmett Finnegan points out that "the problematic character" of Griselda's promise of unconditional obedience to Walter "is the main reason that the tale sends ambiguous messages to the reader and generates

contradictory responses" (302). As he sees it, "we are asked to recognize in Griselda's forbearance a positive exemplum of the Christian's relationship to God; yet Griselda, deliberately fashioning herself an extension of her husband's will and thus exercising the patience which has been described as a mark of her 'exemplary status,' makes of herself an accomplice to homicide" (303).

Finnegan's concern is the paradox which the tale presents in terms of a conflict between nominalist versus absolutist interpretations of the tale. What is its ontological status? Does it exist only as sort of supernatural exemplum characterized by personified virtues and vices, or can Griselda and Walter be scrutinized as responsible beings? If we closely examine the changes which Chaucer made to Petrarch's version of the story, we may be tempted toward the latter alternative, but if we also notice the changes *that he did not make*, it should be apparent that there is both an allegorical *and* a literal side to the tale, and that the two sides, following Griselda's lead, attempt to "redress" each other for the "commune profit." Unfortunately, if we recall the pejorative implications encoded in the process of redress, the suggestion that there is something inherently wrong with the idea of common profit to begin with implies that reconstructing Griselda as an exemplum will never satisfy more than half the people half the time. Clearly, the potential for resolution in this argument has about as much hope of succeeding as Walter does of getting to heaven.

The idea of getting to heaven is, of course, what the pilgrimage to Canterbury is all about. But first, one must make the decision as to whether or not heaven exists, and what position humans are in to negotiate their entrance. As Chaucer's most dramatically nominalistic work, *The Clerk's Tale* offers an attempt to balance between good and evil by allowing each idea to exist as a sort of funhouse mirror reflection of the other, presumably with the intent of showing how, in a world of individuals, truth is merely a matter of opinion. Not surprisingly, then, "commune profit," with its implications of universality, cannot exist in a nominalistic, individuated world. Griselda's failure, her choosing to submit to the "greater" will (Walter's), is precisely a result of her inability to recognize that "consenten" is a dangerous illusion. Indeed, as Gardner suggests, "there is no common ground of humanity, no 'human nature' as celebrated by Aquinas; no understanding. [So] how can there be justice in the world, fair government, ordered society?" (292)

Elizabeth Kirk prefaces her discussion of *The Clerk's Tale* by observing that the tale refutes the notion that "critical intellectual engagement with a religious tradition—with its intellectual structure or with its problems or abuses—is in inverse proportion to the speaker's commitment to that tradition" (111). Kirk observes shrewdly that in the late 14th century a Clerk of Oxenford would have been very much "involved in philosophical discourse shaped by nominalists" (114). Arguing then that the Clerk's words are "sownynge" not only in "moral vertu" but also in the "the vertu that makes plants grow in the spring," Kirk

proposes that the conclusion of the tale celebrates "the energy it takes to remain a choosing self in the face of hierarchical power" (119). The problem with Kirk's argument, however, is the crux of Finnegan's essay: Griselda's choice is the wrong one. And the very "wrongness" of it implies an irrationality that drastically devalues freewill. The issue at hand is not what, if anything, Griselda gains through her complicity, but rather the dangers posed by agreement with authority based on tradition rather than wisdom.

One problem raised by Ockham regarding the problem of evil is the suggestion that if God were to order a man to disobey him, the fulfillment of such a command would be impossible, for obeying God would mean disobeying him. Moreover, it would be impossible for God to issue such an order, since what God wills man to do of man's own freewill is what is *good*, and disobedience of God's will is a sin. Such self-contradictoriness pervades *The Clerk's Tale*. Walter's attempts to redress Griselda, both physically and spiritually, are indeed, as both Finnegan and Kirk note, far more diabolical than salvific. However, the Clerk's attempts to temper the Marquis' actions with a disturbingly ambiguous explanation may suggest that Walter views himself as a martyr, a martyr "bound" by the will of God:

But ther been folk of swich condicion  
That when they have a certein purpos take,  
They kan nat stynte of hire entencioun,  
But, right as they were *bounded to that stake*,  
They wol nat of that firste purpos slake. (701-05)

And in the same way that the Marquis acts in what he perceives as a saintly manner, so too does Griselda:

"The heigh God take I for my witsse,  
And also wysly he my soule glaade -  
I neveere heeld me lady ne mistresse,  
But humble servant to your worthynesse,  
And evere shal, whil that my lyf may dure,  
Aboven every worldly creature.

That ye so longen of your benignitee  
Han holden me in honour and nobleye,  
Where as I was nocht worthy to bee,  
That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye  
Foryelde it yow; ther is namoore to seye."(821-31)

It seems that both husband or wife are deferring to some higher power for the responsibility in making their respective choices. More so than validations of freewill, Griselda and Walter become equivalent demarcations of determinism. Walter, "the gentilleste born of Lumbardye" (472), admits no accountability for his horrific actions, and Griselda, as a result of an unshakable love that leads to her "consenten," allows her one remaining virtue, her ability to "redress the common profit," to assume its most pejorative aspect, that is, that there must be something wrong with her (indeed, with all of "lower class" humanity) in the first place.

If there is indeed something "wrong" with humanity, it has a great deal to do with our struggle with death and the ways that we try to talk ourselves into a false sense of control over it through the use of narrative and definition. We may be good at

making up stories about ourselves pragmatically to suit whatever situations we encounter, but such re-definitions may prove insufficient if our personal ideas of what follows the death-event prove incorrect. Certainly, Chaucer, Ockham and others like them must have been well aware that their challenge to belief systems could have been construed as a form of sin, a way of living and communicating that might cost them considerable anguish in the alleged afterlife. Such a concern with a rather nasty interpretive judgment by God might naturally have led an author like Chaucer to try to separate himself from his stories—no mean feat in Medieval times.

In *The Manciple's Tale* we can find a narrator who excludes himself from responsibility for the issues he raises. Following this tale of authorial renunciation is the tale told by the Parson, which is not a story at all, but rather an extended sermon. And following *The Parson's Tale* is Chaucer's *Retraction*—a curious structural sequence that would tend to support the idea that Chaucer was becoming increasingly concerned with the effects of his storytelling upon his potential afterlife. The tale told by the mischievous Manciple then, along with *The Parson's Tale* and Chaucer's *Retraction*, infuses the "conclusion" (one can hardly avoid using quotation marks for such a term) of *The Canterbury Tales* with a curious take on the ideas of death, definition, narratorial voice, personal responsibility, and, most importantly, the idea of conclusion itself.

In *The Manciple's Tale*, a talking crow, "by sadde tokenes and by wordes bolde" (9.258) tells his master that his wife is an

adulteress. But the master, Phoebus Apollo, kills his wife and then, as Celeste Patton puts it, "adulterates" the story the crow gives him:

"Traitor," quod he, "with tonge of scorioun,  
Thou hast broght me to confusioun...

O deere wyf! O gemme of lustiheed  
That were so sad and eek so trewe  
Now listow deed, with face pale of hewe,  
Ful giltelees, that dorste I swere, ywys...

..."O false theef!" seyde he,  
"I wol thee quite anon thy false tale...

Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke (9.271-97)

This process of adulteration, this "making false" is in fact a form of mimesis within a mimesis. The whole process is commenced by the Manciple, who is described in the *General Prologue* as being able to "sette hir aller cap" (1.586), a phrase which is glossed as meaning that he "deceived them all." The conclusion of the tale, then, fittingly, becomes a renunciation of language, a renunciation that comes in third remove from the author, words apparently passed down from the absent "dame" (mother) of the Manciple:

"My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe  
Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe.  
Whereso thou come, amonges hye or lowe,  
Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe." (9.359-62)

The collapsing of Chaucer's voice into the Manciple's, and the Manciple's into the crow's (and for that matter, his mother's) has

led John McGavin, in a discussion of artistic responsibility, to reflect on what he calls the "unhappy" image of Chaucer that comes through in the personality of the Manciple (445-46). McGavin cites instances wherein the Manciple says things that Chaucer himself seems to be saying about his seeming need to distance himself from his work:

[There is] the Chaucer who pretends that what he has been saying is a digression but that now he will return to his real matter: 'But now to purpos, as I first bigan' (9.155); the Chaucer who misapplies exempla in a provocative way: 'Alle this ensamples speke I...' (9.187) the Chaucer who shelters behind the authority of 'olde clerkes': 'Thus writen olde clerkes in hir lyves' (9.154); the Chaucer who plays with his audience's expectations about words, and his own coarse use of them: 'Certes this is a knavysh speche...The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng' (9. 205-11); and the Chaucer who evades responsibility by pretending to ignorance: 'But for I am a man nought textueel' (9.235). (448)

McGavin suggests that Chaucer is concerned with "what might happen to such an artist," and offers the suggestion that what will happen is precisely what does happen at the end of *The Manciple's Tale*: the narrator no longer exists. One might say simply that the author is dead, and then go on to add a few more vocal appropriations to McGavin's list: the idea of Apollo, the "two-sided" "Host" (god of poetry) as usurper of voice; the Manciple's own usurping of the Cook's voice; the Host and Manciple's "explication" of the Cook; the crow's "explication" of the adulterous liason, and also its "explication" of its owner (usurping the very

words the Manciple uses to describe Phoebus earlier on); and the Manciple's final surrender of authority to his mother's words.

*The Manciple's Tale*, then, as the final "fiction" of the tales, evinces a considerably more critical tone toward the "quyting" role that Chaucer has thus far only been, shall we say, uneasy with. The progression that the tale of the Manciple takes shows a determined attempt to diminish the role of the storyteller rather than to increase it. Moreover, there is a strong sense, through the advisement neither to participate nor to take credence in "janglynge," that the writer may have serious doubts about the storytelling process's ability to offer any degree of truth to an audience or an author. Not surprisingly, then, *The Parson's Tale* moves away from fiction and into the realm of homiletic discourse, with the Parson denouncing storytelling by stating that "Thou getest fable noon ytold for me" (10.31). But then, his "tale," if it may be called that, turns out to be a series of definitions of "penitence," "confessioun," and "satisfaccioun"—the three ways to achieve salvation—and "the synnes that comen of the tongue" (10.651).

If there is any authorial motivation behind this shift, that is, if we want to call it an act of penitence, for instance, it may have something to do with Melissa Furrow's ideas about the author and damnation. Based on the cultural/historical premise that Chaucer was treading dangerously close to heresy by writing in English at a time when Latin was preferred by the church, Furrow suggests that the author may have become increasingly uncomfortable

with the possibility that his Ockhamist words might lead others astray. As she sees it:

*The Knight's Tale*, like *Troilus and Criseyde* [one could also include *The Clerk's Tale* in this group] offers an alternative view of the universe, one untethered by Christianity, one offering secular ideals of behaviour and celebrating human love and human ideals. It is not that the fictions are sinful in themselves; it is that they "sownen into synne," are conducive to sin; the author cannot trust his readers to use them right. And if the reader does not use them right, the guilt is not just the reader's, but the author's. (250)

As I see it, regardless of how the Parson's sermon is labelled or the motivation for its being written, it does constitute a shift from the use of words from "thilke that sownen into synne" (10.1085) to ones "sownynge in moral vertu" (1.307). And it is upon this shift from fiction to sermon that the *Tales* arrive at what we must deem to be their conclusion. *The Retraction's* merger with the Parson's homily then allows the voice of the author to float up and out of his work almost like a soul escaping from the body. Chaucer, the ever self-conscious practitioner, seems evidently aware that he has been "lying" all his life and all he can do now is ask God to "graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf" (10.1089). Ironically then, as the Parson observes, writing becomes Chaucer's "verray penitence, confessioun, and satisfaccioun" (10.1052) for the sinful act of writing itself, a way of attempting to alter the text of himself, a re-definition in the face of death, as it were.

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It was clearly very difficult for Chaucer to end *The Canterbury Tales*, and it is no easier to advance an argument about the structure of a collection of tales for which no original manuscript exists. While most critics have come to accept the authority of the Ellesmere edition, it must still be borne in mind that even this manuscript was not written until some fifty years after Chaucer's death. It is a testament to his reknown and ability as a storyteller that his work has survived at all, but six centuries of scholarship have taught us that there will always be a great deal about Chaucer that we can never know.

Regardless of the difficulties faced by theorists in working with questionable texts, however, it should nonetheless be apparent that the central conflict in much of Chaucer's work is very much like what Ockham and Chaucer were facing in their own lives: the seeming impossibility of a reconciliation between philosophy and faith, a reconciliation that faces its greatest obstacle in death. It is, perhaps, ironic that an author who was so concerned with both literary conclusion and his own conclusion via the death-event should have become such a significant site for critical inconclusiveness. Moreover, the way that death influences the characters within the frame, as well as the author outside, particularly when examined with Ockham's ideas in mind, suggests numerous sites for discussion.

While space does not permit in this essay, I should have liked to examine other works of Chaucer's that exhibit a similar relationship between a deconstructive literary sensibility and the idea of death, most notably *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Creseyde*. Indeed, there are many examples of an apparent affinity between Chaucer's writing style and Ockham's suspicion of the instability of the words with which humans communicate their ideas of philosophy and faith. By linking Chaucer and Ockham together, I have hopefully demonstrated how the confrontation between faith and philosophy began to change the face of storytelling, and how the way that people conceived of what was "out there" beyond this life had a direct influence on the way that people used, and continue to use, language to define themselves mimetically.

## Chapter Two

# "You are my creator, but I am your master. Obey!" :

Death, imagination and the voices of audiences and  
authors in English Romantic literature

In making the rather quantum leap from storytelling in the Middle Ages to the Romanticism of the 19th century, one must be careful not to give the impression that nothing of importance happened in between the two periods. Quite the opposite, in fact, was the case. Renaissance works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and John Donne's study of the sinfulness of suicide, *Biathanatos*, continued to provide investigation into the relationship between humans and God. And, in the 18th century, G.E. Lessing's *Laöcoon* used the moment of death as depicted in a Greek sculpture as a site for discussing the difference between the temporal and spatial arts. No work, however, moreso than William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, acts as a better bridge to the Romantic obsession with the divine powers of the imagination and

the way in which storytelling changed via the supplanting of God with the human mind.

As Shakespeare's seminally alienated character, contemplator of death, and wonderful example of "voice," Hamlet not only acts as a vehicle for what we can presume to be the author's ideas about death and storytelling, he also lends credence to the idea that it is probably a good idea to consider both sides of the death/afterlife argument. As a beginning, then, to a discussion of Romantic storytellers John Keats, Lord Byron and Mary Wolstonecraft Shelley, I want to use Hamlet as a kind of springboard to demonstrate and illuminate what was arguably the most important shift that ever occurred in storytelling, a shift that came directly as a result of human attitudes toward death and afterlife.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth Maslen's essay, "Yorick's Place in *Hamlet*," focuses on the conflict between the "natural" and the "unnatural" in Shakespeare's most well-known tragedy. Maslen states that for Hamlet, the "naturalness of death is obscured...by an unnatural view of the world" (5). This "unnatural view" is prompted by the lack of proper mourning exhibited by his mother and uncle, and furthered by his agreement to abide by the revenge wish of his deceased father. But what is Hamlet's world but unnatural death? The action of the play is driven *by* unnatural death *toward* unnatural death, and is littered throughout *with* unnatural deaths.

As well, the psychological conflict of the main character is a vacillation between suicide and murder. Using Hamlet's "loss of confidence in the natural order" (6), then, Maslen explores the way in which the two "visitants from beyond the grave," (2)—the ghost of Hamlet's father and the skull of his jester, Yorick—together create a balance between "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (1.4. 56) and death, "the leveler" (3).

Although she may not realize it—she certainly makes no mention thereof—Maslen is discussing the operation of the metaphoric/metonymic poles within the play. Her study raises an interesting question which I would like to consider as an extension to her ideas. If *Hamlet* is indeed structured by the conflict between the "natural" and the "unnatural," and if these two concepts are representations, respectively, of the metonymic and the metaphoric, what are the implications of this conflict upon the act of storytelling? Is the narrative process itself not "a loss of confidence in natural order?" While it is reasonable, on the one hand, to propose that humans shape themselves through stories, it is also important to bear in mind the effects that science and religious attitudes have had upon the purpose of those stories. I would suggest, then, that inasmuch as literature attempts to re-order reality, literature itself is re-ordered by the social reality within which it is written.

In the mid-19th century, as humanity's range of conception began to include more scientific aspects, literature, not surprisingly, was being dominated by an emphasis on imagination, and a new attitude toward the relationship between death and

story-telling was occurring. Death and afterlife, previously dramatized in stories primarily through religious metaphysical allegory, would eventually shift in interpretive possibility more toward an allegorical account of the power of the human imagination's relationship with the rest of the universe. And at the forefront of it all was poetic voice, figurative speech.

According to Gerald Doherty, metaphor consists of "the crossing of one semantic site to another" (56), and according to Lakoff and Turner, metonymy is the process wherein "one can refer to one entity in a schema by referring to another entity in the same schema" (103). Thus in the context of death, metaphor focuses on an afterlife, whereas metonymy would focus on the corpse. And it is this distinction between attitudes toward afterlife that forms the foundation of narrative strategy and authority. Moreover, it is this distinction between views of the death-event that is the dominant force behind Benjamin's change in the art and methodology—the "death," as he so bluntly puts it—of storytelling.

The advent of Romanticism is a critical juncture in the competition between the transformative and extension views of death because the Romantics began the shift from the metaphoric to the metonymic. Indeed this conflict would eventually bring an end to Romanticism and go on to structure the death debate throughout Modernist literature. It was, perhaps, inevitable that the human mind's reliance on figurative speech for definition would eventually lead to a dramatic shift in the way that humans would tell stories about death. As a thought process, that is,

"understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 5), figurative speech suggests a perpetual reorganization of categories that must necessarily lead to new ways of conceptualizing. And Hamlet, being the hopeless, imaginative, cerebrally-bound person that he is, considers the possibilities of life and death eloquently and at length.

In his most famous soliloquy—"To be or not to be..."—Hamlet is confronted by the metonymic and metaphoric poles as he considers death first as "sleep" and then reflects on "what dreams may come / When [he has] shuffled off this mortal coil." And we can see the contrast between metaphor and metonymy occurring in other Shakespearean soliloquies as well, particularly in the words of MacBeth—"a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage." While it is true that life, fictionalized or real, is brief, it is in the process of recounting it that the new breed of metonymically-biased storyteller seeks "extension:" something closer to truth, a moment of clarity or at least a chance to see things in perspective, a certain immortality in the moment—"pause," as Hamlet calls it.

Some critics have found fault with Hamlet's procrastination, but it is worth considering that perhaps it is his "loss of confidence in the natural order" that prompts him to seek "pause" from the unfathomable occurrences that he is faced with—indeed, the pausal nature of soliloquy is implicative of doubt. And it is this sense of doubt, coupled with the isolation associated with soliloquy and imaginative use of figurative language, that presents Hamlet as an archetypal Romantic hero. Moreover, the soliloquy,

the speech to "no one," is remarkably like prayer, arguably the most powerful weapon for humans in the war against mortality. But in Romantic works such as John Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion," Lord Byron's "Manfred," and Mary Wolstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we will find a new kind of prayer, a more humanistic, more subjective prayer, oriented toward the storyteller *as* god rather than merely as the teller of God's tales.

\* \* \*

Terence Hawkes notes that "it is worth pointing out that the sort of metaphors Coleridge assigned to the Imagination are those which exhibit the most obvious characteristics of speech. The interaction of the elements, the 'esemplastic' [Coleridge's term meaning 'to shape into one'] fusing together of the parts, are the sorts of things that happen, naturally, when we speak; especially if we are driven by the 'spontaneous' overflow of powerful feelings" (52). Certainly, nothing has produced more "powerful feelings" (in the guise of poetry and metaphor) than has death, and no poem could purport to do any finer job of highlighting the bond between death, story, and the ways that we speak about our most powerful feelings than John Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion." In an examination of Keats's poem, then, I want to explore the way in which, as Garrett Stewart puts it, "Romanticism brings to the fore the relation of heroism to death as rendered and even embodied by the artist, that implicit need for mortal extremity as the credential of narrative" (29).

If a truly creative journey takes one so far into the imagination that death, or at least the perception of it, is conquered, then I would suggest that John Keats was certainly one of the most imaginative of the Romantics. More so even than Coleridge, whose ideas of Imagination and Fancy provided Keats with inspiration, in works such as the "Hyperion" poems, Keats really put his imagination to the test when it came time to write. The intent of such efforts was not in the spirit of competition, however, but rather a declared necessity of creation.

C.D. Thorpe, in his treatise on the Romantic imagination, says that "Keats's conception is that the poet's being is sort of a detached entity...independent of earthly circumstances and vision, free to take leave of the body to roam about where it will...to mingle with 'essence' in 'fellowship divine'" (179). This metaphoric death that seems to precede creation is a key aspect of the Romantic tradition and Keats incorporated it in his work to the point of esotericism. In effect, an earthly sort of death was required in order to achieve poetic heroism. So why, then, was death such a bane?

When Percy Bysshe Shelley concluded "Adonais," his elegy to the recently departed John Keats, with the phrase "tis Death is dead, not he," he paid homage to Keats's own musings about the mortality of immortality as evidenced in "The Fall of Hyperion." Keats's poem, however, is "a parable not of gods demoted to mortals so much as of creatures, any creatures, recognizing the truth that they must die" (Stewart 30). More significantly, though, the poem is about the relationship between death and story, an

intricate connection of mortality and artifice. Very quickly—within the first five lines of the poem—Keats addresses the importance of figurative language in explaining the afterlife, in effect offering a defense of the work to follow:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect; the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at heaven: pity these have not  
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf  
The shadows of melodious utterance (1.2.1-5)

And what follows is at once "melodius utterance" as well "immortal sickness." For here we have the poet challenging death with words at the same time that he is engaged in interpretation of his dreamwork, attempting "To see as a God sees, and take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye / Can size and shape pervade" (1.2.304-06).

It is the notion of poetic storyteller as god, dream interpreter, if you like, that Keats, I believe, is implicitly dealing with. Moreover, because of the way that Keats asks the reader to participate in the poetic process—"Who alive can say / Thou art no poet; may'st not tell thy dreams?" (1.2.11-12)—he draws attention to his use of allegory and the way that interpretation is not restricted to just the writer. His most common way of illustrating the relationship between teller and audience is through a dream. But what can we learn about the connection between death and storytelling via the analogy of poet and dream?

"The Fall of Hyperion," like "The Eve of St. Agnes," takes as a major concern the issue of how to tell a story "without losing one's self in the telling," as Marjorie Levinson declares. "To tell [the dream] correctly: in its own language or in the spirit of the original is to resign one's self to the order of organic repetition....The way to resist [the dream] is to frame, corrupt, and estrange the vision, as by the medium of a material 'shadow' language" (213). By challenging the authority of the dream, by "estranging" it, poetry, then—indeed, all forms of storytelling—projects a kind of Romantic heroism upon venturing into the unknown. Hence, the attraction of the sublime. Death, the ultimate alienation, takes on a new appeal, not as something to be experienced (such is not possible anyway), but rather, something to be challenged through verse. Consequently, Romantic heroism in Keats's eyes would be more likely to be a profound imaginative vision of death rather an interest in its actuality (could this be the real reason why he gave up the practice of medicine?).

Language is certainly used as a distancing device in "The Fall of Hyperion." The speaker is made to defend his poetic abilities in a region curiously similar to Chaucer's *House of Fame*. It is not surprising that Keats would have made death—the ultimate distancing of a storyteller from an audience—a significant part of fame. Levinson states that "[t]he special inferiority which Moneta ascribes—honorifically—to the poet is a function of his alienation: from his audience, his precursors, and his fantasies....The poet, silenced by the sheer perversity of Moneta's accusations, is positioned by that silence as a spectator" (216). But we need to

remember that Moneta is no less a product of Keats's voice than is the poet/speaker. The poet, as imaginative audience to and author of the gods, replaces the apparent metaphysical allegory with a new kind of metaphors: an allegory of the power of the human imagination, particularly in regard to the type and purpose of afterlife.

Bearing in mind that the relationship between the goddess and the poet is not unlike our own relationship with Keats, we can possibly glean some insight into one Romantic poet's sense of how death "speaks" to him, and how verse might alleviate his suffering over his eventual demise. Listen to Moneta as she develops a theory of tropes as part of her explanation of an agony not unlike that experienced by Chaucer's old man, an agony founded in the unnerving experience of "deathwards progressing / To no death (1.2.620-21):

Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright,  
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,  
Making comparisons of earthly things;  
Or thou might'st listen better to the wind,  
Whose language is to thee a barren noise  
Though it blows legend-laden through the trees (2.2.1-6)

Like the storyteller, or in this case, the poet, the goddess must liken her thoughts to those of her listener. She must create an artifice that allows experience to be effectively exchanged. With this notion in mind, we can look back on the speaker's struggle to surmount another "artifice" in the poem, the "immortal steps" of the goddess's altar—the same steps which the speaker

must "ascend" in order to avoid dying. And just "one minute before death," the speaker's "iced foot" touches the lowest stair "and as it touch'd, life seem'd / To pour in at the toes" (1.2.32-34). Is this not both an account of metaphor as well as a metaphorical account of the power of poetry—and, ultimately, storytelling—to surmount death? We can say then that, in describing death in imaginative terms, the storyteller provides the reader, as Benjamin does, "with the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" (101). But, considering the shift from metaphysical allegory to an allegorizing of the power of the human imagination, what does it say about storytelling when the death is the teller's own?

John Keats's death of tuberculosis—indeed, the "popularity" of death by tuberculosis in 19th-century literature—is a significant touchstone in discussing the changes in storytelling that have transpired over the last two hundred or so years. As Peter Brooks declares in response to Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, "[t]he Romantic era, which was busy making the individual ego the center of the universe—since traditional transcendent Sacred terms of meaning had lost their coherence and assent—needed a modern, individual fatality: a disease which selected the individual, and conferred upon him a special destiny" (440). But this is surely an indication of alienation, is it not? Moreover, it focuses upon the artist. Brooks's statement is supported by Paul Cantor's idea that "[i]n Keats's myth, the fallen god in fact becomes an image of the Romantic artist himself" (25). This concept of a "fall" is not only *à propos* to a discussion of death and storytelling,

it also provides a useful starting point for an examination of another important use of voice during the Romantic period.

\* \* \*

The works of George Gordon, Lord Byron, have been considered the most inconsistent with the Romantic movement. M.H. Abrams largely excluded Byron from *Natural Supernaturalism* on the grounds that "he deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries" (13). And yet, upon close examination, it becomes apparent that Byron was perhaps the *most* Romantic of writers. For instance, in terms of voice, perspective, "implied author" (Wayne Booth's term) or however one wishes to describe the relationship between writer and narrator, Lord Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" is significant in that "Harold's responses to his experiences and the scenes through which he moves remain to the end simply the narrator's," as W.H. Marshall observes (Introduction to *Lord Byron: Selected Poems* xiv). Indeed, Byron may be said to be using the narrator—himself—to impose a unity of theme that might not exist otherwise. It is, perhaps, this idea of humanity-imposed order that concerned Byron most. His dissatisfaction with both poets and politicians of his day was reflected in poems like "Darkness"—"a dream which was not all a dream" (219). This horrific vision of a dead planet says much about how Byron felt about the political and literary circumstances in which he lived. Indeed, many of his poems took

death as a dominant theme. Works such as "So We'll Go No More A-Roving," "Cain," "Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed from a Skull," and many others found Byron taking a sympathetic stance toward death as, using Maslen's term, the "leveler."

Although Byron's worldview might have seemed despairing, at least it was *his own* view. If one of the Romantic poets stands out as most heroic in life—based on a struggle for individuality and the alienation that frequently follows—rather than in verse, it must be Byron. Just as the narrator of "Don Juan" seems to lose his desire for heroism at the end of the poem, so too does Byron again and again throughout his career, and considering his position amongst Romantic poets, such weariness is fitting. It is important to bear in mind, as Percy Shelley did in the preface to "Prometheus Unbound," that "Poets...are in one sense, the creators and in another the creations of their age" (135). Perhaps because of Byron's chronological position as the "last" of the Romantic poets, it is not surprising that the ideals held by those who preceded him not only influenced him but also provided him with satirical targets. It is in this Byronic sense of satire that I wish to examine one of his most intriguing works, "Manfred." But before doing so, I want to provide some historical backgrounding of the Romantic hero for whom Manfred acts elegiacally.

While Keats declared his world to be that of the imagination, Thorpe describes Byron as focusing on the "particular" (189). It was this desire for something more concrete that led Byron to push the boundaries of Romantic thought in a more Modernist direction. Whereas Keats yearned for absolutes, Byron wandered

somewhere between a need for universals and a fear of relativism. As Jean Hall notes in her study of the Romantic desire to test the limits of the imagination, it is the "incessant mobility" (111) of Byron's ideas and aspirations that distinguishes him from the other major Romantic poets (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake and Keats). Moreover, it is Byron's search for outward rather than inward heroism that sets his use of narratorial voice in stark contrast to Keats's. According to Hall:

Where Keats aspires to a poetic heroism that will renew nature through the invisible and powerful participation of the poet, Byron wants to be highly visible and superficially impressive, but actually powerless. (111)

I wonder, though, whether Byron wants to be powerless or whether he is trying to create a more accurate reflection of mortality than he perceived the other Romantic poets to be doing. Indeed, there may be many reasons for Byron's "antithetical mix" of Romantic tradition and renegade scorn, not the least of which are historical.

As Abrams notes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, "the English Romantic era, which occurred hard upon the French Revolution, amid war and rumours of war, and in the stress of social and political adjustments to the Industrial Revolution" (326), was a time not only of political strife but philosophical dilemmas as well. Sensitive to the role of "legislator" that was his birthright, Byron took his seat in the House of Lords in 1809. "Declaring himself independent of political parties," as Marjean Purinton notes (56),

the poet soon realized that the types of social reform he sought were not the sorts of things that could be achieved through the bureaucratic parliamentary process. After a few years of trying, Byron eventually abandoned the game of government and turned completely to poetry and theatre. Purinton calls attention to Byron's "poetical scribblings" in a letter written to Lady Melbourne in the fall of 1813, which paints an accurate picture of the political milieu that was England at the time:

Tis said—*Indifference* marks the present time  
Then hear the reason —though 'tis told in rhyme—  
A King who *can't*—a Prince of Wales who don't—  
Patriots who shan't—Ministers who won't—  
What matters who are in and out of place  
The Mad—the Bad—the Useless—or the Base? (57)

Appropriately, Byron's response to the legislative idiosyncrasies of Parliament are not so much different from his attitude toward the traditional Romantic hero.

Inasmuch as the Romantic tradition idealized the solitary poet-hero, the movement as a whole was setting itself up for disintegration. How could the promotion of sensitivity and introspection, imaginative and visionary powers, and glorification of the outcast not eventually lead at least one follower down the road toward alienation from the other Romantics who had come before him? It does not matter whether Byron adopted his fate consciously or whether it was thrust upon him by critics. That he is described by a major theorist like Abrams as an "ironic-counter voice" (13) only goes to show just how much of a Romantic Byron

really was. He, like many of the speakers in his poems, was the author as death, clothed in black, awaiting the reader with sickle in hand.

It is fitting that "Manfred" was at the time of its publication (1817), and continues to be, an enigma. The story (although few would call it that), involves a magician who has left society for the isolation of the Alps in hopes of attaining some knowledge from the spirit world. Although the magician seems more interested in dying than anything else—partly because of some great torment wreaked upon him by a love affair that seemingly resulted in his lover's death, but mostly because he wants "forgetfulness," freedom from his own mind—he nonetheless is saved from suicide by a Chamois (deer) Hunter and urged vainly toward conversion by an Abbott, before eventually achieving his goal of death (an event foretold by his departed beloved, Astarte).

Much of the drama is monologic in nature, and there is really no action to speak of, other than the suicide attempt and a few collapses. One reviewer was driven to describe the tragedy as "quite unfitted for the stage....Lord Byron is not to be comprehended by everyone, and least of all by the *crowd*" (Reiman 1251). The drama, described by Byron himself as "mental theatre," does not so much tell a story as it provides, in large part, a monologue on what it was like to be Lord Byron. I cannot help but find it astonishing (although this may be a flaw in my research) that no one has proposed that Manfred's dark secret, "the deadliest sin to love as we have loved" (2.3.123) was a reference to Byron's homosexuality. But that is beside the point.

What matters most about the use of voice in "Manfred" is the way that the speaker engages the supernatural in conversation.

As in "The Fall of Hyperion," we certainly see the relationship between men and gods being explored. But in Byron's work, unlike Keats's, the tone is not one of awe and respect. In "Manfred," death—without afterlife—is a welcome respite rather than something to be feared:

Say that. . . I shall die  
For hitherto all hateful things conspire  
To bind me in existence—in a life  
Which makes me shrink from Immortality—  
A future like the past. (2.3.125-30)

But the exact nature of death is consistently rendered ambivalent throughout the drama and most clearly at its finale when the Abbott says "his soul hath ta'en its earthless flight; Whither? I dread to think—but he is gone" (3.4.160-61). This uncertainty about humanity's place in the cosmos is highlighted further by the correspondence that is drawn between Manfred and the spirit in Act 3, scene 2. According to Erika Gottlieb:

The spirit bears the traditional appearance of Satan, and seems to represent Manfred's eternal damnation, "the immortality of Hell" (3.4.78). Yet he is also the essence of Manfred's own being, "The genius of this mortal" (3.4.81). He proves to be yet another mirror image of Manfred himself, and the Abbott's question, "Why dost he gaze on thee and thou on him?" (3.4.75) succinctly describes this fact. (103)

As in "Cain," his later meta-allegory, Byron creates a Romantic mythic hero who "finds himself turning into a parody or mirror image of the God he hates: isolated, discontented, and destroying others to relieve his own frustration" (Cantor 140). The difference between "Cain" and "Manfred," however, is that for Manfred, the power, he declares to one of the Spirits, is in his own hands:

Thou hast no power upon me, that I feel;  
Thou shalt never possess me, that I know:  
What I have done is done; I bear within  
A torture which could nothing gain from thine:  
The Mind which is immortal makes itself  
Requittal for its good and evil thoughts  
Is its own origin of ill and end...

—Back ye baffled fiends!

The hand of Death is on me—but not yours. (3.4.125-41)

For this reason, then, we could say that for Manfred, humans are the true gods. It is critical to note, however, that the humans who attain god-like status for Manfred are aligned with the poet's audience rather than, as was the case with Keats, the poets themselves. This difference is fundamental in assessing the place of "Manfred" in Romantic storytelling as authorized by death.

Reading the text of "Manfred" as "self-divided and self-critical" (126), Alan Richardson notes the drama's "ambivalent relation to the stage" and points out that "Byron's complication of conventional generic boundaries illustrates simultaneously the Romantic impatience with traditional forms...and makes us more self-conscious regarding literary kinds" (126, 127). Relating

"Manfred"'s unconventional form with its thematic concerns, Richardson suggests that Manfred's debt to other literary models, such as Faust and Milton's Satan, is a reflection "of the poet's anxiety [about] literary precedents, the burden of the past" (129). To take Richardson's ideas as a jumping-off point, then, I want to propose that the allegory contained in "Manfred" is the death of Romantic idealism.

The ambivalence with which Manfred faces his demise is akin to the allegorization of the reader's powers of imagination, for once the audience has become as disillusioned as the storyteller, then a kind of literary death occurs. And in such a death, heaven and hell are moot. Presence is replaced by absence, and that is all. The role of the hero is supplanted by nothing. And the teller, the tale and the reader are all left to fend for themselves. This is surely how death authorizes storytelling, is it not? It is that point in the narrative/interpretive experience when one sees, exquisitely, the unalterable separation of author, text and reader, and how each must face the struggle between preservation of their beliefs and sacrificing of preconceptions in order to arrive at a shared sense of meaning. Dead to the world, as they enter the realm of imagination, creature and creator become locked in perpetual chase.

\* \* \*

Just one of the many intriguing aspects of Mary Wolstonecraft Shelley's most famous work, *Frankenstein*, is

the way that many readers give the name of the monster's creator to the monster himself. This metonymy of maker and made has been extensively explored by Paul Cantor in *Creature and Creator: Mythmaking and English Romanticism*. Noting how "many readers have sensed" that Frankenstein and the monster "are the same being," Cantor goes on to observe that, "[a]s creator, this being feels an exhilarating sense of power, an ability to transgress all the limits traditionally set to man....But as creature, this being feels his impotence, feels himself alone in a world...in which he is doomed to wander without companions to a solitary death" (106-07).

Extending Cantor's creature/creator dichotomy to a consideration of Mary Shelley's place as a female amongst the predominantly male Romantic authors, let's start with the assumption that the monster is not a man, but a woman. This idea is not a new one. Indeed, as Jenny Newman suggests in her essay, "Mary and the Monster," "the monster's unique experience of knowing what it is to be born free of history, his social illegitimacy, his namelessness, nameless as a woman in a patriarchal society, make him figuratively feminine" (87). This business of "monstrous" as "feminine" is an intriguing one. In a study that provides a great deal of historical backgrounding to Shelley's place amongst the Romantic "old boy's club," Sarah Gilbert and Susan Gubar compare the Monster to Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "His shuddering sense of deformity, his nauseating size, his namelessness, and

his orphaned, motherless isolation link him with Eve and with Eve's double, Sin" (239).

Paraphrasing Jacques Lacan in a study that uses *Frankenstein* as one of a number of models for psychological theories of literature, Terry Eagleton writes that "it is an original lost object—the mother's body—which drives forward the narrative of our lives, impelling us to pursue substitutes for this *lost paradise* in the endless metonymic movement of desire" (185). The Monster, herself (I will momentarily substitute feminine for masculine pronouns when referring to the creature) says of *Paradise Lost*:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature. (129)

When the Monster does try to make communication with the cottagers, she is rejected soundly, and she declares that she "could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted [her]self with their shrieks and misery" (136). This action is, of course, repressed. Like Eve then, with her "moral deformity," the Monster does not belong to the class of "superior beings." She is not welcome within the symbolic order, nor, in her rage, can she be forced to remain outside of it. Anarchy would appear to be her only recourse. The Monster is not *man*, but it is the difference from *man* that gives her meaning. And as she

herself observes, trapped in the symbolic order, she is doomed forever to try to return to the imaginary:

God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred. (130)

No wonder she wants Victor to create another female!

Certainly it is clever and amusing to allegorize any work of fiction in a manner such as I have just done, but this is a mere beginning to my larger project, which is to compare the supernatural aspects of *Frankenstein* with those in "The Fall of Hyperion" and *Manfred*. To begin, we might note how Shelley may be using the larger-scale frame of the novel to evoke a more effective sense of time and space in her storytelling. It is this more powerful sense of reality that the novel contains that associates it with a metonymic view of the death-event and projects the Romantic vision onto Modernist literature—ironically, or perhaps, appropriately, through the death of its ideals. Moreover, the way that Shelley constructs her story indicates her dissatisfaction with Romantic idealism, and offers a clue (like "Manfred") into the way that the allegorization of the readerly imagination at the cost of the typical metaphysical allegory leads us into doubts of an afterlife.

At the end of *Frankenstein*, the Monster (and here, I return now to the male pronoun) endeavors to defend himself to Walton,

saying that he will not cause anyone any more harm, with the exception of himself:

My work is nearly complete. Neither you nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being, and accomplish that which must be done; but it requires my own. Do not think that I shall be slow to perform this sacrifice. (222)

This is the role of both reader and storyteller in the true Romantic tradition. Both parties in the interpretive process have completed their "work" only when they have died to the world and allowed themselves to agree with their creator. The accomplishment of storytelling then becomes something other than a sharing of information. It becomes a sharing of being. But this is at odds with the Romantic ideal, is it not? What happened to the solitary figure, alienated from society, bound up in imagination in search of transcendence? Well, the hero is still there, but in the eyes of fringe Romanticists like Byron and Mary Shelley, the hero has become a monstrosity.

It is perhaps a feature of heroism that it requires something inferior to distinguish itself by. And perhaps it is this "superiority complex" that seems inherent in Romanticism that causes its heroes to stumble upon catching glimpses of the sufficiency of the ordinary. As Fred Botting notes, "Frankenstein's subject position is constituted by a desire for transcendence, for an imaginary totality that encounters its lack when confronted by the otherness of the monster" (15). If we push the allegory further and propose

that *poetry encounters its lack when confronted by the novel in the same way that men encounter their lack when confronted by women in the same way that life encounters its lack when confronted by death*, we may find at the root of such speculation the senses of wonder and fear that motivate all creation. But such an idea will have to be the basis of another study which takes the death of Romantic idealism as its starting point. Here, I want to focus instead on the novel's structure as an indication of its parallel with "encountering its own lack."

The structural basis of *Frankenstein* is essentially a frame within a frame within a frame. The outer frame is the story told by Captain Walton, the shipmaster whose own sense of adventure leaves him in danger of mutiny by his crew; the secondary frame is the story of Victor Frankenstein, as told to Walton; and the innermost frame is the Monster's story, as told to his creator. This structure reaches its "deepest" point, that is, with the Monster recounting his own version of *Paradise Lost*, his futile attempt to explain himself to humans and thus to acquire their love and understanding. But despite his ability to control language, his corpse-like bodily presence is too overwhelming for him to be accepted. So begins the narrative progression back to the surface (opening) level. But the end of the novel plunges back to the root and gives the Monster the final speech of the story, saying "My spirit will sleep in peace or if it thinks it will not think thus" (223). The Monster's lack of satisfaction with his time in the world will not be alleviated by some cosmic justice, but rather by

an absence of pain and torturous workings of his imagination. The only justice, if there is such a thing, that the Monster will ever encounter is, as Cantor declares, "the scene many a Romantic poet dreamed of: the opportunity to confront his creator and tell him how thoroughly he bungled the job" (127). It would seem that *Frankenstein* is as much, if not more, of a destruction myth than a creation one.

Ernst Cassirer, in a consideration of symbolic forms in *Frankenstein* and other Romantic works, suggests that this "vortical structure" of the novel "might reveal a certain temporal *gestalt*, a coming and going, a rhythmical being and becoming" (108). Charles Schug, in his discussion of Frankenstein's place in the genesis of the modern novel, draws attention to the "whirlpool" effect of the novel, and states that it "depends for its effect" upon "the active participation [of] the reader [who] creates the novel along with the implied author" (73). Whereas both Cassirer and Schug focus on the novel more in terms of its effect rather than its cause, Elisabeth Bronfen uses a theory of Walter Benjamin's to connect Cassirer and Schug's ideas of the author/reader relationship with that of Shelley and her mother:

One has often thought of the creation of great works of art in the image of birth. This image is dialectic; it circumscribes the process in two directions. One has to do with creative conception and its genius concerns femininity. This femininity exhausts itself after the fulfillment. It gives life to the art work and then dies. What dies in the master artist once creation has been fulfilled is that part in him, in which creation was conceived. Now, the fulfillment of the art work—and that leads to the other side of this process—is nothing dead...here, too, one can speak of birth. For in the

process of being fulfilled the creation gives birth once again to the creator. Not in his feminine mode, in which his creation was conceived, but rather in his masculine element. Reanimated, he exceeds nature...he is the masculine first-born of the art work, which he once conceived. (438)

Applying Benjamin's idea to the relationship between Victor Frankenstein, the monster, the women in the novel and Mary Shelley herself, Bronfen draws attention to the role of the feminine in the novel by pointing out that "the birth of the writer means a usurpation of the maternal role that leads to its elimination....Particularly striking in Mary Shelley's case is the blurring of the figural and the literal since her birth as a writer was a repetition of the matricide that her physical birth entailed" (131). This idea of *Frankenstein* being an allegory of Shelley's relationship with her mother suggests a parallel with the author's other "family": Romantic writers.

As a female in a literary family largely comprised of men, Mary Shelley must have felt an enormous pressure to outdo her male counterparts. As Cantor puts it in his article "Mary Shelley and the Taming of the Byronic Hero," "in the "Romantic war with *Paradise Lost*, it is hardly surprising that a woman should emerge as one of the fiercest fighters: She exposes the dark side of Romanticism, the destructive potential of the egotism and narcissism that lies barely concealed beneath the new Romantic premium on the self" (135). This attitude of Shelley's toward ego, I would suggest, is not only related to her being a woman in the company of men, but also plays a role in the way that she does

battle, particularly in light of the way that Keats and Byron fight (perceived) gods moreso than men. Both of these factors provide an important clue into the way that Romantic poetry gave rise to the modern novel.

By presenting notions of a fall, and by allegorizing the reader into the role of this fallen creature, Shelley, Keats and Byron used the idea of death as a form of birth for freedom of thought. And it is this freedom, however racked with doubt and "pause" it may be, that characterizes modern literature. As Schug observes, the truth in the modern novel, "if it exists at all, exists only in readers' minds after it has been pieced together by those readers themselves, rather than by a single narrator...Likewise, when we discover the reader being asked to take on the role of narrator, we should investigate a possible connection to Romanticism" (234). Certainly this idea of "the reader being asked to take on the role of narrator" is allegorized at the centre of *Frankenstein's* vortex. The Monster, as reader of *Paradise Lost*, endeavors to use knowledge gleaned from the epic to come terms with its own fall. In this sense, the Monster is the archetypal modern reader, refusing to be dominated by his creator. As the monster so eloquently explains, "You are my creator, but I am your master. Obey!" (201).

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The modern reader's imagination, I would suggest, is more effectively allegorized by the novel because it more closely

approximates reality than does poetry, and it is through the subtlety of this approximation that the reader is more effectively "made monstrous." But the progression toward this approximation was driven dramatically forward by the way in which Romantic poets such as Keats and Byron, working out of the tradition of Chaucer and Shakespeare, quite literally forced their readers to think for themselves. If the Romantics added one important footnote to this process, it was as Cantor states, that "they tell the story of a fall, but give no clear view of the state from which man fell or to the state to which he might aspire to undo the fall" (192). Cantor notes, as I did in the introduction to this project, that this vision of the human condition is similar to the position that Martin Heidegger takes in *Being and Time*:

So neither must we take the fallenness of *Dasein* as a 'fall' from a purer and higher primal status'...We would also misunderstand the ontological-existential structure of falling if we were to ascribe to it the sense of a bad and deplorable ontical property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves. (220)

Heidegger's statement is an important one, for it points toward the fundamental need of humans to project themselves beyond the moment. But the danger in such projection is that we may well see the singular truth of our individual futures: demise.

Everywhere we turn, then, in search of explanation, we see death or impending death. Each voice that rises up in explication does so in full consciousness of its temporality, and it is, perhaps, this temporality that links storytelling and death so closely

(although with the advent of Modernist literature we shall see how the spatial aspect of literature relates death and narrative). The concern of an accumulating history, however, is the escalating confrontation of metaphor and metonymy in the imagination: the more experience we have to develop our ideas from, the less certain we become of our knowledge of anything. And, then, we always have the unexperienceable at the centre of our thought process, as though to confirm that the storytelling imagination must push ever onward. The very moment of creation starts the process toward death: "Once upon a time [sometime and somewhere else] there was [says someone else to someone else]...an ending [that signals the beginning of something else]."

Chapter Three:

## "dying is fine)but Death"

Conflict, death and storytelling in the Modernist period

If we can see the story (or "text," as we prefer in the late 20th century) as a kind of corpse that the author presents to a critical audience for dissection, we can use the "death of definition" analogy—the search for the limits of literary possibility as a metaphorical product of the basic human thought systems that emerge from our sense of mortality—to commence a study of Modernism. Unlike the Middle Ages, wherein the relationship between storyteller and audience was as intimate as the relationship between the body of the deceased and the mourners, the Modernist era—by virtue of mass print media and the increasing role of the hospital as mask of death—focused more on distance than intimacy in matters of meaning. The text, like the corpse, perhaps due to an increasing cerebralism, became something that one thought about moreso than experienced. In the same way that literary criticism was developing an abundance

of potential reading "modes" that threatened to sever completely the author from not only the work, but the audience as well, generalizations about death were replaced by the feeling that each of us must make very personal decisions as to our belief-systems.

It was the conflict that arose between mortality and immortality, represented in an artistic and metaphysical sense by time and space, that gave way to what we call Modernist literature. Storytellers such as T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence came on the literary scene with works that challenged the Romantic ideas of "Divinity in everything," including a sense of continuity and unity that the storyteller—by virtue of his or her distancing and imagination—could realize in an almost supernatural way. Replacing Romantic idealism with disturbing visions of fragmentation, isolation, and the ironic alienation generated by urban life, Modernist storytelling made its most significant mark by attempting to merge the concept of space—through conflict and alienation—with the most temporal of arts, literature. In Modernist literature, space corresponds to metonymy, while time is aligned with metaphor, a statement neatly evinced in Paul's thoughts at the end of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*:

Everywhere the vastness and terror of the immense night which is roused and stirred for a brief while by the day, but which returns, and will remain at last eternal, holding everything in its silence and its living gloom. There was no Time, only Space. Who could say his mother had lived and did not live. She had been in one place, and was in another; that was all. (420)

In his essay, "Death and the Rhetoric of Representation in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*," Gerald Doherty explores the way in which the "competition" between metaphor and metonymy "project two antagonistic value systems, each one of which gives the death-event its own characteristic significance" (56). Doherty uses the actions and attitudes of characters in Lawrence's early Modernist novel to raise fundamental questions about human responses toward dying and also to focus upon "the crossing point where past and future indices meet" (71). As he sees it:

Like metaphor, death too enacts a change in the mode of meaning-relations, achieved through transformation of sense, based on similarities and differences between the domains....Structured as metaphor, representations of the death-event are powerfully teleological, geared to future disclosures: the unknown mapped in terms of the known, the invisible in terms of the visible. As such, they possess a vivid explanatory force, mediating the present in the light of a future which it resembles and toward which it is oriented. (57)

According to Doherty, whereas the metaphoric approach looks beyond the present, the metonymic approach "forecloses the future" (60); metonymy, then, is like taking a close-up photograph of the body, as it were, with nothing else in the frame but the grisly sight of the corpse as a reminder of the absence of life. And the "crossing point where past and future indices meet," is the moment when the Romantic sensibility encounters Modernism, the confrontation between "contemporary configurations which strip death of meaning and explanation" and a "traditional metaphoric which recuperates death as transcendence" (71).

At risk of alienating myself from "strict" Modernists, I will extend the chronological boundaries of Modernism past the Second World War and well into the early 1960s. In so doing, I hope to show that the sort of intellectualism that we call Modernism is essentially about conflict, and that the increasing complexity of literature in the 20th century made delimitations of Modernism less a matter of periodization than of thought and experience. As a part of my project to extend the boundaries of Modernism, then, I wish to consider some writers less popularly linked to the movement than Lawrence and Eliot. As well, I would like to demonstrate the range of works within which the "death of definition" idea is applicable. In the present chapter, I will draw upon works by William Butler Yeats, W.H. Auden, e.e. cummings, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Sylvia Plath as important Modernist representations of the relationship between death and storytelling. To commence such a study, it would, no doubt, first be appropriate to provide some explication of Modernist literature.

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In terms of chronological boundaries, Modernist literature is associated with the time from the outset of World War I until, perhaps, the end of World War II. Some literary historians move the starting date back into the 1890s and the conclusion of significant literary shifts to not beyond 1930. It is not so important, however, to be aware of the exact era of Modernism as

it is to come to some understanding of its sensibilities. As Ricardo Quinones declares in his mapping of literary modernism, this "climate of opinion" (1) was pervaded by a sense of something "almost brutally discordant, suggesting the divergence between human emotions and needs and the facts of natural or social experience" (130). If the Romantics made the first dramatic shifts in the relationship between storyteller and audience along the journey toward alienation, then the Modernists certainly continued down the same path. But it would be imprudent to ignore the differences between the two movements.

Certainly the most significant dissimilarity between Romantic and Modernist modes of alienation was the "goal" of each. While the Romantics—perhaps with exception of Byron, who was as much an early Modernist as a late Romantic in terms of his attitude toward his literary "scene"—were concerned with finding an organic unity that could be better seen from a wider perspective, the Modernists were more interested in the perpetual conflict that arose from the chaos of nonconformity. As Quinones observes:

The complex central consciousness affirms both the separate reality of the self and the multiplicity of the world that it registers and reflects....This principle accounts for the strength of Modernism, its ability to present a rich variety of perspectives, all of which are "true," and none of which is victimized by any humbling disclaimers of "subjectivism."  
(116-17)

Unlike the Romantics, who found the Divine in everything, and who did so through the subjective juxtapositioning of the artist

and the work of art, the Modernists sought to give their audience a "fuller picture of the complex nature of reality" (117) via a disruption of the continuum between story as history and story as fragmentation. This strategy drew together, in a very important sense, the relationship between time and space.

From a scientific perspective, Quinones notes, the rise of Modernism can be linked to the publishing of Einstein's Theory of Relativity in 1916. This correspondence between literature and science is important particularly in regard to the way that storytelling and death are connected. As a product of science, the strict structuring of time—the great legacy of the Renaissance—had a definite societal influence upon current literary modes and preferences. If the Romantics, then, could be said to have used time as a way of addressing mortality—particularly the relationship of adult to child, and the yearning for control over time as evidenced in works such as Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality"—then the Modernists (Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an excellent example of this) used mortality as a way of addressing time. In other words, for the Romantics, the ultimate triumph of humanity was the ability to use the imagination in such a way as to see the "beyondness" in things. For the Modernists, there was no triumph, just a powerful intellectual realization of a conflict grounded in death's harshness and an unsuccessful explanation thereof. In yet another way of describing this difference, a way most aptly suited to a discussion of literature, the Romantics tended to think metaphorically, while the Modernists were more metonymic in nature.

The distinction between metaphoric and metonymic conceptions of the death-event is important to an understanding of the way that the Modernists differed from their literary predecessors. For the Modernists, a metaphoric conception of death implies a transformative sense of the death-event not so much in terms of an afterlife but, rather, a progressive sense of life. This progressive sense of life necessitates a need for survival in order that death may be *reached* rather than succumbed to. In this sense, extended survival transforms death into less of a failure. In the metonymic conception of the relation between time and death, the corpse stands still and silent as a spatial reminder of the perpetual "nowness" of time, the shattering of the illusion of progression. For the Modernists, both of these attitudes are acceptable, yet they stand in direct opposition to one another. As Quinones explains, the storytelling strategies that emerged from this opposition of attitudes grew out of a "strongly felt tension, an ever-present danger from which [the writers] must save themselves, the fear of being swallowed, of pitching oneself into the abyss" (163). The "death of definition" idea enters the conflict because of the way in which the Modernists used language to do battle, so to speak, with death—it was a different sort of language than the Romantics had used, however, for it was *the language of space rather than time*.

\* \* \*

The early Modernists, possibly as a direct response to the poetic death in youth that so appealed to the Romantics, were overtly interested in survival. According to Quinones, it was not an interest in "continuity" that appealed to them, but rather a revulsion against the way that "death seemed to scar existence badly" (162). Moreover, the triumph of death was, in essence, the triumph of time over space, a competition that the Modernists were determined not to lose. One early Modernist, motivated by his Romantic roots, makes an interesting case study in the progression of ideas—particularly those regarding death—between the periods. William Butler Yeats's storytelling career was marked by a gradual shift from the Romantic belief in the power of the subjective imagination as a governing force in the universe to the bleak Modernist perspective of an uncontrollable life that moves toward ultimate tragedy and despair. Moreover, Yeats's interest in the occult, reincarnation and "death and immortality as one single unbroken journey" (Raine 53) connects his attitude toward the death-event with his position on the cusp of Modernism.

In Yeats's short poem "Death" —produced late in his career— the speaker sets up a conflict between humans and other animals.

Nor dread nor hope attend  
A dying animal;  
A man awaits his end  
Dreading and hoping all;  
Many times he died,  
Many times rose again.  
A great man in his pride  
Confronting murderous men

Casts derision upon  
Supersession of breath;  
He knows death to the bone—  
Man has created death.

The implication behind the difference between humans and other animals lies in the power of the human intellect to conceive of the process of reincarnation, which is proposed in the following two lines: "Many times he died / Many times rose again." Also, implicit in this suggestion of reincarnation, however, is the idea that not every human being is as confident in rebirth as is the speaker, since the waiting involves both "dreading" and "hoping." Consequently, the poem gains its strength not so much from the proposition of immortality, but from the tension that exists between doubt and faith. Perhaps because the speaker so obviously associates himself with the "great man" who "knows death to the bone," there is a significant indication that a hierarchy exists amongst humans as well as in the animal kingdom as a whole. I think that there is, in fact, more than a little doubt in the speaker's voice as to the certainty of reincarnation. Rather, there is a sense of vanity and self-consciousness—the speaker uses the word "pride"—that goes along with the power of the intellect and imagination. The answer to the question that Larry Brunner asks in his study of subjective salvation in Yeats's poetry—"if man, in creating death, is indeed in charge of the process of death and rebirth, to what purpose has he done this?" (68)—may be that humans have not created death so much as they have *conceived* it.

As a poet bridging the Romantic and Modernist periods (he lived from 1865 until 1939), Yeats began his storytelling career with a Romantic sensibility firmly in place. The importance of imagination (conception might be an interesting alternative to this most popular of Romantic words), and the relationship of art to living things is apparent in Yeats's earliest work. But there is also an immediate sense of a world that is no longer interested in Romanticism, a Modernist world which would eventually leave Yeats in some doubt about the nature of truth. In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," for instance, the speaker states that "Of old the world on dreaming fed; Grey truth is now her painted toy." Highlighting the role of the storyteller in such a place, the speaker declares that "words alone are certain good." This sense of literature and the power of the imagination to regain some mastery over the "greyness" of truth is the vital link between Romanticism and Modernism.

One of the Modernists' key contentions, an idea that emerged from a heightened intellectualism, was that while it is possible to use words to confront truth, as soon as we use those words, the things we have described become secondary. As Peter Nicholls, in a discussion of death and desire in Modernism, points out:

The word gives us, then, the meaning of the thing, but in doing so replaces what it names, thus condemning the thing to a kind of non-being. This understanding of the negating power of a language, its way of obtaining meaning at the expense of the things it names, might easily produce an elegiac poetics of distance and loss. (285)

It is hardly surprising that, as literary techniques became a larger source of interest to critics than the poetic power of the imagination, the relationship between signifier and signified (Ferdinand de Saussure's *cours in linguistiques generale* emerged during this period) would supercede the relationship between humans and God. The text, like the corpse, would take on a power of its own that no amount of authorial intent, or religious dogma could fully overcome. "For the Early Modernists, the artwork rather than the artist causes the world to be" (46), states Bruce Fleming in his study of Modernism and its "discontents." But for the later Modernists, there was a sense of uneasiness with the power of the critical interpreter to supplant the author. In W.H. Auden's elegy to his mentor, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," the poet presents a seemingly direct affront to Yeats's belief in reincarnation. How might we use this work in order to see how it was the *story* of the artist, rather than the artist personally, that caused the late Modern world to be?

In reading Auden's elegy, it is hard to ignore the dejection that pervades the initial stanzas, and, indeed, the entire poem:

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
And snow disfigured the public statues;  
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a cold dark day.

Far from his illness  
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;

By mourning tongues  
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,  
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;  
The provinces of his body revolted,  
The squares of his mind were empty,  
Silence invaded the suburbs,  
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

It is as if the speaker is confronting the end of storytelling altogether, as though the audience, left to its devices, would finally sever their relationship for all time. This separation of the storyteller from his work was, based on these concerns, evidently a great cause for alarm. As Lucy McDiarmid notes, Auden, like Yeats and Eliot, was very much interested in the way that "the 'saved' world of the work of art becomes more separate from the unsaved civilization around it with each generation of poets" (98). It is with utter disillusionment in the "unsaved civilization" that the speaker of the poem looks upon the death of Yeats:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark  
And the living nations wait  
Each sequestered in its hate

Certainly there is a strong implication of the effects of World War II (which Europe was just beginning) in the speaker's words. But the conflict in the poem is not driven by a competition between war and peace. Rather, the tension is between artists and non-artists. It is curious, however, that the speaker's plea to other poets is a cry that emerges, as McDiarmid observes, from the art/world dichotomy found in the phrase "poetry makes nothing happen."

McDiarmid states that "Auden's denial" of poetry's inability to make things happen in the "real" world "is a necessary precondition for making claims for art's powers" (101). It is worth bearing in mind that Auden was an imagist. His poetry focused primarily on the power of word to generate meaning in terms of the concrete rather than the abstract. Such a storytelling strategy makes him a realist, and realism is, of course, the preferred genre of those biased toward metonymy. The problem that realists like Auden had to face however, as Alison Lee observes in a study of realism and its "discontents," is that "if meaning is socially constructed, then the author is as much at the mercy of linguistic structures as the reader or critic" (23). Being aware of this difficult relationship between author and audience—and the triadic imposition of the story (text) itself upon the sender and receiver of its message—Auden would no doubt have been doubly concerned by the absence of the concreteness offered by a living, breathing bodily Yeats as a referential for his work. While it may have been to the audience's benefit to have a greater say in the meaning of a story, it was an affront to the author, a danger

that needed to be allayed through an encouragement to audience members to become artists themselves.

In the case of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," then, it may be said that Auden views the corpus as the corpse, and enlists as his followers those who have a metonymic conception of the death-event. Calling young poets to "follow right / To the bottom of the night," the speaker urges artists to triumph over civilization by distancing themselves from it rather than attempting to transform it to their wishes. In response to this elegaic call to conflict, Alan Friedman observes the "the lost subject of the poem is himself a poet who is made both mute and great by death; in reaction, the surviving poet is inspired to outrage and to art" (70). This ultimate alienation—the artist is forever separated from the world and the possibility of ever creating more art—is yet another way in which death authorizes storytelling. By inspiring other artists to fill the empty space left by time's robbery from a story-hungry world, death not only redirects mourning into creativity, it also encodes creative mourning with an essential meaning: that the collision of time and space—death—justifies art.

Friedman refers to modern narrators such as Auden as "failed priests," meaning that they "cannot find an adequate way to mourn their dead" (75). Their stories, which serve the ritualistic purpose of funerals, become incoherent, hopeless muddles depicting "neither living nor dying, but only an uneasy displacement of both" (75). It is hard to be sure whether Friedman is speaking in a pejorative sense here, or whether he is simply stating a fact about Modernism. If it is the latter, then his

observation is astute. For if we consider the intellectual religion of the Modernists, the struggle for survival in the absence of redemption, and the challenge faced by storytellers in describing the unexperienceable—death—then it is easy enough to see that writing about death should be just as "hopeless [a] muddle" as death itself.

Perhaps because of the need to find some literary ground to stand on, so to speak, in the face of an increasingly complex world that offered no easy answers to the perpetual bombardment of metaphysical questions that science continued to ask, the Modernists were inclined toward realism. This is not to say, however, that realism, as a device, was a property of Modernist literature. Rather, it was the central proposition of realism—"a particular way of looking at art and life as though there were a direct correspondence between the two" (Lee 3)—that provided an impetus for Modernist storytelling approaches. As one might expect, this struggle for correspondence between art and life was riddled with conflict which manifested itself through a struggle not only with questions as to what "life" actually is, but also with the way that "art" might mirror it.

The poetry of e.e. cummings, for instance, is not realist in a stylistic sense, but its experimental status emerges from a struggle with a sense of playfulness and reality. In the poem entitled "dying is fine) but Death," for instance, cummings uses unconventional linguistic structures to raise a conflict between the metaphoric "liveliness" of dying and the metonymic "evil" of the corpse:

dying is fine)but Death

?o  
baby  
i

wouldn't like

Death if Death  
were  
good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying  
's miraculous  
why?be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly  
putting  
it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly  
scientific  
& artificial &  
evil & legal)

we thank thee  
god  
almighty for dying

(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death

From the very beginning of the poem, an unconventional use of space acts as a disruption of typical notions of temporality and

literary process. In the first line, a repetition of the title, there is no space before or after the parenthesis between "dying is fine" and "but Death," as if to suggest that the space, represented metonymically by the corpse, is banished. The metaphorical, transformative process of dying is indeed "fine," but Death, the fixed concept, is removed. This scenario is repeated toward the end of the poem when the space between "lively" and the parenthesis preceding "but Death" is again absent. And then, once more, in the last line of the poem, the space between "life!" and "the sin of Death" is again removed.

Interestingly, although the metaphoric/metonymic conflict plays itself out over the course of the poem, implicitly, it is metonymy that triumphs in the end, with "Death" being not only the last word but also not followed by a period. Realism, then, with its metonymic emphasis upon the object world rather than the province of the mind (although one could debate the difference between the two throughout eternity), gains its primary influence over Modernism not strictly as a way of storytelling but rather as a way of seceding to "the facts."

As much as the prominence of realism gave the competitive advantage to the metonymic conception of the death-event, however, this does not mean that the literary battleground of the story had settled into a truce. Indeed, there was still a dramatic competition going on between metaphoric and metonymic stances, as we have seen in the case of Yeats and Auden. But something did transpire that may have caused a profound shift in the relationship between the storyteller and the listener: there was a

shift in popular literary storytelling away from poetry to the novel, a shift that clearly marked the distancing of author and audience as well as the demand for a higher degree of "truth."

Perhaps this shift was prompted by the advent of cinema, with its insistence on an external form of realism that, in turn, raised the expectations of the literary audience toward the writer's ability to describe the internal more effectively. Perhaps it was the invention of the war-time newsreel that raised world consciousness of the importance of truth versus propaganda. Perhaps it was the dawning of mass media and the glorification of "celebrity." Or maybe it was the scientific separation—via hospitals—of death from everyday life. Whatever the case, at the same time that the novel was becoming a new kind of religious artifact, the transmission of such "relics," as described in Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," prompted the storyteller to relate his or her own mortality with the story itself in such a way that an audience might better relate to both. An appropriate example of a novel in which death takes centre stage for a "celebrity" who is both an isolated, struggling reader and writer is Jack London's tragic fictive autobiography, *Martin Eden*.

The fictive autobiography, wherein the author creates a character whose life closely parallels the author's own, is not a modern phenomenon. Indeed, an argument could be made that Plato was writing in such a genre. But when we consider such a style of writing in terms of Benjamin's notion that "the meaning of a man's life is revealed only in his death" (101), we can, I hope,

begin to see how the problems of fame and immortality, the artist's fascination with death, and the eventual effects of isolation disrupt the storytelling process.

In an essay entitled "Art and Alienation," Charles Watson describes the sacrificial role of the writer that London gives to himself via Martin Eden, saying that "the logic of the ending [Martin's suicide], then, is finally the logic of myth" (156). Martin's struggle with the way that others look down upon him early in his writing career, despite his greatest work having been already done, spills over into his later life when people are suddenly fawning over him for the same work. His stories, as long as they have reached sufficient popularity—but not a moment before—make him something more than what he feels he has been all along. Noting the way that Eden reflects the "myth of the dying god [shades of *The Fall of Hyperion*] discussed by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* and the Dionysian prototype of the tragic hero described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*" (156), Watson draws attention to the metaphoric quality of the novel.

Examples of the correlation between Martin and the sun-god include use of Dionysian images of music and intoxication. Martin describes the wildly successful long poem, "Ephemera," written by his idol, idol Russ Brissendon, as having "gone to my head. I am drunken with it" (305). Also significant is Martin's identification with the energy of the sun—"there was something cosmic in him....The blaze of tropic suns was in his face" (69). "But what awaits the dying sun-god, like the tragic Dionysus," writes Watson, "is the ritual of dismemberment" (158)—and, as Watson has it, "the

cycle of organic life (157). And then there is also the matter of Martin being symbolically dismembered by his readers and critics, as well as literally dismembered—he has "a piece taken out [of him]" (410)—by a bonita in the ocean. But is not a fish which takes Martin's life, it is drowning, and a voluntary drowning at that.

Garrett Stewart, in *Death Sentences*, states that "authorized by a popular belief free of religious premises...the drowning mind...offers the perfect model for agnostic epiphany. [It is] a metaphor for the wordless withdrawal of a feverish mind into the vortex of its own annulment" (33). Certainly, no death moreso than drowning provides a sense of the cyclical return of life back into nature through death. But this is not Martin's intention. His hope is more intimately bound up in Lakoff and Turner's dominant metaphors for death: departure, sleep and rest. Confronted by the Romanticism that fails him—his dream of transformation through the use of his imagination in writing—Martin faces nature in a decidedly more Modernist way. He is haunted by Longfellow's lines, which he quotes:

The sea is still and deep;  
All things within its bosom sleep;  
A single step and all is o'er,  
A plunge, a bubble and no more (271)

Martin thus does seek escape into nature, but his idea of escape is not a transformative one. Despite the metaphoric structure of *Martin Eden*, its sensibility is metonymic. As he takes his last long

dive down into the ocean, Martin "falls into darkness. And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know" (411). He abdicates the throne of his celebrity body as a way of addressing the temporality of earthly fame. As Joan Hedrick writes, in regard to the the problem of life's limitations and the problem of "living death," "only in illusions was [Martin] able to entertain the notion of his life's significance after his death" (228-29).

Like London and his fictional counterpart Martin Eden, Ernest Hemingway was very much intrigued by the "notion of his life's significance after his death." As not only one of the most prolific Modernist fictive autobiographers, Hemingway was also immensely concerned with the relationship between story and reality. His Nick Adams stories, and novels such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*, among others, resonate with connections between his own life and those of his "heroes." In *Islands in the Stream*, he creates the character of Thomas Hudson, a painter who lives in relative isolation on one of the Bimini Islands. Paralleling Hudson is Roger Davis, the painter's longtime friend, who is a writer. While historical critics like Rose Burwell propose that this paralleling is a "recognition that Hemingway was dealing with the unitary origin of creation by using the *remate* technique to explore problems common to a writer and a painter" (61), Evelyn J. Hinz and John J. Teunissen argue that "*Islands* is actually in large part a fictional exploration of the respective boundaries of the narratorial and pictorial arts, and—within this framework—Hemingway's evaluation of his own performance through pictorial analogues" (27). Whether one agrees with the

historical or interdisciplinary approach to the novel, it is certain that the story illuminates the space/time conflict inherent in Modernist literature.

As an artist in isolation, Thomas Hudson creates spatially—he paints—but in doing so, he places himself in perpetual conflict with temporality. It is almost as though he requires an audience to recount his stories for him, as though his memory is insufficient. He seems to utilize his three sons as a way of drawing up his past as if to suggest that that without audience, stories cannot exist, perhaps, even, to suggest that the writers themselves cannot exist. As young Tom, Hudson's oldest son, explains his friendship with James Joyce to Roger Davis, there is a clear sense of how disruptive temporality can be to the storytelling process itself:

"Did you know Mr. Joyce, Mr. Davis?"  
"Yes. He and I and your father were very good friends."  
"Papa was much younger than Mr. Joyce."  
"Papa was younger than anybody, then."  
"Not than me," said young Tom proudly. "I figure I was Mr. Joyce's youngest friend."  
"I'll bet he misses you a lot," Andrew said." (64)

The tension between space and time that can be perceived between youth, age and storytelling continues to mount throughout the passage:

"The hell I do make things up that way," young Tom said. "Sometimes Papa and Mr. Davis refresh my memory for me. But I figured in and took part in a whole epoch in painting and literature and if I had to I could write my memoirs right now as far as that goes."

"You're getting crazy, Tommmy," Andrew said. "You better watch yourself...."

.....

"Tell me some more about those friends of mine, papa," young Tom said. "I know I knew them and I know we used to be around the cafés together but I'd like to know some more definite things about them. The sort of things I know about Mr. Joyce, say."

"Can you remember Mr. Pascin?"

"No. Not really. What was he like?"

"You can't claim him as a friend if you don't even remember him," Andrew said. "Do you think I won't be able to remember what Mr. Davis was like a few years from now?" (72)

In the same way that the sons as storytellers rely on their audience for information, so to it seems that Hudson relies on them, for once his sons Andy and David are dead, he seems hardly able to remember them at all (as evidenced by their decided absence from the "Cuba" section). Perhaps Hudson's temporal difficulties are caused by the detachment generated by reportorial creativity. As John Gaggin points out in his study of the "detached observer" in Hemingway's fiction, "there is a life superior to that of mundane pursuits—an artistic life that can flourish when practical concerns are set aside" (46). And, certainly, near the end of *Islands*, when Thomas thinks, "But life is a cheap thing beside a man's work. The only thing is that you need it" (433-34), there is a strong sense of metonymy in place: the corpus and the corpse are one and the same once again.

There is much to say about *Islands in the Stream* that reflects the relationship between death and storytelling. A good argument could be made about the relationship between the death of Thomas's sons and the shift that occurs in his "work"—at first, artistic, and later, mundane. One could propose an analogy between the abrupt spatial/temporal disruption of their lives and Thomas's abandonment of the spatial creativity that provides him with a resistance against decidedly more temporal—life and death—occupation of a paramilitary man. Additionally, Hinz and Teunissen's argument that *Islands* is Hemingway's *Laocoon* could be explored further in regards to the way that the conflict between writing and painting in the novel leads into questions as to whether or not realism as a "*fusion* of the arts" (47) draws the metonymic conception of the death-event to the forefront of Modernist interdisciplinary studies. Perhaps most interesting of the various possible ways in which *Islands* could be examined—as could other of his works including "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and *The Old Man and the Sea*—is in relation to Hemingway's personal, real-life separation from his work via suicide. As Burwell states, "when Hemingway could no longer write, he could not live" (68).

While critics like Roland Barthes, and philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre were preaching a literary religion of "the Other," storytellers like Hemingway were creating their own otherness, their own gap in the space/time continuum, if you like, through the true separation of the bodily author from the body of work via voluntary death. Nor were American writers like Hemingway alone. In Paris, the "Death Movement" was in full swing, and even

the pre-eminent critic on the relationship between death and storytelling, Walter Benjamin, would take his own life. No wonder it is, then, that Benjamin wrote, "it is...characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but, above all, his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death" (94). While Benjamin chose to use a masculine persona, his words are equally transcribable to the feminine, particularly when the discussion turns to what is perhaps the 20th-century's quintessential novel of death and storytelling, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

Fictively autobiographical in the same sense as *Martin Eden*, *The Bell Jar* recounts the story of Esther Greenwood. Mirroring London's work in the way that the story focuses on the problem of storytelling in the Modernist era, Plath's work also delves into the problem of suicide, and the death motivated by a disillusionment with 20th-century society. Interestingly, though, Plath uses a different kind of societally-motivated death as a touchstone in punctuating her novel. Beginning with the line, "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer that they electrocuted the Rosenbergs" (1), Plath then unfolds the tale of her own "electrocutions."

An aspiring writer, Esther confronts her limitations during a month-long trip she wins to New York City. The prize in this particular contest involves learning something about the magazine industry. What Esther learns—or, rather, what she perceives herself as learning—is that she is torn between a mundane existence as a wife and mother and immortality as a famous

writer, a conflict that will ultimately lead to repeated suicide attempts, a stay in a mental institution, and a series of shock treatments. She uses a story about a fig tree as a metaphor for her dilemma:

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs all wrinkled and began to go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (80)

The figs themselves serve as metaphors for the dead babies that Esther is shown by her would-be boyfriend/husband, Buddy, in the cadaver room where he trains as a medical student. The idea of the cadaver room not only inspired Plath in the writing of *The Bell Jar*, it also figured prominently in her poetry as well.

"Two Views of a Cadaver Room" is a crucial piece of Plath's work in that it provides a clear structuring of the conflict that not only pervaded *The Bell Jar*, but also her real life as well:

The day she visited the dissecting room  
They already had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,  
Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume  
Of the death vats clung to them;  
The white-smocked boys started working.  
The head of the cadaver had caved in,  
And she could scarcely make out anything  
In that rubble of skull plates and old leather  
A sallow piece of string held it together.

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.  
He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

## II

In Brueghel's panorama of smoke and slaughter  
Two people only are blind to the carrion army:  
He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin  
Skirts, sings in the direction  
Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,  
Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,  
Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands  
Of the death's-head shadowing their song.  
These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long.

Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country  
Foolish, delicate, in the lower right hand corner.

As Fred Moramarco writes in his study of Plath's "burned up intensity:"

the "two views" of the cadaver room in the poem's title are essentially a realistic view of death (as epitomized by the cadaver room itself) contrasted with a romantic view of death, represented by a detail from a Brueghel painting depicting two lovers, in the midst of a scene of destruction and devastation, entranced by one another and oblivious to the "smoke and slaughter" all around them. (144)

It is this conflict between the metonymic and the metaphoric that ultimately leads both Plath and her fictional counterpart in *The Bell Jar* toward suicide. What is most illuminating in both the poem and the novel, as well as in Plath's real-life relationship with death, is the way that the metonymic is metaphorized. Suicide (early death, as in the case of the "snail-nosed babies" in the poem), the too-abrupt ending of it all, as it were, is transformed from something awful into something beautiful (in

the poem, "desolation, stalled in paint"), a freedom from the drudgery of the mundane.

*The Bell Jar* serves an important purpose in coming to terms with the shift in storytelling that occurs over the course of the 20th century. By drawing attention to the correspondence between the author's need for experience—Esther states that she is unable to write a novel because she "had never been in love or seen anybody die" (128)—and lack of reality in fiction, Plath succeeds in demonstrating how the Modernist author must face his or her self fully in attempting to capture life in words. One character in *The Bell Jar*, Joan Gilling, serves as a kind of two-way mirror between Plath and Esther. In the novel, it is Joan who actually commits suicide, but she does so seemingly because of a desire to be like Esther. When Esther makes her first attempt, Joan reads about it in the newspaper and subsequently runs off to New York to try something similar. Later, in the asylum, Joan gives the newspaper reports to Esther to read. In her study of the way that the relationship between Esther and Joan heightens the confessional aspects of *The Bell Jar*, Elisabeth Bronfen writes:

At first Esther uses her body as medium, fantasizing and then realizing death *in lieu* of the novel...that she can't write. Yet *The Bell Jar* is implicitly the novel that Sylvia Plath, disguised as Esther Greenwood, couldn't have her fictional self write until she had experienced death. It is written out of death, in contradistinction to the external rendition of her suicide attempt in the newspaper as well as to the fantasy of spectators like Joan. In this novel she offers a reading of her death-like self, not only by repeating the death and rebirth she designs for herself but also by supplementing it with the double of the self-ironic commentator. (411-12)

As much as critics like Bronfen focus on the doubling effects of fictive autobiography, the idea of "confessional" storytelling has an eerily religious overtone to it as well, especially when one considers the sinful implications of the storyteller's revelations of suicidal tendencies. It is as though the Modernist mind has become something similar to the biblical temple full of usurers. The religion of literature becomes hypocrisy as the messiahs court immortality by trying to gain control over their own deaths. Or maybe we are just witnessing the rise of a new mode of storytelling which further blurs the line between author and audience. Perhaps what we see in the reflections of the lives and work of London, Hemingway, and Plath is not hypocrisy but the beginnings of Postmodernism as it relates to the death-event. In the same way that Byron and Shelley led the way out of the Romantic period with their increasing trouble with man's relationship to nature, writers such as Sylvia Plath headed the charge into Postmodernism by pitting the emptiness of time and mortality self-reflexively against itself. As Alfred Alvarez puts it in *The Savage God*, his study of suicide and literature, these artists become "an imitation of death in which their audiences can share" (282).

Albert Camus's famous opening line to *The Myth of Sisyphus*—"There is but one truly serious philosophical question and that is suicide" (3)—has significant implications when taken in consideration of the relationship between the Modernist storyteller and audience. In the same way that Auden—as

audience and student of Yeats as well as mentor to another generation of poets—attempted to define his tripartite roles, Moramarco points out that writers like Plath—into this category I would also include London and Ernest Hemingway—"had developed a wide range of devoted followers and imitators who looked to their work and their lives as models" (141). Like Auden, then, the "confessional" nature of their work sets them up as failed priests as well. After all, as Moramarco observes, "the only way to relinquish the painful awareness of impending death and nothingness is to relinquish life itself" (44)—which is, of course, the method that Plath and some other "confessionals" like Hemingway—and London, too, albeit in a slightly more roundabout way—chose.

While literary critics were patting themselves on the back over their agreement with Roland Barthes's idea of "the death of the author," the late Modernist period would see authors themselves focused on the same phrase but in a very different sense. The writer's own life and death rose to become the judging-point of both literary validity and the moral universe. Discussing the idea of the storyteller who actually carries through with the suicidal obsession that he or she writes about, Moramarco writes:

if we take "meaning" in a broader context—as we always do when interpreting a literary work—if we take it to refer to our overall impression of lines and poems, how we respond to them and the traces they make on our emotional and intellectual lives, then surely the suicide is not only relevant, but even central to our understanding of the work. (147)

Moramarco ultimately concludes—after much arguing with other critics—that a taking into account of Plath's suicide and her obsession with it throughout her life helps to make a "full contemporary response" to her work.

Based on what I have been discussing throughout this thesis regarding the death of definition—the search for the limits of literary interpretation as a metaphorical product of the basic human thought systems that emerge from our sense of mortality—it is hardly surprising to discover the kind of interpretive conflict that Moramarco's study reveals. Plath's work, like that of Byron, Shakespeare, Chaucer and a host of others, inevitably draws death to the forefront of human thought and leaves it hanging there as a perpetually looming question mark. Humanity cannot ignore its oncoming demise, nor can we justly celebrate it. Instead, we can only tell stories and wait.

### Conclusion

"Every story is over before it begins."

To bring a story to the "surface," so to speak, involves a process not unlike that of dying. The bodily container has to relinquish captivity of the soul, almost. And such a release, in order to be valid, implies a certain sense of previous completion: a story that comes out in partial form, as Esther's aborted novel does in *The Bell Jar*, is no more valid than a life cut short by untimely death. That a sense of completion is required before narrative can commence is an idea that can be found in most any treatise on the art of storytelling. Michael Roemer, for instance, in *Telling Stories*, begins by saying "Every story is over before it begins" (3). Walter Benjamin's way of addressing the same idea is considerably more evocative, but in essence he says the same thing:

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (94)

In a study of the relationship between Benjamin's death and his own work as a storyteller of sorts, Shoshana Felman comments on the way that the text of "The Storyteller" "duplicates and illustrates" the point of what she describes as its "forceful" yet "ungraspable" beginning (205-06), an opening which reads:

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly....It is as if something that seemed unalienable to us...were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (83)

Felman notes that Benjamin's idea of the death of narrative coincides with the mass death of World War I. His acute awareness of the "tiny, fragile human body...[standing] under the open sky in a countryside where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds" (84), she feels, put a final end to the days when dying was "a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one" (93). The horror of death instilled by the first real media-covered war and the consequent rise of public health care facilities meant that "agonizers [would] die in private and without authority. They [were] attended by no listeners: They [told] no stories" (207).

Felman theorizes that the remaining text of "the Storyteller" "does not quite process" (205) the argument made at the beginning of the text, but the fact of its "unintegrability...is not mere coincidence; it duplicates and illustrates the point of the text, that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors" (206). Felman then proceeds to use her own, somewhat ungraspable, text to raise the point that Benjamin has told society an excellent story about death and storytelling through his own self-imposed silence via suicide:

Benjamin's suicide, coming as it did at the outbreak of World War II, mirrored the suicide of his young friend, Heinle, at the beginning of World War I. Both men's bodies were denied "proper" burial. Whether or not Benjamin's act was at all related to the death of his friend cannot be ascertained, but the point and treatment of the two deaths was similar. Felman explains it thus:

"For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories," Benjamin has written in "The Storyteller" (91). Benjamin's own suicide will ironically and tragically repeat, thus, both the story of the suicide of his youth and the shameful story of an absence of a burial. By asserting his own choice of death and by taking his own life, Benjamin repeats, as well, from Heinle's story, the message of the corpse: the posthumous, mute message of the suicide as a symbolic gesture of protest against the war and as the autonomous assertion of an uncoerced and uncoercable will in the face of the overpowering spread of world violence. (228-29)

Felman claims that Benjamin, through his death-imposed silence, "gives posterity a language; it endows the future with a yet unborn word....The repetition of the suicide recovers the collective

meaning that was lost to death both in the battlefields—and in the suicide—of the First World War" (231). Benjamin himself writes that "the voice of the anonymous storyteller" (107) recovers "a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier (102):

One can...ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way...exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivory around a wall. (108)

As Felman so gracefully observes, "through his death, Benjamin converts, thus, his own life into a proverb" (231). As a Modernist, then, it would seem that Benjamin sought the more realistic assurance of being "saved" through the work of art, rather than relying on faith in providence.

Despite the self-reflexivity that connects Benjamin's idea of death and storytelling with the primary tenet of Postmodernism, he himself committed suicide before the rise of that movement. Perhaps because of this temporal limitation, Benjamin's work is a reflection of his own times. As Richard Shiff notes in his study on the metaphoric relationship between art and life, "like our artists, we strive to create a picture of our world, yet that picture is never complete; for we continually pass on to new experiences and new

images of reality" (105). David Simpson, in a discussion of Postmodernist storytelling, speculates on what Benjamin would have to say about his, perhaps, premature death of storytelling if he were alive at the end of the 20th century:

Suppose we could rewrite history...We might have seen [Benjamin] as a presiding sage at some early conferences on the Postmodern. Imagine the curious colleague standing up during question period: "Professor Benjamin! You wrote many years ago that the age of storytelling was coming to an end. What has happened?"

How we must wish to have heard his answer. What indeed has happened? Benjamin was writing about the end of an oral tradition whose fullness we have certainly not recovered. Nonetheless, it seems that everyone is telling stories, and professing the ability to exchange experiences. Perhaps the aged distinguished professor would have opined that we are here engaged in an enormous gesture of communal nostalgia, seeking to live again in false consciousness what we have lost as historically authentic. (Had he said so, he would have been offering up another definition of the Postmodern). (22-23)

I don't think that many critics would dispute the idea that, at its root, Postmodernist storytelling is a way of returning language to its childhood, so to speak. The movement is concerned with showcasing the storyteller's ability to *play* with discourse rather than to treat it with the adult-like seriousness that was characteristic of Modernist literature. Simpson, then, is right in proposing that Postmodernism is a kind of nostalgia and, not surprisingly, it has much in common with the storytelling style of a certain Medieval writer named Geoffrey Chaucer: a lack of satisfaction with conventional endings, a concern with the limits

that plot (time) imposes upon story structure, and, through an exploration of humanity's relationship with god, a self-reflexivity particularly evident when it comes to the idea of the relationship between death and storytelling.

Regarding Medieval responses to death, in *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, Philippe Ariés writes:

In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species, and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. He merely accepted it with just the proper amount of solemnity due to one of the important thresholds which each generation always had to cross. (28)

Focusing on the shifts in Western human attitudes in regard to death from roughly the 12th century up until the 1960s—from an acceptance of death as a part of the natural process, to a personalization or a subjectifying of death, to a denial of death—Ariés concludes his study with a series of questions:

Is there a permanent relationship between one's idea of death and one's idea of oneself? If this is the case, must we take for granted, on the one hand, contemporary man's recoil from the desire to exist [shades of the end of Modernism *à la* Sylvia Plath], the inverse of what occurred during the...Middle Ages? And on the other hand, must we take for granted that it is impossible for our technological cultures ever to regain the naive confidence in Destiny which had for so long been shown by simple men when dying? (107)

Ariés' questions, which focus on the Modernist concern with the death-conflict as opposed to the Medieval and Postmodern attentiveness to the death-ending, suggest a certain circularity

that he, like Benjamin, may not have been fully able to perceive from his location in history. If we take into account the way in which the Medieval human confronted the audience and death intimately and thoroughly, while also bearing in mind the way that humans on the cusp of the 21st century are coming face to face with the globally-destructive effects of severe environmental damage, we ought to be able to see how our storytelling strategies demonstrate, like our eventual deaths, a certain "from whence we came" type of character.

Both Postmodernist and Medieval storytelling have at their root, as Simpson calls them, "little narratives" (translated from the Jean-Francois Lyotard's *petit récits*). The idea of a little narrative evokes the concept of definition: a very short story about the meaning of a word, a story that presupposes its audience's conceptual inexperience as well as that same audience's surrender of interpretive control. It is interesting that, perhaps, as a result of the adulthood and subsequent mid-life crisis that storytelling went through in the Modernist period, Postmodernism—which might be described as the twilight years of literature—would see a return to that curiously child-like habit of asking, "but why...?" Moreover, the methodology of this asking, coming through "little narratives," has a distinctively naive and oral flavour to it, a nostalgic desire to "speak with the dead" (Simpson 71). The goal of such speech, one would suppose, would be to define one's place in the universe relative to those who have lived and died previously. Consequently, if Simpson is correct in pointing out that "the re-creation of history—its facsimile, or simulacrum, in a

process of performance—is what narrativity provides" (179), then it should follow that storytelling and, indeed, all language, would have death at its beginning.

If I may pose a question of my own in response to those of Ariés, I would ask, with a "naive confidence in Destiny," whether or not the beginning and the end of any story, like the beginning and end of any life, serve the same purpose. In other words, aren't stories and life simply the way that we fill in the space left by time? The circular shape of progress that we often perceive as linear time shows human beings travelling forward to a certain point—the bottom of the circle—before beginning a backward "progression" that will eventually see them end up exactly where they began: non-existent. Like life, a story "takes off" from its beginning, but it gains power through a tension with its inevitable ending. Postmodernist approaches have sought to challenge the concept of ending, as did Medieval ones, whereas Romantic and Modernist approaches were more concerned with the beginning (as represented by the artist). Ultimately, none have fully succeeded in their projects. But how could they? Death was always in the way.

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