Remodeling Models:
Modernism and the Middle Ages

> «I see the Middle Ages everywhere, transparently overlaying my daily concerns, which do not look medieval, though they are.»
>
> Umberto Eco

INTRODUCTION:
BORGES AND POSTMODERN DISCOURSES OF HISTORY

«That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvelous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable...« (Borges, 125)[1]. Borges made this ironic comment forty years ago in his story, «The Theme of the Traitor and Hero», a story whose title evokes the sense of a decentered universe, a world endlessly labyrinthine, where hero and traitor, reader and writer, «book and labyrinth are, finally, one and the same (97)». By way of anticipating Umberto Eco's dictum that «books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told» (1984-1), Borges prefaces «The Theme of the Traitor and Hero» with a quotation from Yeats's poem «Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen»:

> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead;
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clagour of a gong. (ll. 54-58)

Borges highlights Yeats's awareness of the failed promise of history: no longer seen as an infinetely expanding, ultimately perfectible progress, but skeptically, as a constricting spiral. What Yeats saw as a failure of history, Borges sees as a failure of Platonic historicism of the kind that assumes «a primal unity of Western culture which, in spite of its modifications, fragmentations, displacements, is ultimately recoverable as an origin through the culture's major texts» (Lentricchia, 183). As Eco recently observed, such notions of the hegemony of history moved Nietzsche to condemn «the harm done by historical studies in which the past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us» (Eco, 1984-2, 66).

Borges separates history from historians in order to emphasize the historical dimension of discourse. The act of quoting Yeat's «Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen» on «Today, the third of January of 1944», shows Borges ironically confirming historical sequence. The dates are not neutral in modern history: 1919, the year after the end of «The Great War», «the war to end all wars», — but the beginning of Ireland's war for independence (January 1919) — and 1944, the midst of World War II, its very name confirming historical sequence and the continuum of the aggressive matrix in which the terms «hero» and «traitor» presuppose implication.

In «Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen», Yeats had apocalyptically pronounced the end of literature as a force for changing the world:

> The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
> That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
> To end all things, to end what my laborious life
>   imagined, even
> The half-imagined, the half-written page. (ll. 79-83)

The juxtaposition of the dates, «1919» and «1944», suggests that the intervening twenty-five years had proved Yeats more correct than he knew. Literature does not necessarily change history, *pace* Sartre, but it always problematizes it (and vice-versa). By ironically recalling the voice of the prophet declaiming the end of literature from the heights of «The Tower», Borges underscores the problematic presence of history in literature.

More than that, by construing history as a self-conscious signifying element, by underscoring its narrative character, Borges calls attention to history's availability to theory. In Borges's text, history exists as part of the problem, not as part of the answer. Like literature itself, the grammar and syntax of history must be parsed according to a paradigm of entropy, rather than entelechy.

Borges places history in ironic and self-conscious quotation marks. From a Borghesian perspective, we read the final, apocalyptic ride of «that insolent fiend Robert Artisson»[2], and those who travel with him:

> Violence upon the roads: violence of horses
>
> ...
>
> A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
> Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
> Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind; (ll. 113, 119-121)

not as metaphorically signifying the end of literature, but literally, as a statement of Yeats's despair on «the Present State of the World», a comment on history.

By quoting Yeats against himself, Borges reasserts the force of the historical dimension of discourse — against Yeats's own skepticism. He highlights the difference between modernism's disenchantment with history and post-modernism's sense of its paradoxical power. Ireland and Argentina, marginal spaces of discourse controlled by the hegemony of superpowers, become figures for the postmodern recuperation of the marginal, including the return of history, not as truth, but as allegory and theory.

Neither literature nor history, Borges reminds us ended in 1919, nor even in 1928, when Yeats published *The Tower*. Rejecting historic mimeticism, Borges treats ironically Yeats's assumption that past and present must be juxtaposed in a denial of poetry's power to change the world:

> The night can sweat with terror as before
> We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
> And planned to bring the world under a rule,
> Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (ll. 28-31)
>
> ...
>
> O but we dreamed to mend
> Whatever mischief seemed
> To afflict manking, but now
> That Winds of winter blow
> Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (ll. 84-88)

---

[2]   See Yeat's «Note after text»: «The country people see at times certain apparitions whom they name now 'fallen angels', now 'ancient inhabitants of the country', and describe as riding at whiles 'with flowers upon the heads of the horses'. I have assumed in the sixth poem [of '1919'] that these horsemen, now that the times worsen, give way to worse. My last symbol, Robert Artisson, was an evil spirit much run after in Kilkenny at the start of the fourteenth century. Are not those who travel in the whirling dust also in the Platonic Year?» (433)

Such despair is but the reverse of the idealism Yeats so bitterly recants. It affirms the mimetic power of history to control and neutralize the literary project at odds with the brutality of politics. Instead, Borges shows that the opposition of literature and history, the rejection of one by the other, subordination of one to the other misrepresent their evident relationship as part of an unbounded continuum mediated by theory.

From Borges's viewpoint, Yeats's mistake was to think first that history had been suspended

> O what fine thought we had because we thought
> That the worst rogues and rascals had died out (ll. 15-16)

and then to despair because it had'nt:

> But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon
> There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
> Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
> That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
> To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
> Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks. (ll. 125-130)

As an allegory of the postmodern relationship of literature and history, «The Traitor and Hero» ironizes Yeats's portentous view of history

> A man in his own secret meditation
> Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made
> In art or politics...   (ll. 69-71)

by demystifying (or redefining) the labyrinth. Borges presents it not as a metaphor for ontology, but literally, as an historical artifact, a trace or pattern inscribing the expected, the already-known.

Thus at the end of «The Traitor and Hero», Borges's twentieth-century historian, Ryan, recognizes that in tracking down the truth of the crime, he has played a pre-destined part in the original script. Yeats's political labyrinth becomes for Borges the matrix for the story, and thus of history. As Eco notes, «Every story of investigation and conjecture tells us something that we have always been close to knowing» (1984-2, 54). Indeed, the labyrinth is the figure for theory because the labyrinth is «an abstract model for conjecturality» (1984-2, 57). Ryan's labyrinth resembles what Eco calls the «net or rhizome model»:

> It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite.
> The space of conjecture is the rhizome space. The rhizome labyrinth...
> can be structured, but it is never structurer definitely. (57-58)

Ryan discovers his pre-destined role by following the network of intextual echoes — in this case the Shakespearian quotations — through the labyrinth of historical and literary allusion:

> In Nolan's work, the passages imitated from Shakespeare are the *least* dramatic; Ryan suspects that the author interpolated them so that one person, *in the future*, might realize the truth. He understands that he, too, forms part of Nolan's plan... (Borges, 127)

Such self-conscious theoretical postulates make «The Traitor and Hero» an appropriate locus for speculation on the postmodern relationship of literary theory to history. In the first paragraph of the story (which he calls «this history»), Borges cites two forces at work in its production: ludic intertextuality and cognitive philosophy, each identified with a particular historical figure: «Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries)» and the «court counselor Leibniz (who invented pre-established harmony)» (123).

From the outset, we find theory, history and literature evoked as powerful co-presences each informing and situating the other within the text as a condition for its production. Syntagmatically linked in a relation of solidarity, history and literature mutually presuppose one another, even overlapping at times, e.g., «Julius Caesar» and *Julius Caesar*, in a modeling of discourse, which draws attention to its own historicity as remodeled language. Intertextuality, whereby medieval *Festspielen*, Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar*, The Passion Gospels all constitute subtexts for «The Traitor and Hero», counterpoints the syntagmatic structure (Greimas/Courtes, 376).

Borges appears to subscribe to Bakhtin's view that «every specific situation is historical», and that our consciousness of specific situations takes shape in an intertextual dialectic of historical and literary models. He revisits history ironically to show, as Suzanne Gearhart has recently argued, that

> History is not always concerned with contradictions. It may be more concerned with discovering totalities or with locating a cause or a complex of causes thought to explain a historical event or set of events in a way that is «consistent» or «logically satisfying». (20)

Indeed, «The Traitor and Hero» can be read precisely as a revery on the pressures generated by narrative history for logical satisfaction. The final words of the story say as much: «At the end of some tenacious caviling, [Ryan] resolves to keep silent his discovery. He publishes a book dedicated to the glory of his hero; this, too, no doubt was foreseen» (127). The difference between Borges's revery

and Ryan's history is the metascientific or theoretical elements — the labyrinth or «abstract elements of conjecturality» — Borges incorporates in his story.

In so doing, Borges provides a model for history and literature mediated by theory which can serve as a guide for inquiry into other periods. For Borges shows that if postmodern discourse means anything, it means, in Eco's formulation, to revisit the past, not to «negate the already said, but to rethink it ironically» (1984-2, 68). As Borges shows, the past is rupture, certainly, but also continuity across the network of fractures.

TENNYSON, ARNOLD
AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORICISM

Borges's view of history as a positive cultural perspective contrasts sharply with the prevailing nineteenth century notion of history as a progressive force, indeed an imperative. Unlike Borges, the young Tennyson appeared distinctly ambivalent about the propriety of drawing upon the past. Tennyson sharply questioned the utility of remodeling poetic forms from past ages when, in the early 1830's, he wrote «The Epic», as a preface to the first version of the «Morte d'Arthur».

There, Tennyson imagines a Christmas-Eve dialogue between a parson and a poet in which social concerns and scientific progress — seen as fit and proper subjects for poetry — contrasts starkly, and perhaps only slightly ironically with the Epic past. The Parson inveighs against the decline of faith, deploring the loss of «an anchor to hold by», the past here equating with religion.

One of the poet's college friends tells of an epic of King Arthur, «some twelve books», written and subsequently burnt by the poet. Asked to explain this destruction, the friend replies:

> ... «Oh sir,
> He thought that nothing new was said, or else
> Something so said 'twas nothing — that a truth
> Looks freshest in the fashion of the day:

The poet intervenes to speak for himself:

> «Nay, nay», said Hall,
> «why take the style of those heroic times?
> For nature brings not back the Mastodon,

> Nor we those times; *and why should any man*
> *Remodel models*? Those twelve books of mine
> Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth,
> Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt.» «But I»,
> Said Francis, «pick'd the eleventh from this hearth
> And have it: keep a thing, its use will come (I, 253-254)

Tennyson's ambivalence toward the past may be seen in the disjunction he introduces between history and literature. The narrative frame, a Christmas Eve convivial gathering of men friends (the moment can hardly be considered neutral in nineteenth-century England) joins a debate between «the Parson» (a Chaucer-like tag) who represents a traditional, nostalgic historicism («the anchor of faith to hold by») and the poet, an agent of progress. No longer a maker of «verses», the poet writes a new breed of forward looking «poetry», a serious expression of social vision in the sense understood by Yeats. Tennyson here postulates the past as dead, «extinct»: like the mastodon, a subject fit for preservation in museums only.

This disjunction between past and present establishes a paradigmatic axis within the narrative, where poetry and history appear as mutually exclusive discourses. What we miss here is a concept capable of linking them either logically or ironically; in short, we miss «the abstract model of conjecturality», the labyrinth of theory. Instead, we find a purely evaluative, judgmental idiom expressed as conventional laws: «a truth looks freshest in the fashion of the day»; «for nature brings not back the Mastodon, / Nor we those times»; «and why should any man / Remodel models?» Imitation of the great poetic forms of the past, like epic, cannot be remodeled to retain their grandeur: «those twelve books of mine / Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing worth...»

Tennyson does not quite elide history here — «keep a thing, its use will come». But it can at best be subordinate, playing only a background role. For Tennyson, as for Victor Hugo, history loses its specificity as «real» time, to function more as a mythic projection, inward and emotional, a foil against which to play off present illusions and discontents alike[3].

---

[3]   On Victor Hugo's mythic conception of history, see Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, Place, Publisher, 1984.

What seems simply attitudinal in Tennyson, becomes doctrinal in Matthew Arnold. In his critical essays, Arnold develops a metahistorical literary theory with the explicit purpose of separating literature form history[4]. Arnold, concerned to elaborate universal evaluative criteria for literature, equates history with subjectivity, branding both as «fallacies»[5]. Yet close inspection of Arnold's critical tenets reveals a hostility to what we would call theory in favor of an empirical esthetics of emotion: feeling and enjoyment constitute the criteria by which he arbitrates what he calls «the truly classical» in literature.

What separates him from post-structural theories of the ludic and the pleasurable in literature is his elision of the text. For Matthew Arnold, there can be no labyrinth, no abstract model for conjecture because he does not conceive the text as structure; it is not a narrative. To maintain his disjunction of history and literature, Arnold advocates a method of reading for «touchstones», individual lines of poetry from diverse periods against which all poetry — or poetic fragments — may be judged.

The fracturing effect of the touchstones approach disrupts the symbolic matrix in which the historical context unfolds. There can be no textual problematic, no abstract model of contextuality in the Arnoldian method because the narrative has been dismantled. By selecting monuments out of context, Arnold inhibits access to the narrative through which the works engage history.

He begins by undercutting the philosophical premises upon which the works as metaphysical documents could be read. In his essay, «Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment» (1865, 174-199), Arnold situates medieval literature on a paradigmatic axis in which positive and negative values clearly relegate history to the negative pole around which cluster «outmoded» values like esthetics, concern for

---

[4]   «It was in the course of the nineteenth century that the gradual specification and specialization occurred that give history and literature their modern aspect and accentuate so radically the difference between them», Gearhart, 9.

[5]   Arnold, 1889, 6. Yes; constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read. *But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious.* A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really.

the multitude, encyclopedic knowledge. He reproaches Catholicism
for its immersion in history, accusing it of a totalizing mimeticism.
Catholic literature, particularly as embodied in the Church Fathers,

> Embraces the whole range of human interests; like one of the great
> Middle Age cathedrals, it is itself a study for a life. Like the net in Scrip-
> ture, it drags everything to land, bad and good, lay and ecclesiastical,
> sacred and profane, so that it be but a matter of human concern. Wide-
> embracing as the power whose product it is! *A power for history*, at any
> rate, (and) eminently the Church: not, I think, *the church of the future,
> but indisputedly the church of the past, and in the past, the church of
> the multitude.* (1865, 176)

Arnold makes two assumptions that not only falsify the image of
medieval literature he gives here, but also demonstrate how the gulf
between literature and history could have been so deeply ingrained in
the nineteenth-century literary consciousness. In the first instance, he
promulgates a transparent medieval history, accessible and
recoverable from artifacts and records — in short, a literal history
emptied (the second movement) of theoretical presuppositions. He
takes history literally in part because he views the Church as a
monolothic structure, a force for historical atavism, myth and
superstition in the manner of Michelet. By writing theory and history
out of Patristics, Arnold avoids the anamnesis that would expose the
historicist and religious predicates of his own project, predicates
rooted in nineteenth-century English nationalism and imperialism.

PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE:
HISTORY AS MYSTERY

Arnold can take history literally because he defines it, like poetry,
as a form of simple mimesis, rather than as semiosis. For him, both
literature and history are, as Claude-Gilbert Dubois formulates the
distinctions, «conceived as a reproduction, specular in nature, of a
formal model», rather than «as a '*mise en sens*' of an enigma to be
deciphered, a symbolic construct belonging to the world of signs»
(471). Looking closely at Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, the compilation
of Patristic thought that Arnold was talking about in the quotation
cited above, we discover that what preoccupied the Fathers for the
most part was precisely the «enigma to be deciphered» in the world
construed as a world of signs. In various ways, starting with

Augustine, it was the opacity of history, not its putative transparence that preoccupied them. Indeed, we find a radical assertion, in medieval literary theory, of the power of language to rethink — and remodel — the relationship of the cognitive subject to history.

More specifically, we find representation construed as an abstract model of conjecturality, as a process forced to negotiate the Borghesian labyrinth by way of revealing the complex modes of history's relationship to the multiple realities recognized by the Fathers. If Arnold was not incorrect in perceiving an ideal image of the cosmos as motivating medieval thought, he mistakenly assumed a unitary correlation between the cosmic One and the many conflicting models for portraying it proposed by the Fathers.

When John Scottus Eriugena reflects on language in the ninth century, for example, he focuses precisely on the hidden nature of the sign, its abstract conjecturality, rather than on its status as phenomenal manifestation. In a memorable formulation, he offers a metaphor for the sign that demonstrates his awareness of its semiotic, rather than simply mimetic function. He speculates on the anterior nature of the sign — its status as something *other*, «a *mise en sens* of an enigma to be deciphered».

Citing the example of a fountain, he reasons that it is not at the source that the water comes into being; it originates elsewhere, out of sight, and much further away in hidden springs. Eriugena, or John the Scot, rigorously distinguishes between visible signs and their causes *ex secretis sinibus naturae*, in «the hidden breasts of nature»[6].

> For it is not where the source appears that water begins to be, but it flows from somewhere else through channels that are hidden and indefinable to the senses before it appears at the source and therefore only by abuse of language can the place where it first rises to view be called the source, since for a long time previously it existed in hidden places where it concealed itself from sight... (105)

Eriugena underlines with this metaphor the conjectural nature of language, shows the persistent gap between apparent meanings and real significations. The Patristic concept of the levels of meaning

---

[6] «Siquidem non ubi fons apparet ibi aqua incipit esse sed aliunde per occultos poros sensibusque infinitos longe ante manat priusquam in fonte appareat ac per hoc quemadmodum abusiue dicitur fons ubi primo uisibiliter surgit — longe enim ante erat in secretis terrae siue oceani ubi se inuisibiliter latebat...», *Periphyseon*, Book III, Sheldon-Williams, III, 104-105 (*MPL*, 122, 653A-653B).

derived in part from Augustine's recognition of the significance of this interstice as Alain Rey and Eugene Vance[7] have both shown, and it survives in distinctions such as that made by Dubois in speaking of the gap between «the mode of production of images and the mode of production of meanings», in terms of «interferences that create ambivalence and confusion» (471). It is this space in which history and theory intervene.

For John the Scot representation implicates history and theory in the signifying act. The enigmatic sign assumes material specificity in space and time through the conventions of language, but without losing the virtual resonance of the anterior state. This coming-into-being of the sign simultaneously evokes an anterior state of non-materiality, a sense of being «other». Hjelmslev explained this phenomenon as a «correlation between expression-plane and content-plane [as] given by a difference: the sign-function exists by a dialectic of presence and absence, as a mutual exchange between two heterogeneities» (Eco, 1984-3, 23). Eriugena's metaphor of the fountain, then, is consistent with post-structuralist theories which hold that «the nature of the sign is to be found in the 'wound' or 'opening' that constitutes it and annuls it at the same time» (23).

But, as Eco notes, Leibniz postulated the same idea at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Leibniz came to his conclusions by «searching for a restricted number of thoughts from whose combination all the others could be derived (as with numbers)... The binary system of calculation is thus the wondrous likeness of this dialectics» (23). As Leibniz anticipated Derrida and Eco himself, so Eriugena anticipated Leibniz: the passage quoted above from the *Periphyseon* belongs to the section of Book III where Eriugena discusses the combinatory power which allows all numbers to proceed from the monad.

Eriugena, too, locates semiotic difference in that part of the sign not invested with space and time, and therefore, prior to being. It exists as absence, as potential.

---

[7]   On this aspect of Augustine's sign theory see chapters 1 and 2 of Vance's *Mervelous Signals*, Chapter 3, «Une Sémiologie chrétienne», of Rey's *Théories du signe et du sens*, and also his «Lecture du signe», in *L'Archéologie du signe*, and Part 1 of Paul Ricœur's *Time and Narrative*.

> The third mode (of being) can suitably be seen in those things of which
> the visible world is made up, and in their causes in the most secret
> breasts (*sinibus*) of nature, which precede them. For whatsoever of
> those causes through production is known by matter and form and in
> time and in space, is by a certain convention of (human) language said
> to be (*esse*), while whatsoever is still held in the breasts of nature and
> *is not manifest by form or matter, in time and space, or by other
> accidents, is, by the same convention of (human) language, said not to
> be (non esse)*[8].

The same principle motivates representations of being, history, literature, and language and that principle is difference. The combinatory paradigm begins for Eriugena with life itself, taking Adam as the modal one from whom the many proceeded[9]. The paradigm allows John the Scot to link being, history, literature, and language as co-presences, where each operates on a continuum of absence/presence, identity and difference.

Eriugena's thought here is not dissimilar to that of Heidegger's in «The Origin of the Work of Art». In this essay, Christopher Fynsk argues,

> Heidegger remains faithful to the assertion of *Being and Time* that the
> address that has its source in another Dasein's relation to an alterity is
> *essentially the address of history* and is therefore anonymous. He thus
> elides in his discussion the place of the artist in the artistic process as
> a «living personality»... But the place of Dasein in the history of Being
> is still irreducible for Heidegger: as he says in his «Addendum»,
> *«Being needs man and is not without man.»* And so the work of art,

---

[8]   Tertius modus non incongrue inspicitur in his quibus huius mundi uisibilis plenitudo perficitur et in suis causis praecedentibus in secretissimis naturae sinibus. Quicquid enim ipsarum causarum in materia et forma in temporibus et locis per generationem cognoscitur quadam humana consuetudine dicitur esse, quicquid uero adhuc in ipsis naturae sinibus continetur neque in forma uel materia loco uel tempore caeterisque accidentibus apparet eadem praedicta consuetudine dicitur non esse, *Periphyseon*, I, 42-43 (*MPL*, 122, 444C-445A).

[9]   Thus since God in that first and one man whom He made in His image established all men at the same time, yet did not bring them all at the same time into this visible world, but brings the nature which He considers all at one time into visible essence at certain times and places according to a certain sequence which He himself knows: those who already ⟨are becoming, or⟩ have become visibly manifest in the world are said to be, while those who are as yet hidden, though destined to be, are said not to be... *The third mode [of being] [is found] specifically in those [things]* which partly are still hidden in their causes, partly are manifest in (*their*) *effects, of which in particular the fabric of this world is woven*, Eriugena I, 42-43 (*MPL* 122, 445A-B).

inasmuch as it opens a history, as Heidegger asserts in his essay, *must necessarily also pose the question of man.* (134)

The metaphor of the fountain serves Eriugena as the symbol not of origin, but rather of the continual process of the flux of representation. What makes John the Scot so compatible with the postmodern discourse Borges illustrates is his recognition of the mystery of history. That is, after all, in part what Borges was driving at in the quotation we began with. In saying ironically «that history should imitate literature is inconceivable», Borges signals the presence of the marvelous, the unexpected qualities of *meraviglia* that moderns associate with fiction, but which earlier ages rightly understood as the proper of *historia*, history organized narratively[10]. Matthew Arnold, operating from a perspective of literal historicism, construed the element of the marvelous simply as superstition, accusing a medieval poet like Dante of manifesting only «the religious sense overbalancing the thinking power» (1865, 198). What he did not see was that the mystery, for Dante and Eriugena — as for Borges — was the key to «the thinking power» and that history, as «the enigma to be deciphered», offered the matrix for such thought.

Like Borges and Heidegger, Eriugena recognized that difference was not simply a matter of presence and absence, the manifest or the virtual. History was not an open book, a way for humans to glimpse the hidden springs of nature. In the first place, it was partial and often contradictory, like the two different versions of Creation that so preoccupied the Church Fathers. And then, what was not said — what my colleague Gerald Prince calls the «disnarrated» — was often as interesting as what was. Eriugena's approach may sound like a negative way to reach an affirmative goal — to say what something is not in order to understand what it is. The approach is consonant with John the Scot's apophatic (negative) theology that is the driving force behind hte *Periphyseon*. Negative theology defines not what God is, but what He is not, rather like a Black Hole in modern astrophysics.

History was thus an incomplete presence, an opaque *arcanum*, or mystery, and all the more so in that it relied on language for represen-

---

[10]   On the concept of *historia*, see Nichols, 1985, chapter 1. On the association of *meraviglia* with epic, see Greene, 1964, chapter 1.

tation. Eriugena met the challenge of incompleteness by proposing, ingeniously, not to apply categories of truth or falsehood to the representation of history, but rather by invoking the combinatory principle again, this time in terms of simple versus complex sets which he identifies as symbol and mystery. History is a complex set, in this scheme, because of the number and kind of discourses used but also because of its mediated referentiality to events in the world.

History and literature — modernist distinctions based on assumptions of «truth» and «fictionality» — have no real signifying power for John the Scot because he divides representation functionally rather than generically into categories of *mysteria* «mysteries» and *symbola* «symbols». In a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin's distinction between monologic and polyphonic discourse, Eriugena categorizes the discourse of *historia* analytically according to the number of expressive elements comprising the representation. Those with multiple elements possess *mysteria*, «mysteries», in the sense that in their complexity, achieved by linking word and context, they hold out a greater promise of meaning and understanding. At the same time, they also convey the real complexity of the world — not in the sense of mimetic realism — but in the sense of its indeterminacy, the multiple implications and meanings emerging from the unitary event.

Rather than promising to lay bare the «meaning of things hidden since the beginning of the world», this discourse of *historia* reveals the extent of the «wound» or gap between real meaning and apparent signification. The Eriugenean discourse of *historia* poses the question of the speaking or writing (or reading, for that matter) subject's situation. It implies a rethinking of the relationship of the cognitive subject to life and thus to history and this in turn generates a remodeling of representations of that relationship. The remodeling usually takes the form of rewriting prior texts which, for the medieval period, generally meant classical or parascriptural models (e.g., Augustine's *Confessions*, which is itself a rewriting of the *Aeneid*)[11]. We will see

---

[11]   On *Confessions* as a rewriting of the *Aeneid* see my «Amorous Imitation: Bakhtin, Augustine, and *Le Roman d'Enéas*». I am indebted to my colleague James O'Donnell for drawing my attention to the 1988 article by Camille Bennett, «The Conversion of Vergil: The Aeneid in Augustine's Confessions». On *Confessions* as a model for autobiography, see Marina Brownlee, «Autobiography as Self-Representation: The Augustinian Paradigm and Juan Ruiz's Theory of Reading». For an

the practical consequences of this process later, but first let's examine more closely the premises of Eriugena's discursive models, particularly as they bear on *historia*.

Eriugena begins by making the human mind the locus for perceiving and representing the world. Since all forms of expression will be mediated through the mind, there can be no question, in his theory, of naive mimetic realism. Language can never represent reality directly. The metaphor of the fountain incorporates an awareness of the parallax factor in perception — be it linguistic or visual — that teaches the distortions inherent in appearance. The image of the real and apparent sources of the water flowing from the fountain serves as a natural example for the principle of differentiation Eriugena conveys by means of the more abstract mathematical paradigm of the Monad and its numbers.

The principle of differentiation, analogous to the physical law of entropy, inheres within the Monad itself, governing the centripetal movement away from wholeness into diversity. «Things fall apart, the center cannot hold»: Yeats's line, if not its ultimate conclusion, helps us to understand how the notion of the Monad moving into diversity and transience could be viewed as applicable to many phenomena, beginning with historical existence. For the same reason that Eco signaled the importance of Leibniz's theory of the Monad for problematics of linguistic representation, Eriugena's speculations can help us to understand better medieval sign theories and their uses — particularly in the development of vernacular narrative in its relationship to history. Eriugena's originality lay in his ability to fuse the Western tradition which he inherited (particularly Augustine) with the Greek realist theories of language into a synthesis whose originality stimulated new modes of representation.

To understand practical applications of the principle of difference which he joined to the analysis of history as mystery, we must look briefly at the theory of the procession of the numbers from the monad. From his Greek sources, John the Scot postulates a dual

---

innovative exposition on the generative remodeling of Ovid's *Heroides* in Boccaccio and the Spanish *Novela Sentimental* see Marina Brownlee's forthcoming book *The Severed Word: Ovid's 'Heroides' and the 'Novela Sentimental'.*

mode of existence for all numbers[12]. Numbers exist in undifferentiated (preconceptual) form in the mind as «force» (*vis*) and «power» (*potestas*). As he points out (*PL* 122, 658A-659C), *vis* is the power by which numbers subsist in the eternity of the Monad, while *potestas* is the capacity of the numbers for proceeding from the Monad to the Many; in short, the initial differentiating principle. These two qualities define the «hidden», or «secret» phase of existence. This aspect continues to be a property of «numbers» (for which one may substitute language, image, or whatever created product of mentation is at issue); it is the «hidden origin» of all created things which expression, while setting the objets before us, only succeeds in obscuring. To take a linguistic example, the existence of one language suggests the «force» and «power» of all languages; but the one language, while showing the potential of language in general to express ideas, also shows its limitations, limitations shared by as well as revealed by comparison with other languages. The difference here is not the difference between given languages, but the difference between a given language and «language» as *vis et potestas*.

It was this sense of historic language as differentiated from an ideal, universal «language» that gave rise to the medieval myth of a prelapsarian perfect language of communication. The effects of the Fall were nowhere more keenly felt in medieval thought than in the nostalgia for a lost language, a transparent language. As G.R. Evans says, «the changes which took place as a result of Adam's sin... amount to this: the harmony of Adam and Eve's relationship with the

---

[12]   The main source for Eriugena's theory of differentiation is Book Three of *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* in which he expounds the Third Division of Nature concerned with the Material Cause of the universe. The theory of the Monad and its numbers permits him to differentiate between the One and the Many, while retaining the link between them. In this theory, the metaphor of the foutain illustrates how the Monad equates with the origin of the water hidden deep «in the secret breast of nature» while the surface outlet where the water rises and flows forth represents the progression into historical being and differentiation. The flowing forth is the progress into historical and material existence. The Monad in question is not a transcendent symbol for the Prime Mover, which would place us purely in a realm of theology of peripheral concern to the discourse theory we're concerned with. It is rather a created Monad, a model for sign theory which helps to explain the problems of historical representation. Cf. *Periphyseon* III, *PL* 122, 659A-B, S-W, III, 118-119: «...For I am not now concerned with that Monad which is the sole Cause and Creator of all things visible and invisible *but with that created Monad in which all the numbers subsist causally, uniformly, reasonably, and for ever, and from which they break forth into multiplicity.*»

rest of the created world and with God himself was broken (Gen. 3:14-19). It is upon this supposition... that the whole of medieval exegesis is founded» (1).

The sense of a lost language motivates both the concept of difference, and that of the «hidden», «obscure» originary state of created objects. It also undergirds the idea of mystery as an historical, rather than a transcendent phenomenon, as we shall see in a moment. For it was the historical intervention of the physical world in the Genesis story, under the guise of the serpent's discourse of desire that brought about the Fall. The serpent's language was a language of difference at odds with the naming language of identity and obedience spoken, up to that point, by God and Adam (Gen. 1-2). The Fall was, then, a linguistic event that brought about the awareness of history as difference.

Vis and *potestas* are, for Eriugena, the hidden sources of language in the preconceptual mind.

> So you are not unaware, as I think, that numbers are both eternal and made: eternal in the Monad, but made in the multiplicity in their descents, first, that is, they are made in the intellect of those who contemplate them in themselves, a mode of making *which is far removed from the senses*. (659A, S-W III, 118-119)

John the Scot's originality lay in his equation of the hidden springs of nature with the preconscious recesses of the human mind. It is this movement that allowed him to conflate so imaginatively the materiality of Augustinian sign theory with the idealism of the Greek Fathers. In the case of «force» and «power», the fact that the numbers are already in the mind as potential, however, positions them for the next phase of existence, the «descent» into history and differentiation.

Actus, «act» and *opus*, «operation» form the second phase by which «numbers» become material signs. *Actus* designates the metacritical, self-reflexive capacity of thought, the basis for discourse as an abstract principle of conjecturality. In Eriugena's terms, it is «the motion of the mind by which it contemplates the procession of numbers independently of the things into which they proceed; act is the motion of the mind in regarding without any imagery the numbers under the most pure aspect of their nature.» If act represents the consciousness of the non-mimetic correspondence between sign and referent, *opus*, 'operation', is the second principle of abstract conjecturality, the joint operation of perception and expression

characteristically described by Eriugena only in the last analysis as a physical discursive process: «Operation, on the other hand, is the motion of the same mind when the pure numbers which it considers in itself it consigns to the memory, embodied as it were by certain corporeal fantasies, and sets them in order there and deals with their reasons more easily; and conveys them, made significant to the corporeal senses, to the knowledge of others.»[13]

Here is the crux of John the Scot's labyrinth, the mystery in which people gradually find themselves enmeshed. Human intellect stands in a dialectical and problematic relationship to the world around it and the history in which it must situate itself. The mystery is not of human fabrication, but each being must discover and mediate it as best he can.

> ... the intellect is not the maker (*factor*) but the discoverer (*inuentor*) of the arts of nature, [though] it does not discover them outside itself but within itself — but when that art begins to descend by an intelligible progress into the reason from its secret places (*ab archanis suis*) in which it is all one in the mind in which it is, soon it gradually begins to reveal by evident divisions and differences its hidden structure... (658B, S-W III, 116-117)[14]

---

[13] (657C-658A, S-W, 114-117) The whole passage reads as follows: «'Force' is, as I think, the substantial virtue by which [the numbers] subsist eternally and immutably in the Monad, while 'power' is the possibility, innate in them, by which they are able to be multiplied and *become* manifest to intellects by certain terminological distinctions, quantitative diversities, differential intervals, (and) the wonderful equality and indissoluble harmony of proportion and proportionalities. Act is the motion of the mind in contemplating in itself and in them the multiplication of the numbers as they proceed from the Monad into the diverse genera and different species before they reach the fantasies of cogitation, that is in considering with the eye of the intellect beyond all quantity and quality and places and times the numbers themselves ⟨in⟩ the simplicity of their incorporeal nature which lacks all imagery; and, to give a brief definition: Act is the motion of the mind in regarding without any imagery the numbers under the most pure aspect of their nature. Operation, on the other hand, is the motion of the same mind when the pure numbers which it considers in itself it consigns to the memory, embodied as it were by certain corporeal fantasies, and sets them in order there and deals with their reasons more easily; and conveys them, made significant to the corporeal senses, to the knowledge of others.»

[14] Later in this passage, Eriugena provides a summary of the progression from inchoate intellection to concrete expression: «So the intellectual numbers stream down from the Monad so that they may shine forth in the (1) **mind,** then by flowing forth from the mind into the (2) **reason** they reveal themselves more openly; next descending from the reason into the (3) **memory (imagination)** they receive from the

ALLEGORY OF EVENT AND WORD (MYSTERY)
AND ALLEGORY OF WORD (SYMBOL)

Turning from the abstract model to practical application, Eriugena devised a hermeneutics for reading and representing the world as allegory. When Borges ironically remarks that it would be inconceivable for history to imitate literature, he reminds us that history is a figurative process for representing the world, in other words, allegory. Eriugena's conception of the Monad and its numbers, particularly in the last phase, «operation», makes figural expression a principle of abstract conjecturality, a labyrinth. But he conceives of narratives as labyrinths with varying degrees of complexity. In line with the modern distinction between truth and fiction (but **not** between history and literature), John the Scot proposes a hermeneutic model for distinguishing between texts based on historical event as well as narrative, and those that use narrative not grounded in historical event.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, Eriugena interprets the account of the miracle of the five barley loaves and two fish in a radical departure from previous commentaries, particularly Augustine's[15]. In a movement whose importance for medieval theories of representation have yet to be fully appreciated, he proposed that historical event, rather than truth per se, *in its discursive form*, be taken as the criterion for distinguishing history from other forms of symbolic expression. In other words, history should be viewed as text. By thematizing history as a narrative component, he creates an allegorical architecture susceptible of infinite mutations. «Mystery» was the term used to suggest the labyrinth of potential variations.

---

nature of memory itself phantasmal appearances in which they clearly reveal the powers of their multiple forms to those that inquire into them, then into the (4) **senses**, lastly into the (5) **figures** [*deinde in sensus, postremo in figuras*]», (658C-D, S-W, 116-119). — Sheldon-Williams, n. 27, p. 313, summarizes the descent into the figures and diagrams by which we represent sensible objects in terms of five motions of the mind: 1. Intellect, 2. Reason, 3. Imagination, 4. Sense, 5. Symbolization.

[15] On the innovative quality of Eriugena's commentary in respect to Augustine's (whom he explicitly acknowledges), see the notes to Jeauneau's edition, and the indispensable article by Jean Pépin.

Commenting on John 6, 14,

> Homines ergo uidentes quod fecit signum iesus, dicebant: Quia ipse est
> uere propheta qui uenit in mundum.
>
> (The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, «This really is the
> prophet who is to come into the world».)

John the Scot observes that the account shows the people's imperfect understanding of signs by their insistence on interpreting simply the visible sign (operation) rather than its potential for meaning (*PL* 122, 344B, Jeauneau 348-349). Even Augustine, he says, did not fully appreciate the richness of the passage, because, like the people, he commented on what was said — the intelligible sign — rather than what was not said, the mystery.

The «profound mystery of which Augustine does not mention so much as a word in his commentary» (344C, 350-351) is not the miracle of the loaves and fish itself, as the people thought, but the whole story of the feast and the «cleaning up». Why, he asks, does the account mention the twelve hampers that the disciples filled with the remains of the barley loaves, but not the fish? What happened to the remains of the fish?

Eriugena believes the omission to be intentional, an example, in Prince's words, of «an event that does not happen but which is nevertheless referred to, in a negative or hypothetical mode»[16]. Through the disnarrated, historical narratives reveal mysteries, and that is what sets history apart from parable, the other common biblical mode. Although Scripture often gets the two terms confused (345C), mystery and symbol, he argues, are two distinct allegorical modes. Mystery, the first allegorical mode, is the more complex. It is an allegory of events and words («Mysteria... proprie sunt quae iuxta allegoriam et facti et dicti traduntur, hoc est, et secundum res gestas facta sunt, et dicta quia narruntur» 344C, 352).

«Mystery» is thus both historical event and the narrative of that event. Moses's tabernacle (Numbers 7,1) was constructed according

---

[16]   This is Gerald Prince's definition of the «disnarrated, a narrative category that constitutes a powerful source of information about a particular narrative's view of narrative and of itself». An early version of the concept may be found in his article, «The Disnarrated», in *Style* 22 (Spring 1988), 1-8. A subsequent version with the categories more fully elaborated called «L'Alternarré», will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Strumenti Critici*.

to history; in Scripture it appears both as historical fact and narrative (344D, 352-353). Similarly, the circumcision was performed in the flesh and narrated in word (345A, 352-353). In the New Testament, the same may be said of the mystery of baptism, and that of the body and blood of Christ (345A). Signs of this sort that, on the one hand «have actually happened, and, on the other, have been transmitted by letters are visible signs, properly called by the holy Fathers 'allegories of event and of discourse'» (345A, 352-353).

The allegory of *facti et dicti* emphasizes the visibility or presentation of the event for contemplation. It is less the factuality of the happening that seems to matter here, than its ability — as a compound artifact — to stimulate reflection not just on the factual event, but on the represented event, the event as text. He does not downplay the importance of historicity so much as take it as a given not requiring proof. The historical dimension of the allegory of event and discourse *must* matter for John the Scot because it is the connection to the physical world — revealed in its opaqueness, like the language that conveys the event — that makes the mystery.

Symbol is what Eriugena calls the second kind of allegory characterized by him as simple, rather tham compound. «Allegory of words but not of events» (allegoria dicti non autem facti), so called because it consists solely of narrative and moral teachings. Unlike mysteries, symbols are not historical events, but discourses recounting things which did not actually happen **as though they had happened for didactic purposes** (345A-B, 352-355).

Examples of the narrative symbolic mode are found in both Testaments. Exodus 23,19 and 34,26, give the law that you shall not boil the kid in its mother's milk. Augustine, from whom Eriugena derives this allegorical mode, found the law ridiculous as a real proposition and so concluded it must be exemplary rather than literal[17]. The New Testament, according to John the Scot, contains many discursive symbols; the parables of Christ, like the story of Lazarus and Dives, for example, are rich in allegory of the word (345 B-C,

---

[17]   See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 303-308, for a discussion of the rehistoricization of this law in the later Middle Ages (when the knowledge of Hebrew became more common among Christian theologians). Subsequent discovery that this law had a perfectly rational literal meaning for those who understood the Hebrew and Jewish culture would not affect Eriugena's concept of the symbol. It simply removes this particular example from the list.

355-357). The parables rely on figural language, and the exact name for the figural language of the parables is «symbol» («proprieque simbolica nominatur»), but, he adds in a wonderful aside, «Scripture has a habit of calling 'symbol' what is properly 'mystery' and 'mystery' what is 'symbol'» (345C, 355-357).

We cannot pursue the intricacies of Eriugena's distinction between mystery and symbol for biblical exegesis. Suffice it to say that the five loaves represent the five bodily senses while the two fishes represent the two testaments. Together, the loaves and the fishes are the sacraments. The multitude — whom he calls the fleshly faithful — take the sacraments, that is the historical sense alone. The spiritual adepts gather the crumbs, the remains signifying the spiritual meaning (346B, 358-61), so they wind up with both history and the deeper meaning in the form of its hermeneutic accretions.

In John the Scot's view, all mystery contains the double address to the bodily senses and to the mind, each corresponding to the literal and the spiritual meaning. History cannot signify, at least in any profoundly meaningful way, unless it contains the element of mystery, of otherness which makes it allegory. Mystery, his name for the hidden sense, may also be identified as a sign of the mental activity triggered by the discourse in a search for deeper meanings. Mystery thus corresponds to the term and process of invention which played so important a role in vernacular lyric and narrative in the Middle Ages under such terms as the Provençal, «trobar», or the Old French, «trover», which mean «to discover», «invent», «compose» and gave us the terms for poets, «troubadour» and «trouvère». Discovery or invention by the intellect working on the enigmas posed by the world: that is Eriugena's driving principle. We will see the consequences of this for vernacular literature shortly.

With symbol, the unitary, rather than the combinatory principle obtains. In the everyday world, Eriugena would argue, symbol is less complex than mystery, but that is precisely what gives it a higher value from a transcendent viewpoint. Symbol, free from ties to the physical world of history represents, allegorically, the undivided language of pure spirituality. As John the Scot explains in Chapter Six of his Commentary on Saint John (346D-347A, 364-365), the two fish represent the allegory of spiritual teaching which is an «allegory of words and not of (historical) events». This allegory is allied with the number two because its perception involves two senses only, sight and sound: one reads it with the eyes and hears it with the ears.

The allegory of word alone is the indivisible symbol: one can't «break it» like the bread because it's already single, an allegorical discourse without historical content. In effect, Eriugena interprets the «Disnarrated» here by explaining why we find no mention of the disciples gathering up the remains of the fish after the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. The fishes are symbol because they cannot be divided, like the bread, into the historical (literal) sense (the part consumed) and the spiritual meaning (the crumbs gathered by the disciples).

In principio erat uerbum, et uerbum erat apud deum, et deus erat uerbum (John 1,1) is Eriugena's archetypal example of the allegory of word alone. The statement conveys no historical event or fact (848A, 366-367). It must be taken whole in its unity by the spiritual men, without being divided and parcelled out to the multitude, or, as he calls them, the «fleshly faithful». It cannot be fragmented, split, nor broken down in any way, for nothing in it may be understood as history; it is pure theology, typifying allegory for the two senses. «Readers read it with their eyes; listeners hear it; one can thus understand how a single theological proposition works for two of our senses: it is comparable to the two fish» [Oculis legitur legentium, auribus sentitur audientium, ac per hoc, ueluti quidam duo pisces, una eademque euangelistae theologia accipitur, duobus sensibus conueniens (348B, 366-367)].

Our inquiry concerns mystery, rather than symbol: history rather than theology. If Arnold's strictures on the lack of modernity for medieval thought have any applicability, it would be to the allegory of symbol which marks the ascent of the intellect towards its meeting with the divine grace in the epiphany which John the Scot calls theosis. Symbol thus enacts the return of the numbers to the Monad away from the world history.

«ALLEGORY OF EVENT AND WORD»
AS HISTORIA AND TRANSGRESSIVE HISTORIA

As Pépin points out (18-19), Augustine had made the distinction between *allegoria dicti et allegoria facti*[18]. He conceived them, however, as two separate modes: an allegory of event distinct from the allegory of word (quod non dictum sed etiam factum fuit...). They are two «simple» modes, rather than one compound and one single that inevitably make separate categories of history and literature. Eriugena's originality lay in abolishing the boundedness of the two terms by fusing them in the complex mode we have seen. By connecting history to speech and thought, he also connects history to the body, thereby making an analogy between the enigma of history and the enigma of being. In this way, history also becomes part of the landscape of images to be perceived and processed by humans in determining their situation and identity.

A particularly revealing passage in the Commentary on John recasts the metaphor of the hidden springs of nature in physiological terms to make explicit the link between the enigma of being and that of history. Speaking of mystery in the New Testament, John the Scot says (347B, 364-365): «Similarly, in the New Testament... the body and blood of our Lord are a mystery which functions (conficitur) tangibly at the level of historical events but whose hidden sense must be sought at the level of the spiritual meanings». This would be straightforward enough but for the unusual word Eriugena uses for «hidden sense». Instead of «arcanum», his more usual term, this passage uses *cerebrum*, a term sufficiently unusual to lead Jeauneau to devote a note to it:

> The word *cerebrum* is surprising. In its usual sense, it denotes the brain. That's how John the Scot uses it [elsewhere]... But *cerebrum* also means: «hidden sense». This extended meaning is attested in the mythographer Fulgentius who understands *cerebrum* allegorically as myth (*fabula*)... Taken in this way, the word *cerebrum* fits here; it designates the hidden meaning of the mystery... (364-365, n. 9)

---

[18] *De trinitate* xv. 9.15. 27-31: sed ubi allegoriam nominauit apostolus (Gal. 4,24) non in uerbis eam reperit sed in facto cum ex duobus filiis Abrahae, uno de ancilla, altero de libera, quod non dictum sed etiam factum fuit duo testamenta intelligenda monstrauit.

Fulgentius joins the term *cerebrum* with verbs of cognitive percep-
tion, «agnoscamus» «recognize», «identify», «inquiramus»
«search for», «examine». In adopting this meaning of *cerebrum*,
John the Scot shows that the hidden meaning of history must be
sought in the mind, now recognized as the logical source of history
as allegory and of the language that makes it so. There can be no
question of a naïve mimetic realism in which the sign would directly
represent its referent. As Borges would argue, the search for history
occurs in the mind as a consequence of *inventio* or of *trobar*, the
medieval Latin and vernacular terms for «finding» as creating. It is
no accident that the term «inventio» is used both in rhetoric and to
designate the discovery of «mysteries» like saints'bodies or relics
within tombs (as, for example, the «invention» of the True Cross by
Saint Helena).

Viewed in this way, we can see that the allegory of event and
discourse becomes, in Eriugena, the moving force of *historia*, the
representation of history-as-hermeneutic. Put another way, *historia* is
the practical face of John the Scot's theory of the world as image and
meaning. Eriugena did not invent *historia*, but he did transform it by
his insistence on pointing to the gap between discourse and meaning.
Although working resolutely within a theological framework, his
distinction between *allegoria facti et dicti* and *allegoria dicti sed non
facti* opened history to transgression by meanings far different from
the biblical ones that Eriugena had in mind.

He freed history, for instance, to become «transgressive historia»,
the kind of history Borges is really talking about in «The Traitor and
Hero» when the allegory of history as event and discourse becomes
appropriated for the purposes of popular culture where the focus falls
on the enigma of the everyday world rather than spiritual mysteries.
Even when vernacular authors utilize the scheme of allegory as event
and discourse with serious intent in order to rationalize introducing
such artifacts of popular culture as folk tales into the sphere of high
culture, the effect of transgressive historia is parodic. Parody does not
necessarily imply humorous intent; it may just as well apply to the
allegorical appropriation of something that is already allegory.
Allegory to the second degree, especially when the allegory ver-
nacularizes the sacred, is a form of parody, even when done in
earnest, as may be attested by twelfth-century examples of popular
culture like the *Lais* of Marie de France.

In a companion article, «Transgressing History in Popular Culture: Marie de France», I have suggested how John the Scot's allegorical model for discovering the hidden mystery's of nature recast as transgressive historia onto the matrix of popular culture, may shed light on one of the most original and innovative projects of the mid-twelfth century: Marie de France's *Lais*. As she articulated the project in her «Prologue», Marie deliberately sketches a plan for reading the record of history as image, the interrogative imprint of a mystery, or a labyrinth constructed by philosophers so that those who came after them might be intrigued, then enmeshed. Her project resonates with ideas made current by Eriugena but Marie transposes them innovatively into parody.

To take but one example from the «Prologue» to her *Lais*, the famous passage where she suggests that the ancient philosophers purposely incorporated hidden meanings in their works so that those who came after would be able to study the works («gloser la lettre») and interpret them by adding their own «surplus» meaning («E de lur sen le surplus mettre»).

> Custume fu as ancïens,
> Ceo testimoine Precïens,
> Es livres ke jadis feseient
> Assez oscurement diseient
> Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
> E ki aprendre les deveient,
> K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
> E de lur sen le surplus mettre. (9-16)[19]

Marie reworks John the Scot's notion of the water that surfaces far from its source in the hidden mystery of nature, combines it with his physiological transposition of «hidden meanings» (*cerebrum*) and spells out the logical conclusion, namely that the waters or events that surface far from their sources will be freed to assume new and different meanings. She takes writing itself as the event (allegoria facti), meaning the work of the ancients which will then be extended by the discursive glossing of subsequent generations in an allegory of appropriation and distancing.

---

[19]   The bibliography on this passage is extensive. As I deal with the different views in my article «Transgressing History...», I won't repeat them here. For a bibliography and résumé of the «Prologue debate» see Alfred Foulet and Karl D. Uitti.

Marie goes on in her Prologue to outline her project for translating the true events recounted in the oral folk tales of Breton culture into a new genre that will combine the historical events of Brittany with a new verse narrative form in Old French which she calls «lays». We recognize her lais as *allegoriae facti et dicti* remodeled into a parodic, hence transgressive historia. By basing her historia on popular, rather than sacred culture, Marie's lais unconsciously illustrate Borges' ironic comment «That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvelous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable». Postmodernism shows us that it is far from inconceivable to juxtapose medieval and contemporary theories for a better understanding of the continuity of history and/as literature across the rupture of time.

WORKS CITED

Arnold, Matthew, *Essays in Criticism*, Boston, Ticknor & Fields, 1865.

Arnold, Matthew, *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, London, MacMillan and Co., 1889.

Bennett, Camille, «The Conversion of Vergil: The Aeneid in Augustine's Confessions», *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 34 (1988), 47-69.

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Ficciones*, New York, Grove Press, 1962.

Brind'Amour, Lucie and Eugene Vance, editors, *L'Archéologie du signe*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1983, Papers in Medieval Studies, 3.

Brownlee, Marina S., «Autobiography as Self-Representation: The Augustinian Paradigm and Juan Ruiz's Theory of Reading», in *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, edited by John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Hanover, University of New England Press, 1982, pp. 71-82.

Brownlee, Marina S., *The Severed Word: Ovid's «Heroides» and the «Novela Sentimental»*, in press.

Dubois, Claude-Gilbert, «Problems of 'Representation' in the Sixteend Century», *Medieval and Renaissance Representations: New Reflections*, edited by Stephen G. Nichols and Nancy J. Vickers, *Poetics Today*, 5 (1984), 461-478.

Eco, Umberto, «How I wrote *The Name of the Rose*», *New York Times Book Review*, October 14, 1984, 1, 35-37, [Eco, 1984-1].

Eco, Umberto, *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, Translated by William Weaver, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Eco, Umberto, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, (1984-3).

Evans, G.R. *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Foulet, Alfred and Karl D. Uitti, «The Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France and Medieval Poetics», *Romance Philology* 35 (1981), 242-249.

Fynsk, Christopher, *Heidegger: Thought and Historicity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986.

Gearhart, Suzanne, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction: A Critical Approach to the French Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, 1984.

Greene, Thomas M., *The Descent from Heaven: a Study in Epic Continuity*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964.

Greimas, A.J., and Courtes, J., *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1979.

John Scottus Eriugena, Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae *Periphyseon (De Diuisione Naturae)*, Edited by I.P. Sheldon-Williams, with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler, Dublin, The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972-1981 (Books I-III), Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, VII, IX, XI.

John Scottus Eriugena, *Jean Scot: Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean. Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes et index*, ed. by Edouard Jeauneau, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1972, Collection *Sources Chrétiennes*, 180.

Lentricchia, Frank, *After the New Criticism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Marie de France: Lais, edited by Alfred Ewert, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958.

Nichols, Stephen G. «Amorous Imitation: Bakhtin, Augustine, and *Le Roman d'Enéas*», in *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, edited by Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1985, pp. 47-73.

Nichols, Stephen G., «*Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2nd Edition, 1985.

Nichols, Stephen G. «Transgressing History in Popular Culture: Marie de France». Spec. issue *Stanford French Review* edited by Kevin Brownlee, Marina S. Brownlee, and Stephen Nichols, Forthcoming, 1989-90.

Pépin, Jean, «*Mysteria et Symbola* dans le commentaire de Jean Scot sur l'Evangile de saint Jean», *The Mind of Eriugena: Papers of a Colloquium, Dublin, 14-18 July 1970*, edited by John J. O'Meara and Ludwig Bieler, Dublin, Irish University Press, 1973, pp. 16-30.

Rey, Alain, «Lecture du 'Signe'», *L'Archéologie du Signe*, edited by Lucie Brind'Amour and Eugene Vance, 1-16.

Rey, Alain, *Théories du signe et du sens: Lectures*, Tome 1, Initiation à la Linguistique, Série A., Paris, Éditions Klincksieck, 1973.

Ricœur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Smalley, Beryl, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1964.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord, *Works*, Volume I, London, MacMillan, 1884.

Vance, Eugene, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Yeats, W.B., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach, New York, MacMillan, 1957.