Everywhere we seek the Absolute, and always we find only things.

Novalis

This paper seeks to tell a literary history in visual terms. Its aim stems from a genuine curiosity rather than from any programmatic agenda, a critical motive to which allegory, with its ability to accommodate almost any content, has been especially prone. The question that initially spawned it was one of discrepancy: How is it that symbolic modes as seemingly disparate as figural readings of Scripture, Benjamin’s death’s head, and the art of Morris Louis can all be (accurately) called allegorical? The assumptions about truth, metaphysics, language, and meaning-making underlying these objects differ so wildly that at times it appears, as it has to me throughout the course of my time wandering through the history of allegory, that these phenomena cannot all possibly be instances of the same thing, and if they are, then this thing, “allegory,” cannot possibly be singular. Like any cultural institution or symbolic system, it has changed over time.

Tropes, a series of symbolic operations available to us through which we can relate objects to meaning, undergo change along with the society in which they exist and that society’s cultural history. This is something like what Jonathan Culler proposes: “The process of developing literary conventions depends on models or operations already current in the social discourse of the period (in the ‘text’ of everyday life, of the ‘natural attitude,’ as well as the discourse of its sciences).” There is a reciprocity between the semiological or figural models legible in any given period and their cultural interpretative context. As the way we understand our relation to meaning-making changes, so do the forms available to us through which to express that relation. The relationship between art and society appears to be, when one considers
it from the point of view of the history of tropes, not one of identity of content, as Culler puts it, but one of “homology of form:” the way operations for the production of meaning relate not to “the content of social life but the operations which produce social and cultural objects, the devices which create a world charged with meaning.”³

Barthes argues that the essence of literature lies in the process of signification rather than in the content of what is signified, and that therefore its history consists primarily of a formal history of signification. “The history of literature as a signifying system,” he says, “has never been written.”⁴ This is precisely the kind of attention I want to give allegory, tracking, through local moments of image-based investigation, the changes to which allegory has been subject, the shifts in how we imagine its structure to work, and the epistemological assumptions about meaning underlying these changes at any given point.

Allegory, as a process through which a thing comes to mean something other and more than it appears, has no definite or essential content, only a defined conceptual space, housed under and demarcated by its name, in which it is possible to envision a set of possible ways of understanding this particular symbolic procedure. Jean-François Lyotard observes that there are a number of “set-ups,” or forms, it is possible for the energies produced in inscription processes (for him, writing and painting) to take. Lyotard understands the set-up as an “organization of connections: it is energy that channels and that regulates the influx and expenditure of energy in chromatic inscription.”⁵ Though Lyotard is interested primarily in flows of libidinal energy within a loosely Freudian model, what I find useful in a discussion of allegory’s form changing over time is the notion of set-ups themselves: possible models, or structures, that show us there are a number of ways in which a single symbolic function can organize itself. Throughout history, it has been generally agreed that allegory is a means of figural double-speak, a place in
which two or more levels of meaning coexist, one of them hidden, though exactly how something comes to mean something else has been a frequent point of debate and changed over time.

The changes symbolic modes undergo register concretely and can be tracked in cultural objects—art, literature, and discourses of all kinds, including the texts and images with which this story is told. In his discussion of set-ups, Lyotard does not distinguish between literature and art, text and image, letter and line, calling this distinction arbitrary. For him, these modes ultimately perform the same work of inscription, though they do so in different ways, each with their limitations and advantages. They share a common horizon, arriving at it via different avenues. Similarly, it is not the type or genre of allegorical medium that matters to me quite as much as the work it does, and the shape or structure this logic takes in any given object. As we’ll see, allegory participates in a confusion of the verbal and visual that makes the drawing of distinctions between the two categories difficult to maintain.

It is with this entanglement, allegory’s fundamental inability to decide whether it is something seen or read, that my story begins.

Visual and Textual

While all figurative language has a visual quality, in allegory this quality is crystallized, appearing in an exceedingly clear diagrammatic form. In his comprehensive historical tracing of the mode’s predominant features, Angus Fletcher points out the dominance of terms with strong visual connotations characterizing allegory as early as the pioneering days of biblical exegesis: paradeigma, figura, schema, emblema, impresa. “When allegory is called ‘pure,’” he writes, the adjective implies that it lacks ambiguity in the same way that a diagram essentially lacks it. For the suggestiveness and intensity of ambiguous metaphorical language
allegory substitutes a sort of figurative geometry. It enables the poet, as Francis Bacon observed, to “measure countries in the mind.”

Allegory has always been a conceptual object that, in its bridging between the concrete and the symbolic, inspires a kind of visually-inflected thought. Northrop Frye calls it a “structure of images” with relationships to precepts, noting that “genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone.” One can, of course, read an allegory into almost anything they wish, but this mode of reading (allegoresis) speaks less to the structured nature of allegory than to its viability as a meaning-making process, and to the astonishing applicability of its structure even in contexts where no allegorical reading was intended.

What undergoes fundamental change in allegory over time is its structure. This structure becomes subject to a progressive flattening, a collapsing of allegory’s levels proportionate to the perceived viability of metaphysics and the presumed relationship between human beings and meaning available at any given time. It is possible to see, on both a visual and semiological level, that allegory moves from a highly-schematized structure of reference to one of flatness, circularity, and non-reference. This structural change is so profound that it alters what we mean when we say that something is “allegorical” in our contemporary moment.

But why call this formal relationship a structure? Why not something amorphous and fluid, like Lyotard’s libidinal flows? Because to do so would constitute allegory’s idealization into a form that appears to us, situated as we are on the far side of post-structural thought, appropriate and appealing, but which in fact does not represent the highly conceptual and schematized form allegory has worn throughout much of its history. The goal is to trace this form and understand its existing manifestations, not to create a new (and naively definitive) account of what allegory “is,” as if there was any such essential, non-historical entity. This is not
to say that there is no thing called “allegory” describing a specific relationship to meaning or a particular meaning-making capacity (ie, looking at something and seeing something else) that does indeed exist across time, only to say that how this capacity functions is unstable, and can’t be distilled into some fundamental definition that can be rescued or recruited for a situated aesthetic project (read: aesthetic agenda).

What does it look like? (Schematic structures)

All arts have a spatial and a temporal aspect. They can be described as a rhythm moving along in time, or as a pattern spreading out in space.\textsuperscript{10} Allegory, in its obvious and pressing spatial and temporal dimensions, opens itself to a distinctly pictorial mode of appearance. How can such an appearance be characterized? What does it look like, and why does it take this form?

Though allegory manifests in a number of spatial and pictorial structures, not all of them identical, these various models nevertheless share the characteristic of creating a hermeneutic relationship (a dialectic) between elements occupying distinct \textit{levels}, or discrete \textit{positions} in relation to one another. Craig Owens suggests that a paradigm for the allegorical work is the palimpsest, wherein one text is read through another.\textsuperscript{11} A key feature of the palimpsest, of course, is the simultaneous existence of multiple texts in layers, not all of them immediately visible.

This doubling of levels in superimposition is certainly a feature of literary allegory. Fletcher describes this structure of doubling, in which allegorical narratives tend to contain two (and sometimes more) distinct plots linked by a magical relationship in which

\ldots the major plot is mirrored by a secondary one, and the mutual mirroring is felt to have a magical force, as if one plot brought the other into existence, since the other was its double. Each plot recreates the logic, the coherence, the persuasive force of the other, and the result is that we get something like a miraculous reduplication of two worlds that “belong together.”\textsuperscript{12}
This parallelism need not be restricted to the narrative’s plot: characters in allegorical stories are often themselves doubled, whether literally or psychologically (Fletcher gives the example of Jekyll-and-Hyde-type narratives), and allegorical narratives are prone to explicating parallel levels of symbolism, wherein microcosmic objects, such as gemstones or Hawthorne’s scarlet letter, correspond to macrocosmic structures of cosmic or social orders. In any case, a dialectic exists between the levels, in which “exactness of parallel must be rigorously maintained,”

giving the doubled elements a schematic, illustrative, diagrammatic quality that is distinctly pictorial.

This is because allegory, whether encountered in written or image form, maintains a strong visual aspect, rendering language nearly synaesthetic and making it possible for imagery to be referred to any of the senses. Ideas conceptualized in spatial terms possess a unique clarity born of their relationship to highly schematic ways of thinking. Fletcher argues that the visualizing, diagrammatic tendency associated with images applies to all forms of allegory, which require a dialectical quasi-visual clarity of outline in order to function. This outline takes the form of a geometric schema, such as the doubling of levels discussed above or a constellation, wherein discrete, individual parts move in an ordered system of mutually dependent relations. The constellation, as much the doubled schema of mirrored elements, partakes in establishing a hermeneutic relationship between discrete objects to dialectically reveal a hidden, “other” meaning: “The silences in allegory mean as much as the filled-in spaces, because by bridging the silent gaps between oddly unrelated images we reach the sunken understructure of thought.”

These various visual qualities common to both narrative and pictorial allegory make it possible and necessary to think about allegory, a symbolic mode so strongly anchored in
language, in visual terms. Turning to visual instances of allegory to understand something about its rhetorical operation is surprising, like stepping into the exaggerated systemic clarity of a lucid psychedelic experience: structural elements suddenly seem blatantly obvious, clearly delineated in hyperbolic visual terms. Further, it quickly becomes obvious that the elements of allegory most at issue in language can be thought about more clearly as visual relationships, and in fact are often linked to the strange transformation that occurs when problems of time demand to be thought as problems of space.

*Structured Strangeness*

Allegory is its own world, one where verbal and visual logics intermix and contaminate one another. Fletcher writes:

> Allegory perhaps has a “reality” of its own, but it is certainly not of the sort that operates in our perceptions of the physical world. It has an idealizing consistency of thematic content, because, in spite of the visual absurdity of much allegorical imagery, the relations between ideas are under strict logical control.\(^\text{16}\)

This reality is something like a picture language expressed in terms of structure rather than content. Allegory has long been associated with the pictogrammatic and the hieroglyphic. Benjamin, in his discussion of Baroque allegory, traces Baroque interest in allegory and the trope’s increasing distance from the symbol to a widespread interest among humanist scholars in deciphering hieroglyphs, which they translated “word for word by special pictorial signs,” writing with concrete images rather than words—in other words, creating rebuses.\(^\text{17}\) The rebus is a picture that can be read or a text that can be pictured, a relationship in which neither the visual nor the textual necessarily holds priority.

In allegory, “the written word tends toward the visual.” At the same time, “at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing.” Benjamin
identifies the true character of allegory when he says, agreeing with a critic’s negative but inadvertently insightful assessment, that allegory crosses borders of modes commonly held apart from each other, instigating a “violation of frontiers” wherein the plastic arts advance into the territory of the rhetorical arts. This hieroglyphic, stubbornly ambiguous medium-crossing tendency of allegory is evident in the ease with which allegory translates diachronic, narrative elements into spatial terms. In allegory, text, which must normally be read through time, becomes synchronic, appearing all at once: narrative cast into image form. While this process is schematized, it is not necessarily rational, harboring, in its process of transformation, something of the surreal, the intoxicated, the strange.

Take, for instance, Fletcher’s discussion of the peculiar way in which agency, in allegorical narratives, is transformed into imagery:

A fixed agent is tantamount to an image, as in reverse (for the iconoclasts) images were tantamount to daemonic agents. In a way we knew this all the time, since the agents of allegorical writing are often presented emblematically through visual icons. But we have come full circle to the point where we can explain why even in narration they are so often sheerly emblematic. Their hierarchic function forbids any other case. Fixation of sense follows from the need to obey narrow controls.

Because allegorical characters are subservient to the idea or concept they represent, or to the plan of the narrative and its overarching conceptual concerns, they often appear strangely static. Even within textual space, “agency becomes confused with imagery, and action becomes a diagram:” the allegorical agent is hypostasized into an emblem, as is evident in personification allegory, where Justice becomes an image of a woman with scales, as Fortune becomes a blindfolded one. Allegorical characters can act, but their actions are in no way mimetic in the Aristotelian sense—they stem not from the agent’s will, but from the will of an external conceptual necessity. This synchronic process within a narrative told in time points to allegory’s tendency to translate narrative and dramatic features into visual, geometric designs, even in narrative space. Such
imagery possesses an odd, stilted quality that Fletcher links to surrealist painting, with its isolated, hyperdefinite objects that function both metonymically and synecdochically and are often placed in constellations.

Or, take Benjamin’s meditations on the allegorical process whereby history itself, a thing normally understood in diachronic, narrative terms, becomes naturalized into setting, or landscape, where events are visible synchronically, all at once. And this, indeed, is a strange occurrence, strange enough so as to find its place in Benjamin’s hashish “protocols” of January 1928: “To return to the colportage phenomenon of space: we simultaneously perceive all the events that might have taken place here. The room winks at us: What do you think may have happened here?” This odd feature of allegory, first theorized in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, finds its counterpart not in a study of genre or language, but in a study of drug experience. Consider:

We know that, in the course of flânerie, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment. When the authentically intoxicated [rauschhafte] phase of this condition announces itself, the blood is pounding in the veins of the happy flâneur, his heart ticks like a clock, and inwardly as well as outwardly things go on as we would imagine them to do in one of those “mechanical pictures” which in the nineteenth century (and of course earlier, too) enjoyed great popularity, and which depicts in the foreground a shepherd playing on a pipe, by his side two children swaying time to the music, further back a pair of hunters in pursuit of a lion, and very much in the background a train crossing over a trestle bridge.

This spatialization of a temporal sequence resembles a history painting, like Geertgen tot Sin Jans’ The Legend of the Relics of St. John the Baptist, where three diagonal segments corresponding to three temporally distinct events occupy the same landscape all at once, as if they were happening simultaneously (Fig. 1).
When we think about language in visual terms, what we are really doing is putting questions of time in terms of questions of space. This way of thinking about tropes is present, for example, in the work of Paul de Man, who, in outlining the contrast between symbol and allegory, writes that in “the world of the symbol it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance […] Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind.” Here a relationship between signifier and signified is understood as a relation of spatial simultaneity, in contrast to allegory’s revelation of temporal distance between signifier and signified. Though he identifies time, and not space, as the “originary constitutive category” of allegory, it is telling that de Man cannot help but use spatial terms in his description of allegory’s
temporal status. “Whereas symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification,” he argues, “allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference [emphasis added].” Elsewhere he describes this distance, or difference, as the “narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from this meaning [emphasis added].”

Or, again: “The fundamental structure of allegory reappears here in the tendency of the language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time.” Distances, voids, the spacing of spirals and spreading of axes—it would appear that despite claims to the contrary, the gap allegory opens between its terms of reference is not purely temporal, but also, as a gap, always spatial, allowing problems of referentiality to be understood as problems of space.

All this is to say two things: one, that despite its schematic, geometric, and highly structured quality, allegory nearly always contains, and in fact breeds irrational elements, pointing to a complex way in which rationality and irrationality are dependent upon one another; and two, that as an object that is both rational and irrational, textual and visual, temporal and spatial, allegory requires a methodology commensurate with its stubborn mixing of modes.

One. Reading all this talk of allegory’s structure and ordered schematic relations, one would think that there is no magic in this form, and that allegory, compared with the liveliness and quick turn of something like metaphor, is the driest and most rational of symbolic modes. This is in fact the meat of the Romantic aesthetic critical disdain for allegory—that it rigidly

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1 de Man’s clean differentiation of allegory as a temporal relation and symbol as a spatial one directly contradicts Fletcher and Benjamin’s formulations about transformations and translations between temporal and spatial categories, and is contradicted by de Man’s own use of spatial rhetoric in his discussions of allegory. It is worthwhile to note that de Man’s theoretical project depends upon his ability to keep allegory’s features totally separate from those of symbol, though the two modes in fact share many similarities (for example, their mutual ability to be conceived of in spatial terms, or the historical fact that a coincidental and unbroken relationship between the elements of reference was assumed to exist in medieval and Renaissance allegory). The characterization of allegory as a relation of distance and non-reference is itself specific to a particular moment in literary history, as we will see.
structures art; that it introduces logic and reason into the profound heart of artistic feeling, retroactively and inorganically structuring what should, in aesthetic terms, be self-sufficient. While allegory is and has always been structured, this structure is in no way antithetical to the mysterious, transformative, and irrational. Fletcher emphasizes these qualities, connecting allegorical experience to features of magic, ritual, surrealism, addiction, and intoxication. There is a gap in allegory, a space in which one thing becomes another, and precisely how this process takes place is not known. The results, despite the allegorist’s aim at exact relation, are sometimes strange, and do not correspond to the logic and appearance of the real world. Allegory shows us that structure and magic are not antithetical terms, and that an object allowing for the possibility of its schematic mapping does not automatically relinquish its potential for mystery. This peculiar mix of rational and irrational, mastery and magic returns repeatedly in the images ahead.

And, two. Allegory’s strange structure invites us to consider that rationality and irrationality are not as far apart as they are normally made to seem, and that epistemology requires and is comprised of both. An examination of allegorical epistemology through its formal structure requires something of the systemic, but also something of the intuitive. It requires the ability to think in terms of a picture language to grasp at an object that is neither solely visual nor solely textual, but participates in the logic of both modes. This method is itself allegorical, privileging a sensibility tuned to the textual elements of the visual and the visual elements of language, allowing for some of the strangeness that results when a translation between these categories takes place. It is a method commensurate with its object.

I endeavor to read visual language, not, as in the hieroglyph decipherer’s dream, for content, but rather for form. When reference is an issue of space, or the drawing aside of a curtain speaks to an epistemological puzzle, we are thinking in allegorical terms—precisely the
kind of terms a question like this requires. I, like every allegorist, endeavor to read the structures upon which meaning hangs its cloth.

*Veiling and Unveiling: A Brief History of a Trope and its Epistemological Assumptions*

Allegory is a curious thing, simultaneously schematic and mysterious. It seeks to maintain the existence of two or more levels of meaning in clear systemic relation while also requiring that some of these levels remain hidden beneath a surface of literal meaning. A seemingly opaque surface that can be raised or penetrated to access what is hidden—a surface not unlike a veil.

Indeed, allegory has been conceptualized as a veil almost as long as it has been recognized as a specific trope. The conceptualization of allegory as a veil between surface appearance and meaning initially comes from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3.13-16), where he writes that the Old Testament is veiled, and requires allegorical interpretation, while in the New Testament no allegorical exegesis is necessary, since “the veil is done away in Christ.”26 Accordingly, all Biblical text has its carnal sense (the literal meaning), and its spiritual sense (the allegorical, exegetical meaning). The necessity to interpret Biblical texts is epistemologically and existentially dire: “God hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter but of the spirit, for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3.6). The letter, or literal interpretation, is linked with Mosaic law, a literal understanding of the Old Testament, and therefore death. The text must be read outside the rigid constraints of the letter of the law in order to yield its true spiritual sense.27 Here thinking allegorically means escaping materiality and the constraints of human flesh. It means nothing less than the potential for the redemption of one’s soul. This is all to say that the symbolic model of allegory as a veil assumes, at its core, the existence, possibility, and necessity of a sort of
transcendence of literality—of moving, in a spiritual sense, beyond. The veil of allegory, in its foundational historical moment, presumes a certain epistemological horizon of possibility and, alongside this horizon, nothing less than the existence of a metaphysics of Truth potentially accessible to those willing to seek it.

But the shape of this tropological structure, veiling/unveiling, changes significantly over the course of its history. Recurring in modern critical texts, it maintains some of its original features while abandoning others as our fundamental assumptions about what it is possible to discover in the world change. Foregrounding the correspondence between visual and textual allegorical modes, I trace the logic of the rhetorical trope of unveiling, using a series of related images in dialogue with texts to ground my investigation. I am interested in how the trope functions, how its spatialized logic translates into personification, and in outlining the consequences of this rhetoric’s logical endpoint for figural representation. This is by no means a comprehensive history, such as the one that can be found in Pierre Hadot’s excellent The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature (2006). It is, instead, a strategic collection of moments in which particular symbolic structures are exceptionally visible during moments of transformation, an allegorical cobbling together of disparate fragments in an inevitably flawed attempt to create a whole. The whole, of course, is always out of reach, though it might be possible to trace it out by connecting the points of a constellation and gesturing at it from afar.ii I begin with the modern moment, one in which the trope of unveiling is still visible with most of its components intact yet already preparing to undergo enormous structural changes.

“The life-process of society,” Karl Marx tells us, “which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan

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ii The postmodern allegorist’s most profound dream.
His dialectic puts into conversation two distinct levels of representation: a surface on which commodities appear as “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” and a secondary, concealed level on which the truth of commodities becomes evident. Commodities appear animate, acting as if of their own will, “far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’ ever was.” But these objects would not seem so strange to us if we understood that “every commodity is a symbol,” nothing but a “material envelope of the human labour spent upon it.” An envelope is a thing that conceals, and Marx asks us to perform an act of exegesis, critically interpreting these symbols to find their latent meaning, that of a “definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”

Asking what produces this seemingly mystical character of commodities, Marx concludes that the key lies in “this form itself.” It is the two-sided, allegorical form of the commodity, that of a symbol requiring analysis, that creates its enigmatic nature. This form requires that a veil be stripped off, moving one from a space of superstitious illusion to an ordered, systematically-comprehensible space, where production can be understood as a deliberate, consciously regulated process. This use of rational analysis to remove an illusory veil separating appearance from truth constitutes a rhetoric of unveiling, an allegorical mode of understanding a critical procedure intended to produce epistemological transparency.

To visualize the rhetorical move of unveiling, it is useful to consider Charles Willson Peale’s *The Artist in His Museum* (1822), a late product of the American Enlightenment. Peale, a naturalist, painter, and founder of the Philadelphia Museum, painted this canvas as a self-portrait commissioned by museum trustees to honour his life and achievements. The painting’s division into a clear foreground, a curtained middle ground, and deep receding
background space corresponds neatly to Marx’s spatialized deployment of this rhetoric. In the painting’s foreground we witness a mysterious world of fantastic, isolated objects symbolic of Peale’s various achievements: his taxidermy tools positioned with a turkey, mastodon bones alluding to the mastodon he had excavated and reconstructed in 1801, and a painter’s palette with brushes sitting upon a table draped in green fabric. Detached from their contexts of use, these objects inspire the awe and curiosity evocative of an Enlightenment-era fascination with natural artefacts. They are not unlike Marx’s commodities, which seem exceedingly strange until carefully examined and placed in an intelligible context (for Marx, that of economic production).

These objects, for Peale as for Marx, become demystified as soon as their veil is raised: in Peale’s case, this unveiling takes the form of a literal curtain held aloft by the artist himself as he magisterially invites viewers into the ordered, schematized, and thoroughly Enlightened space of the museum beyond. Peale, like many Enlightenment thinkers, understood the natural world as subject to the same bureaucratizing and rationalizing organizational precepts as those emerging in the modern economy:

The ranks and cases contain and organize even as they expand infinitely along the axes of their right-angled triangle. The cases present nature to the viewer with the same chaotic rationality—the ordering of the unorderable—that the capitalist market imposed on society in the production and consumption of goods and services. In the painting’s receding space, the isolated foreground objects are made sense of in rational terms via systemic organization, becoming parts of an intelligible whole: on the right, the mastodon bones are seen in their reconstructed form, no longer conducive to imaginative speculation about the beast they may have come from, and on the left regimented display cases rendered in the precise, geometric lines of linear perspective subject the wonders of nature to scientific classification and spatial organization.

Of central importance is the middle ground curtain of rich red drapery that transforms the space of the museum into an allegorically dialectical rhetoric between mystified and demystified spaces. In his monograph on Peale, David C. Ward emphasizes the curtain’s liminal quality: it forms a bridge between life and art, painter and audience, past and future, foreground and background. In the regimented background of Peale’s self-portrait, as in Marx’s ideal, consciously regulated economy, no animism is possible—rationalized spaces are disenchanted ones, where there is, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue, “neither mystery nor any desire to reveal mystery.” Modernity’s reliance on Enlightenment rationalism has resulted, in
Max Weber’s formulation, in a secularized, disenchanted world where “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” and where one can “master all things by calculation.”

Oddly enough, Marx’s argument requires a move to re-mystification before any demystification or disenchantment can occur—he uses personification to actively animate commodities, drawing the world of objects into an allegorical narrative where commodities have desires, are citizens of a world, and speak through the mouths of economists in acts of ventriloquism, only to then strip this veil of animism from his objects of analysis. This is not to say that commodities do not actually appear animated and mystified (as they do to the uncritical consumer), only that Marx mimics and redeployes this animation in his account through a literary technique that could be termed anthropological allegory. Using the wry clinical distance of the anthropological mode of explanation, such as that adopted by Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx dramatizes our ordinary perception of commodities as far closer to magic and necromancy than to the purportedly rational, self-regulating function of the economic system. Made to speak through the theorist’s ventriloquism, the commodity reveals itself as nothing but the reflection of the social characteristics of men’s own labour appearing as objective, natural characteristics of the products of labour themselves—a state in which widespread naturalization of a phenomenon shrouds it in mystification.

Re-enchanting to disenchant is a critical dialectical move used by many modern thinkers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche in his highlighting of the religious genealogy of supposedly secular values, or Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectical critique of Enlightenment’s close relationship to features of myth. The correspondence between rationalism and mysticism evident in this move is not surprising when one considers the deeply mystical origins of the figural trope of veiling and
unveiling. It is also allegorical in the sense that schematization and mystery are not necessarily divorced, but productive of one another.

Here we come to another image, that of The Magician (Fig. 3). Commissioned by Arthur Edward Waite in 1909, The Magician is one of seventy-eight allegorical paintings created by Pamela Colman Smith under Waite’s instruction with the aim of creating a rectified, standardized tarot deck, the first fully-illustrated deck of its kind. The Magician’s brilliant red robe echoes Peale’s red curtain, and his bodily pose, with one hand raised toward heaven and the other gesturing down toward earth, neatly mirrors Peale’s positioning within his self-portrait. Ward, in fact, describes Peale’s pose as that of an impresario putting on a show, “his gesture like the flourish of the magician completing a trick.” The four objects spread on the table before the Magician, symbolic of the four tarot deck suits, correspond to the four objects sitting in the foreground of Peale’s museum. These objects, according to Waite, symbolize the “elements of natural life, which lie like counters before the adept, and he adapts them as he wills.” In the alphabet of archetypes of which the tarot is composed, the Magician signifies a mastery over the natural world attained through the “the divine motive in man.” Not coincidentally, art historians have noted Peale’s move to identify himself with the divinity of the Creator in his self-portrait, pointing out that as a Deist, Peale would have viewed man as a rational agent completing the work of God. His sense of confidence and control over his powers at the end of his successful career recalls the Magician’s sense of proficiency in manipulating the objects before him. Peale, with his interest in allegorical imagery and access to emblem books such as Cesare Ripa’s popular Iconologia (1593), would have been familiar with the archetypes upon which the Rider-Waite tarot deck is modelled.

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iii Though Ripa’s index does not contain a singular archetype called “The Magician,” it features emblematic figures that prefigure this allegorical type, such as Poesia, in which the typically female personification appears as the
In both cases, what is at stake is a mastery over the natural world expressed through a knowledge of nature’s secrets and a consequent ability to manipulate nature at will—a goal that magic and science share. Again, the curtain, or veil, is a liminal space of transformation between a stage of foreground and background. It creates not a two term (foreground/background; surface/depth), but crucially three term structure: foreground/curtain/background. The drape of cloth refers to a moment of action: here a spell, exercise in taxonomy, or moment of interpretation are required to progress from foreground to background. The epistemological assumption is that this act of moving beyond surfaces is both possible and necessary—appearances, though mystifying, correspond to an accessible hidden reality. Nature can be known; the secrets of divinity can be glimpsed.

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young Apollo with a wreath of laurel leaves, echoing the “roses and lilies, the *flos campi* and *lilium convallium*, changed into garden flowers, to show the culture of aspiration” of the tarot card (Waite, *Pictorial Key*, 75), and the general valences of poetry, or art, as a process of transformation. Peale, like the Magician, is an artist capable of transforming the chaos and wonder of the natural world into mastered, organized space. See Yasu Okayama, *The Ripa Index: Personifications and their Attributes in Five Editions of the Iconologia* (Doornspijk, NL: Davaco Publishers, 1992), 222: “Poesia 4.”
Raising the veil, then, or unveiling, is a rationalizing move expressing a compulsion to mastery and a desire for transparency or revelation, whether by empirical or mystical means, whether this veil takes the form of the “mystical veil” shrouding Marx’s commodity fetish or the curtain separating the viewer from Peale’s museum. The veil commonly belongs to Nature, gendered feminine—indeed, in a similar motif used on printed acknowledgements sent to museum donors, Peale explicitly labelled the raised curtain “Nature” (Fig. 4).\(^5\) Around the sixteenth century emblem books began to appear, standardizing codes and conventions of allegorical representation. In these books, authors identified feminine Nature with Artemis of Ephesus, or in Latin culture, with the goddess Diana, who was pictured wearing a crown and a veil and possessing many breasts for the nourishment of all living things.\(^5\) Pierre Hadot argues that at the beginning of the eighteenth century the flourishing of Freemasonry, a powerful intellectual and social movement interested both in Enlightenment philosophy and the mystical traditions of antiquity, helped to standardize the association of the veiled goddess Artemis with the Egyptian goddess Isis.\(^5\) Masonic interpretation of the veiled goddess as Isis emerged in a time of “Egytomania,” the vogue for ancient Egyptian mysteries,\(^5\) resulting in a conflation of the hidden Hebrew God’s proclamation, “I am who I am,” with the inscription on the statue of the divinity honored at Sais in Egypt, associated by Plutarch with Athena and Isis, which reads: “I am all that has been, that is, and that shall be; no mortal has yet raised my veil.”\(^5\) In Waite’s tarot pack this figure appears as The High Priestess (Fig. 5) seated at the “threshold of the Sanctuary of Isis,” with the “veil of the Temple is behind her.” With this conflation of the two

\(^{v}\) The deeply gendered logic of unveiling a female personification of Nature, of attempting to penetrate behind the veil, or of ‘forcing’ nature to give up her secrets is highly problematic and characteristic of dominant masculinist narratives in Western science. Though I don’t have time to address this issue here, I would like to point out that it has been addressed from a feminist perspective by Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), and in Evelyn Fox Keller’s *Secrets of Life/Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender and Science* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
goddesses, the veil of Isis came to assume the meaning of not only Nature, but also of Truth—the ultimate, and perhaps inaccessible, object of the efforts of human knowledge.57

Frontispieces featuring an allegorical unveiling of a female figure appeared in both scientific texts, such as Gerhard Blasius’ *Anatome Animalium* (1681), where Science, represented as a young woman with the flame of desire for knowledge above her head and holding a scalpel and magnifying glass, unveils Nature (Fig. 6), and in poetic contexts, such as the Bertel Thorvaldsen engraving accompanying the German translation of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, whose dedication to Goethe shows Apollo, god of poetry, unveiling a statue of Nature (Fig. 7). *Time Unveiling Truth* (Fig. 8) was also a common motif, one corresponding not to what Hadot calls the “Promethean attitude” of active efforts of hermeneutic discovery, but rather to the “Orphic attitude” which allows nature to unfold in her own time and conceptualizes this unveiling as a mystery into which human beings can be gradually initiated through aesthetic experience or art. Hadot considers Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s approach exemplary of this attitude toward the veil. He also associates this approach with Martin Heidegger, in whose work a complex “blossoming,” or simultaneous veiling/unveiling of Being is the Secret, Enigma, or Mystery of truth.58 In either case, regardless of what mode of approach one might choose, an encounter with hidden truth is expected at the culmination of the seeker’s efforts.

Figure 4: Peale’s gift acknowledgement to Philadelphia Museum trustees. American Philosophical Society.
Figure 6: Science unveiling Nature. Frontispiece to Gerhard Blasius, Anatome Animalium (1681).


Figure 7: Bertel Thorvaldsen, Apollo unveiling a statue of Isis/Artemis, symbol of nature, 1807. Dedication page to Goethe in Alexander von Humboldt, Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen (1807).
Conceptualizing Nature, or Truth, as a personified entity that requires unveiling betrays a fascination with the face behind the veil. Indeed, German Romantic thinkers often thematized a pilgrimage to the Temple at Sais to lift the veil of the goddess’s statue as an allegorical quest for Truth. In Friedrich von Schiller’s “The Veiled Statue at Sais,” for instance, “a youth, athirst for knowledge” ignores the injunction against mortals attempting to lift the veil and, driven by “the fierce fever of the wish to know,” sneaks into the temple at night to unveil the statue. “And ask ye what / Unto the gaze was there within revealed?

I know not. Pale and senseless, at the foot
Of the dread statue of Egyptian Isis,
The priests beheld him at the dawn of day;
But what he saw, or what did there befall,
His lips disclosed not. Ever from his heart
Was fled the sweet serenity of life,
And the deep anguish dug the early grave.”

The spatialized rhetoric of unveiling, when transposed into personified terms, concludes with the sight of the veiled entity’s visage. Schiller’s poem exemplifies the fear and respect with which
some Romantics approached the veil, taking seriously warnings that there may very well be good reason for Truth wanting to hide her face—that she may be too monstrous to behold, or perhaps too ideal, and that in either case, one could no longer live after having beheld her countenance.

Regardless of cause, there lingers, for Schiller, an association between truth and death. Beholding the goddess’s face sends the eager young man to an early grave, not only by accelerating his end, but also by bleeding the joy from his remaining days and replacing it with deep anguish. We find a clue to this relationship between death and unveiling in Nietzsche’s direct allusion to Schiller’s tale:

And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples at night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is concealed for good reasons. [...] One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which Nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons?

Nietzsche would have us “stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance,” because “we no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too long to believe this.” To stop at the veil is to acknowledge that the veil is all there is, and that humanity cannot survive without the veils of myths and values it has strung over the blind process of creation and destruction that is reality. It is to know the abyss of depth and to revel, instead, in the appearance of surfaces that give human life meaning.

Stopping at Surfaces

Let us set aside, momentarily, our curiosity about the deity’s face to think about what is means to adore, indeed, to fetishize surfaces. To stop at them in an act of good faith that it would perhaps be better not to know what lies beneath.
In the allegorical structure that is the veil, it is always assumed that the hidden underlying reality (Greek *hyponoia*, under-meaning), whether it be Truth, or Nature, can be reached, and that appearances, however unlikely, correspond to underlying structures and deeper verities. That ordinary objects point to vast but invisible realities is a hermeneutical model, one as old as allegory itself. It is a referential model that implies a connection between phenomena and their meaning, or in, in the simplest linguistic terms, between signifier and signified. It implies a faith in the possibility of knowing Truth and her derivatives, and thus presupposes the possibility of nothing less than metaphysics. But what happens when anxiety about the goddess’ visage, and the creeping fear that there may be nothing there at all, seep into the scene? How does the structure of allegory change?

Let us turn to the secretive, solitary, and largely unappreciated labors of a reclusive painter who in 1954 became obsessed, not unlike those Egyptian youths, with the mysteries of the veil.

*Morris Louis’ Veils*

Morris Louis, by all accounts a little known painter, quietly began making veils in his 12- by 14-foot studio, a converted dining room in the home he shared with his wife in Washington, D.C.

He rose early, working from dawn till there was no more light to see by, hunching over his canvases in the narrow studio space where he often could not unroll or see the entire length of his work surface at once. Louis poured paint onto unprimed canvases tacked loosely onto stretchers, physically manipulating them to allow the color to spread and flow diffusely down the bare cloth (Fig. 9). The canvases themselves measure eight and nine feet in width, and one can imagine Louis, a slight withdrawn man, wrestling stoically with his massive canvases, newly
heavy with soaked-in paint. Each evening he dried his work with a large fan and rolled it up for storage, tidied the studio and put everything away, only to start again the very next morning.\footnote{62}

It was a monastic, ascetic practice, labor-intensive and solitary. Louis allowed no one in his studio while he worked. While he complained of back cramps later in life owing to the amount of time spent hunched over his canvases, one gets the impression that the work was nothing short of meditative, an absorption in process through intimate involvement with the glacial, flowing quality of time itself. Louis described his Veils as manifesting “the continuity of simple pattern and slow motion.” Kenneth Noland, one of Louis’ few friends, said that when it came to an art work’s finished state, both he and Louis “wanted the appearance to be the result of the process of making it—not necessarily to look like a gesture [as with Pollock, for example], but to be the result of real handling.”\footnote{63}
There is no question here of veiled goddesses, or even of faces—with Louis we enter an entirely abstract, non-figural space, one alien to the human figure and its features.

Nothing but the veil itself. Approach it now, if you wish.

Though perhaps you cannot help it. Its colors pull you, draw your eyes up and down, fore and aft hypnotically, as when half-consciously following the subtle variations offered by a moving flame. They glow softly, a thin series of iridescent layers overlaid seductively in a thing of undeniable beauty: the beauty of the ephemeral, the shimmering, perhaps even—dare I say it—the sacred. The paint is thin, its substance diluted with turpentine that seeps into the unprimed canvas to remind you of what it is that you’re looking at, the thing that literally makes this work possible: the canvas, the support. You are made to appreciate this support in the purest material sense, at the staining level of pigment becoming absorbed into cloth. Leaving a mark, in the plain crosshatch of woven fabric, upon its shelter and host (Fig. 10).

*Figure 10: Morris Louis, Saraband, detail.*
The colors revel in surface, adore it, want to merge with it, become one. The ochres and viridians of *Pendulum*; the bruised magentas of *Intrigue*; the single brilliant swipe of azure streaking through the warm peach resonance of *Beth Chaf*—their flows are gravitational, mesmerizing. They constitute an invitation, a glimmer of the promise of something tantalizing, something just out of sight. *Come inside*, they say. *Don’t you want to see?*

You stand in the gallery and think: if only I could look at it a moment longer, if only I tilt my head, I *will* see it, this glorious hidden seductive thing. What is it, what is it. Beyond the final wash of somber hue lies an undeniable brilliance, a radiant, inner light, a mere fraction of which peeks, maddeningly, from beneath the veil’s diffuse edge (Fig. 11). The veil’s entire plane appears infused with this irrepresible light, returning attention to itself and its surface, the only things on offer here.

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* See Dean Swanson, “Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle,” in *Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1977), 11, for a description of how the final wash of dark, somber color allowed Louis to create the illusion of an underlying radiance beneath layers of diaphanous paint.
A literary analogue, painted with the written word, of the fantasy of stripping the veiled woman bare:

Gately dreamed he was with Ennet House resident Joelle van Dyne in a Southern motel whose restaurant’s authoritarian sign said simply EAT, in the U.S. South, in high summer, brutally hot, the foliage outside the room’s broken windowscreen a parched khaki, the air glassy with heat, the ceiling fan rotating at a second-hand’s rate, the room’s bed a lavish four-poster, tall and squishy, the bedspread nubbly, Gately supine with his
side on fire while newcomer Joelle v.D. raises her veil slightly to lick the sweat off his lids and temples, whispering so the veil flutters around and fans him, promising him a P.M. of near-terminal pleasures, undressing at the foot of the old tall bed, slowly, her loose light clothes moist with sweat and falling easily to the bare floor...  

Don Gately is a recovering oral narcotics addict. In his role as House Staff at his halfway house, Gately steps in to break up a fight between house members and an outside group, taking a bullet to his shoulder in the process. He ends up in the emergency room, where he refuses, to the doctors’ astonishment, any narcotic painkillers, which he understands would mean an immediate relapse into his habit. In the pitch of his fever, wounded and delirious, he dreams of Joelle van Dyne, the mysterious veiled woman recently arrived at the recovery house, recalling, perhaps, the teasing flutter of her veil when she visited him in the hospital and it hung “loose and blank again, so close he could reach his left hand up and lift it if he wanted.”  

though of course it is a fantasy—in his wounded state, Gately can barely move his hand far enough to touch Joelle’s wrist and get her attention.  

To catch a glimpse of a thing just out of sight is to become obsessed. It is to enter into the revolving doors of curiosity, and to hedge one’s bets that what is veiled can be unveiled; that what is hidden can come to light. Louis, by all appearances, was obsessed by his Veils, producing sixteen of them in 1954 and over one hundred in 1958. In the intervening years he experimented with a different kind of painting, a departure he considered a failure, causing him to destroy over three hundred paintings produced in 1955, 1956, and 1957. Only a handful of works from this period survive. By 1958 he had quietly and industriously returned to Veil-making, a practice he persisted in until the decade’s end.  

Louis’ secrecy about his work and its cloistered nature have produced a shroud of mystery around his practices and oeuvre. Something of that mystery sticks stubbornly to the Veil

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vi It is not difficult to imagine how the fantasy of denuding the veiled face appeals to a specifically masculine sensibility of domination of the natural world.
cycle: we don’t really know much about the Veils’ chronology, which was not recorded by the artist in any consistent way. Louis kept no notebooks on process and rarely socialized, giving few individuals any kind of knowledge about his motivations or aims. Art historians disagree about how the canvases, many of them stored in rolled form and not unfurled until after Louis’ death, are to be stretched and displayed. The artist himself left no instructions for this task. Even the names borne by the Veils were applied externally or retroactively. Louis left them unnamed, content, perhaps, to stand before his massive canvases and become absorbed, no longer conscious of their edges, by the moving living thing for which there is no name anyway and for which no words exist: the river of light through which all things came to be. The colors of the world on its very first day of consciousness (Fig. 12).

Figure 12: Morris Louis, Green by Gold, 1958, 93 1/2 x 138 1/2 in. (237.5 x 351.8 cm), Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas. Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan.

Relative obscurity notwithstanding, there was one man who took an extraordinary personal interest in Louis’ work, attempting to attract dealers and collectors and making sure the
paintings were entered in relevant shows. The Veils exhibited during Louis’ lifetime owe their names and visibility to none other than Clement Greenberg. Greenberg was Louis’ friend and advisor for the last nine years of his life, visiting him in Washington and giving the artist advice on his works and direction. In a 1960 piece on Louis and Noland written for *Art International*, Greenberg describes the features that give the Veil-painter’s work a “freshness and immediacy of surface that [is] without like in contemporary art”:

Louis spills his paint on unsized and unprimed cotton duck canvas, leaving the pigment almost everywhere thin enough, no matter how many different veils of it are superimposed, for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath. *But “underneath” is the wrong word* [emphasis mine]. The fabric, being soaked in paint rather than merely covered in it, becomes paint in itself, colour in itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the colour. Louis usually contrives to leave certain areas of the canvas bare, and […] by this parity the other colours are leveled down as it were, to become identified with the raw cotton surface as much as the bareness is. The effect conveys a sense not only of colour as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical, but also of colour as a thing that opens and expands the picture plane. The suppression of the difference between painted and unpainted surfaces causes pictorial space to leak through—or rather, to *seem about to leak through* [emphasis added]—the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them.

Greenberg saw the tantalizing flicker of depth on the verge of disclosure and the play of paint-penetrated surface and immediately knew what to call it: *opticality*. For Greenberg, Louis’ Veils were exemplary of the critic’s own theories about American abstraction and its progressive move away from the illusionistic and representational qualities of the tradition of Western art toward a pure, undifferentiated, self-sufficient unity of the picture plane as surface. Louis, for his part, seemed not to mind, or at any rate, to not disagree.

What does it mean when the veil, an entity historically understood as a surface/depth structure requiring a specific kind of hermeneutic of discovery, is hailed by not only Greenberg, but by contemporary art historians, as an exemplar of *flatness*? We are faced here with nothing less than a structural change, an alteration in the veil of allegory itself stemming from a modern
understanding of surface as identical with depth. The goal of modernist painting, according to Greenberg, was to “avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium. This means, among other things, renouncing illusion and explicitness.” The emphasis on anti-illusionism for Greenberg and many of his contemporaries has enormous implications for the allegorical mode of veiling/unveiling, which requires, as Marx’s rhetorical example of the veiled commodity shows us, a degree of illusion necessary as a contrast to the non-illusionistic thing that is unveiled—Nature, or Truth. Tellingly, Greenberg conflates the categories of the representational, conceptual, and allegorical, grouping them together as levels of meaning the modernist work dispenses with in favor of pure experience and the literality of surface.

Let us think about this shift in purely structural terms. Consider Greenberg’s theatrical description of how we are to imagine the space of the modernist work of art:

From Giotto to Courbet, the painter’s first task had been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. One looked through this surface as through a proscenium into a stage. Modernism has rendered the stage shallower and shallower until its backdrop has become the same as its curtain, which has now become all the painter has left to work on [emphasis mine].

In this conceptual framework, a curtained stage with a clear foreground and background like the one offered by Peale’s museum is no longer a viable hermeneutic or spatial model. The veil, or curtain, merges with its foreground and background all at once, a transition that can be understood in modernist terms as a shift from the illusionistic deception of three-dimensionality to the purity of the two-dimensional work of art. Crucially, a model like Peale’s curtain or the countenance of the veiled goddess relies precisely not on two terms, but on three: the foreground, the background, and the curtain standing for the interpretative act between. A structure like that

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vii See his essay, “Abstract, Representational, and so forth,” in Art and Culture: Critical Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 133-138, where these three terms are used interchangeably throughout, and always in the context of a value judgment involving a progressive historical shift.
given by Louis’ Veils, where foreground and background merge into a single present surface, contains only two terms that are really, at their core, one

Further, “[p]ictorial space has lost its ‘inside’ and become all ‘outside.’” If it deceives the spectator’s eye at all,

it is by optical rather than pictorial means: by relations of color and shape largely divorced from descriptive connotations, and often by manipulations in which top and bottom, as well as foreground and background, become interchangeable. Not only does the abstract picture seem to offer a narrower, more physical and less imaginative kind of experience than the illusionistic picture, but it appears to do without the transitive verbs, as it were, of the language of painting [emphasis added].

To go without transitive verbs is to go without the act of interpretation allegory requires, a move from foreground to background without which these very categories are void. In Louis’ Veils, there is no question of unveiling. Everything that can be seen is already there to be seen—this, in fact, is the operative definition of Greenberg’s opticality, wherein the desire for “purity” works to “put an even higher premium on sheer visiblility” and on “economy of physical substance, which manifests itself in the pictorial tendency to reduce all matter to two dimensions” and thus “render substance entirely optical.” In pure opticality, the work of art is sufficient, and the veil’s surface/depth, foreground/background dynamic is collapsed into nothing but the curtain or canvas itself, which synchronically holds all motions of the rhetorical move in one spatial plane.

The flattening of veiling’s tropological structure holds not only spatial implications, but epistemological ones. When, in Greenberg’s terms, the backdrop is the same as the curtain and is all the painter has left to work on,

No matter how richly and variously he inscribes and folds this curtain, and even though he still outlines recognizable images upon it, we may feel a certain sense of loss [emphasis added]. It is not so much the distortion or even the absence of images that we may mind in this curtain-painting, but rather the abrogation of those spatial rights which images used to enjoy back when the painter was obliged to create an illusion of the same kind of space as that in which our bodies move. The spatial illusion or rather the sense of it, is what we may miss even more than we do the images that used to fill it.
To speak about this loss not in terms of content, but rather in terms of spatial possibilities, is to acknowledge that what has been lost in allegory’s flattening and abstraction is not a specific object, but rather a kind of formal possibility or potentiality: the possibility of going beyond, or confidence in the possibility of a truth, or of the existence of something other, something magical in the world, an alterity shimmering just beneath the surface of ordinary material things. For Louis, the only possible motion is not between the veil and what lies beneath, peeking suggestively from the edge of the cloth, but between the surface, the viewer, and the viewer’s undeniable fascination with this surface—something like the viewer’s inevitable involvement and inability to look away. We may no longer believe, as Nietzsche claims, that truth hides beneath veils, but there is still something in us of the desire to endanger temples at night, embrace statues, and wish by all means to uncover. We are drawn, helplessly and against our collective will, to the core of every allegorist’s secret dream: that beneath the seeming monotony of surface lies a thing both luminous and true.

Indeed, Louis’s Veils contain, in their diaphanous folds, a shimmer of the sacred; the shadow of a metaphysics. Despite William Rubin’s claim that there is nothing symbolic to be read into the name “Veil,” since he himself coined this term to create “a useful way of distinguishing a certain kind of Louis painting,” critics have consistently picked up on the metaphysical intimations (‘niceties,’ as Marx might say) offered by these enormous flowing folds. In an exhibition catalogue, Virginia Wright calls the Veils “romantic and mysterious,” “miracles of art,” “heavenly,” “magically unreal,” and, crucially, reflecting on their tantalizing

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viii In response to Joseph Masheck’s original statement, “And while I have not seen it remarked anywhere, the ‘Veils’ of Morris Louis may, in their collective title, refer not only to their appearance but also to a concept of Schopenhauer’s which was taken up by American artists around the turn of the century (it appears many times in John Lafarge’s Considerations on Painting: the ‘veil of Maya,’ which separates the self from the self of others)” (Artforum 9, December 1970, 78), Rubin writes: “The term ‘veils,’ used for a type of Louis painting which he began to make in 1954, certainly has no relationship to the ‘Veil of Maya’—or to any other veil for that matter. I can say this with absolute assurance since I coined the term myself and it kind of stuck” (“Letter to the Editor,” Artforum 9, March 1971, 8).
aspect, “a temptation in Paradise” offered by colors “too seductive, too easy to love.” In another exhibition catalogue, Edward Lucie-Smith remarks upon the “heretical view” he takes of Louis’ Veils: “I don’t, in fact,” (writing about the symbolic content of Louis’ paintings), “think he abandoned these signposts altogether; I think he used them in a subliminal way. One of his central emblems, the Veil, fascinates me not merely because of the extreme subtly with which he rendered it, but because of its residual cultural connotations.” Among the associations he discusses are the Veil of St. Veronica, upon which Christ’s face was imprinted, and the veil that concealed the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem—the veil represented, of course, by the High Priestess and all of her iconographic iterations with which we have been concerned. It would seem, try as we might to escape the domain of the figural and its concrete representations, we are unable to fully shake the veil’s deep symbolic connection with metaphysics, even within the realm of abstraction (Fig. 13).

Figure 13: Morris Louis, Grotto, 1958, 91 5/8 x 146 in. (232.7 x 370.8 cm), Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas. Private collection, 2015.
Greenberg himself, in any case, seems to have picked up, whether consciously or not, on these manifold intimations. In giving the Veils names so closely tied to the natural phenomena they seem to evoke (Terranean, Italian Spring, Vernal, Aurora, Russet, Loam, Moss, Autumnal, Bower, Verdicchio, Iris, Monsoon, etc.), he points to a revelation of the natural world, the very thing that Nature, as a veiled woman, is supposed to represent (Fig. 14). Noting this connection, John Elderfield writes that all of Louis’ Veils evoke “both a thing in nature (a cliff or an aurora, perhaps) and a vitalist ‘becoming’ of nature, while refusing the specificity of either association[…].”

The notion of a vitalist becoming refers both to an American Romantic notion of nature as a flux of disappearance and appearance explored by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and to the Heideggerian iteration of veiling/unveiling, which posits a similar flux of the revelation and concealment of Being. Indeed, Louis’ Veils “afford less an interpretation of the natural world, their subject, than a revelation of it. The natural world stands forth in these pictures, not pictured, certainly, not even expressed, but simply present to us, in

*Figure 14: Morris Louis, Moss, 1958. 89 3/4 x 136 in. (228.0 x 345.4 cm), Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas. Private collection, Houston, Texas.*
front of us, in the silence of their facing folds.” The veil is an object so powerfully interwoven with ideas about nature, truth, and revelation that these themes crop up even in firmly anti-representational spaces, such as those in which Louis’ Veils exist. To invoke the form of the veil is to invoke these issues, which are clearly at stake here.

What kind of epistemological relation to metaphysics is posited by the Veils? Though historians have had a difficult time fitting Louis’ idiosyncratic and aesthetically unprecedented work into genealogies of related artistic movements, such as Abstract Expressionism, it is telling that his work is often linked to the organicist and idealist qualities of the Romantics. Critics have commented on the parallels between Louis’ Veils and the landscapes of earlier American luminists, which Robert Rosenblum characterizes as revealing “that silent, primordial void of light and space where material forms, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, are virtually pulverized or banished by the incorporeal deity of light.” Elderfield, drawing on Sidney Tillium’s account, links this emphasis on light to the Gothic stained glass tradition, describing a form of illumination in which “a very physical object that is nothing but color, a vast luminous pane through which light filters into the ‘interior’ of a secular cathedral without walls—the concretion of our utterly self-conscious and material intuition of the universe.” A revelation that requires no movement beyond the site of illumination itself describes a relation of immanence—the luminous fantastic thing already present in the same space as that which hides it, and indistinguishable from its coverings. When the mystery inheres in the physical object itself, as Louis’ thin layers of paint inhere in their canvas, the spiritual relation described is one of presence and immediacy, not transcendence. We are directed to look nowhere but to the Veil itself.
The connection between Louis and the Romantics makes enormous sense in this context, as the flow of energy in a material plane is the property of the Romantics’ most beloved aesthetic object: the self-sufficient, immanent Symbol, where the divine is already present in the object at hand. The Symbol represents the Romantic attempt to preserve metaphysics under an immanent rather than a transcendental relation. At historical moments where transcendence is not seen as a viable option, revelation becomes condensed into the object itself. Immanence is the perfect mode for expressing a relation to truth in a radically demystified world, as it does not posit the necessity of moving beyond immediate material reality. The only faith it requires is the Greenbergian “faith in and taste for the immediate, the concrete, the irreducible. To meet this taste, the various modernist arts try to confine themselves to what is most positive and immediate in themselves.” This is the kind of spirituality produced by aesthetic form not through dematerialization, but rather through an intensification of materiality, an experience of sublimity and illumination that occurs in the work of art itself, where everything to be seen is already on two-dimensional display. We stop at the veil, where the three-fold structure of unveiling’s

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ix Much has been written about the Romantic distinctions and aesthetic value judgements corresponding to Symbol and its inferior counterpart, allegory. While the discussion of these differences is not my focus here, suffice it to say that Romantic aesthetic theory generally understood the Symbol as containing, not on another (metaphysical) plane, but within itself, the presence of organic, living meaning. For a seminal critique of the assumptions of presence and organic wholeness of the Symbol as understood in Romantic aesthetic theory, see Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in Blindness and Insight (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228. For an excellent history of the Symbol in Romantic aesthetics, including its differentiation from allegory, see Tzvetan Todorov, Theories of the Symbol (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), especially chapter 6, “The Romantic Crisis,” 147-221.

x This understanding of immanence as a secular form of the sacred is not limited to Romantic thought—it would be both possible and enormously instructive to read contemporary new materialisms, object-oriented ontologies, posthumanisms, and iterations of thing theory as reifying precisely this kind of immanent relation within the material. The hermeneutics of new materialisms generally foreground “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen,” rather than what we might read into an object through our conceptual categories, in order to find the radical non-identity and vibrancy of matter, positing the “ethical task” of cultivating “the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.” Here the goal becomes transcendence through matter itself, which takes on near metaphysical properties. See Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, Duke University Press: 2010).

xi This logic of immanent spiritual experience can be seen in the works of artists such as Mark Rothko and the ZERO group, where the work of art takes on a dimension of the infinite and the autonomous aesthetic form becomes a “placeholder for a question that cannot be abandoned for a wound to the world that cannot be repressed” (see
rhetoric is rendered mute. Like conscientious Nietzscheans, we adore appearances. We worship surfaces, and in doing so we displace our fascination to the fold of the curtain *itself*, transferring our desire and curiosity about the beyond to the object that conceals it.

In writing on Louis, it is often felt that the critic must choose between dominant formalist accounts, such as Greenberg’s, and Romanticist understandings of art as immanence, such as Elderfield’s, or Michael Fried’s. It would appear that these two understandings are essentially at odds, because a work of art cannot be simultaneously identical with its surface and point to a transcendence, as the latter act would entail negating the primacy of material form. Yet for me, something of the Veils’ mystery lies in this tension, in the seemingly paradoxical fact that these paintings can be interpreted as both an exemplar of modernist flatness and as a paradigm of the Romantic vision of immanent Nature. These two accounts that should not, in any logical system, fit together, in fact *do*, as each of them is tied to a symptom of allegory’s structural status at this particular historical moment. In the Veils there is both the desire for transcendence, caught in the temptation to see beyond the canvas, and the mourning of its impossibility. When I draw on Greenbergian accounts, or Romanticist explanations, it is not to situate myself in either camp, or to align my understanding of the Veils with theirs, but rather to show how both of these accounts make sense *simultaneously*, as components of a historical condition resulting from a structural change in allegory’s three term foreground/curtain/background structure to a two term structure, where the curtain is identical with the background, and no space beyond its folds exists. Thinking about allegory’s form and its changes over time allows one to see how, in the strange logic of the allegorical structure, both these explanations are valid and necessary, and point, as I argue here, to a broad shift in our understanding of metaphysical potential at a specific time.

Louis’ Veils are truly mysterious objects. They express a profound longing and mark a horizon of epistemological possibility. While flattening the allegorical structure and its faith that what can be seen corresponds to a truth that can’t, that phenomena refer to their meaning, they simultaneously participate in allegory’s fundamentally reparative urge to preserve something of the mystery of what lies beyond, the semblance of a metaphysics. The same move that collapses the distinction between surface and depth, foreground and background brings a trace of the lost depth, a remnant of desire for the invisible, to stain (mark) the very fabric of the surface itself. There is nothing beyond the Veil but the canvas—the Veil literally is the canvas—and nothing remains to be discovered and hypothetically either mastered or revered. It is an object paradoxically mystical in appearance and rational in structure; radiating with the presence of immanent force while remaining bound to a strict spatial logic in which this luminous force cannot possibly be said to exist. In Brian O’Doherty’s words, Louis “follows the great example of those (like Josef Albers or, less often, Mark Rothko) who measure that fascinating interval between reality (what is actually on the canvas) and appearance (what it looks like).”82

It is this very tension that generates something of the Veils’ incredible hypnotic pull.

*Mark Tansey’s Veil*

Allergic to any relapse into magic, art is part and parcel of the disenchantment of the world, to use Max Weber’s term. It is inextricably intertwined with rationalization. What means and productive methods art has at its disposal are all derived from this nexus.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

But not all recent encounters with veils have taken place in the realm of the anti-representational. Mark Tansey, who has made it a point of his practice to engage with the modernist, and to a large extent, post-modernist prohibition on representation and emphasis on medium specificity,
shows us what every allegorist knows so well: that the representational and concrete can be
marvellously abstract; indeed, that the representational is often where the abstract finds its most
generous home.

Figure 15: Mark Tansey, Veil, 1987. 64 by 50 1/2 in. 162.6 by 128.3 cm. Oil on canvas.
Private collection, Switzerland.
We are in dark chamber dominated by the veil, which is, to say the least, majestic (Fig. 15). Its folds brush the polished floor and stretch beyond the frame, coming from somewhere above, though to say precisely how far above would be impossible. Before it fall a series of figures that seem to melt into the atmospheric ground, returning to the very paint from which they came, the depths of shadow surrounding them resolving suddenly into curtain folds. It is difficult to tell whether there is, truly, any distinction between the material the figures are made of and the material of the curtain itself, differentiated only by the fall of its own light across its hidden features: the figure at the scene’s bottom right appears enfolded as in a blanket or cape, while yet another moves beneath the fabric, visible only through its awkward outline and outstretched hand. In the confusion of figures it is not clear what limbs belong to whom as they extend, without accompanying bodies, at strange angles, as if seeking a hold through which to pull themselves out of the gloom (Fig. 16).

*Figure 16: Mark Tansey, Veil, detail.*
There is in this something of the labor of creation, the impossible task of differentiation, but also the palpable agony of struggling, fragmented and with partial vision, toward an unknown goal. If only we could get over there, to that inundated secret space beyond, we could share something of that light, and be made whole, and finally see. A fantasy of transcendence foundering on the failure to identify an ambiguity in the fabric of the structure itself, and in the identity of its two terms—the veil, and the figures. This structure is not unlike the highly allegorical schema of Plato’s cave, a trope Tansey returns to again and again in his paintings. It is, in fact, the Platonic structure in reverse, wherein the figures face not the projection of shadows, but the source of light, and in which the source, in its ambiguity of promise, provides no revelation of clarity.

Indeed, we cannot be sure about many things in this high-ceilinged, poorly-lit chamber. Tansey’s miraculous feat of diffusion effects (Fig. 17), achieved by a fresco-like reverse-method of dabbing and washing away layers of pre-applied wet paint, leaves a shroud of ambiguity around the question of the intense ray of light penetrating from the veil’s opening. Is the light strengthening the figures, sculpting them from shadow to give them form, or is it dispelling them, as late morning sun moving toward its noontime apex burns away the feeble tendrils of remaining fog? The man in the tie at the right edge of the canvas casts a swath of nothingness across his face, a blank resulting only from the interference of his hand with the light source. That part of his face simply ceases to exist (Fig. 18).

Here the light, seductive and stimulating as it is to these figures, is also blinding. Whatever lies beyond the veil cannot be seen without also compromising, as in Schiller’s account of the Temple at Sais, one’s ability to see, or in fact, one’s very being. One comes to wonder whether, in fact, there is anything to see, or whether the veil, as in Louis’ grand
mysterious structures, is simply all there is. The veil seems to make up the figures, or at least enfold them, and its light seems to both create and dispel their forms. What is this structure, one wonders. Is it not merely all surface, transferred into a symbolic and representational space?

Tansey’s veil, despite its representational guise, is very much like Louis’. It centers the drama of stopping at surfaces and lingering in the liminal space before the curtain’s mysterious folds. The hint of the sacred remains in the single seductive slip of these folds, the flutter of the luminous thing just beyond the veil’s edge. This tantalizing slip arouses profound desire—the desire to see beyond—moving the disoriented, and, one gets the impression, slow seekers to grope their way toward it, their expressions determined yet weirdly affectless all at once. Tansey’s seekers appear mesmerized and detached, as if they have forgotten, midway through their task, what they are doing—what they are seeking, and why.

And then one entertains a sinister, indeed, unbearable thought: One wonders whether the curtain hadn’t been, until this brief cruel billow (“so the veil flutters around and fans him, promising him a P.M. of near-terminal pleasures”), closed, and the room dark, its floor crowded with tangled masses of warm apathetic bodies lost in themselves. And if then, as the curtain

![Figure 17: Mark Tansey, Veil, detail.](image)
fluttered ever so softly, they, roused by its light like fish or insects, began to seek its source, crawling in stunned desperation. If this ritual doesn’t recur frequently, perhaps even several times a day. If the expectation and agony enfolding the seekers are not the same every single time.

Many viewers find Tansey’s art funny or ironic, a fact critics have repeatedly remarked upon. Tansey’s exhibitions have received unfavorable reviews from critics quick to tire of the punning, one-liner qualities of his paintings’ titles and accompanying illustrations. But this is an inattentive, cursory view, one that elides Tansey’s shadows to linger in the quick spark of the easily grasped reference, the knowing nod. After all, who can resist the sight of Clement Greenberg walking on water, exposing the Myth of Depth while his bewildered colleagues look on from the safety of the lifeboat, shaking their heads in awe? In truth, there is something unbelievably dark in the world marked out by Tansey’s work, the dark potential of a mirror-place where everything is inverted and nothing refers. Where surfaces and depths turn out to be the very same thing after all, and the act of seeking for the thing beyond the curtain points only to its own redundancy. Tansey’s gorgeous monochrome spaces have the feel of a joke that, while eliciting the initial chuckle, has gone too far too quickly and is no longer funny, but absurd and final and very sad. His melancholy world is not unlike ours, yet somehow strange, and other. It is nothing less than the world of allegory, where abstraction marries figure and renders ideas, with all their consequences, visible.
This pathos, the unnoticed tragedy of Tansey’s world, is here so thick as to be palpable. *Veil* dramatizes the teasing, cruel dynamic of the slip of the curtain’s folds implied in Louis’ cycle. It both kindles and displays the drama of wanting to see and not being able to, embodying the tension of this desperation in human form.

Another embodiment of this impulse, the tension of retaining hope in lingering at the surface while knowing well, all the while, the futility of this effort: *Secret of the Sphinx (Homage to Elihu Vedder)* (Fig. 19). Directly pointing us back to the fascination with the deity’s veiled face, the face of the Sphinx needs no cover, for even in exposure it shows nothing. Arriving at the statue, the seeker of depth finds, as the thirsty youth at Sais, the mute finality of stone surface gleaming opaquely with late desert sun. The statue’s stone lips will not open, and perhaps never have—they answer no questions, and certainly none that could be discovered by the seeker’s pathetically technical recording device, exposed, by the sheer size of the enduring stone monument, as nothing but a cheap plastic toy.

*Figure 19: Mark Tansey, Secret of the Sphinx (Homage to Elihu Vedder), 1984. Oil on canvas, 60 X 65”. Collection of Robert M. Kaye, West Long Branch, New Jersey.*
Tansey has a unique feel for dire epistemological consequences. In its figural rendering of what Louis’ cycle shows structurally, his work takes on the tone of Kafka’s gatekeeper, speaking to the desperate subject left knocking at the door of the Law: “No one else could gain admittance here, because this entrance was meant solely for you. I’m going to go and shut it now.”

His painting grasps, in other words, the very real implications of a change in the structure of allegory as it exists in our demystified contemporary moment and its hostility to hermeneutical formulations of surface and depth.

The aversion to allegory in modernity and what we vaguely call postmodernity has been duly noted. Walter Benjamin, in his attentive work on the mode, points to the Romantic aesthetic bias against allegory; nearly forty years later, Northrop Frye claims we are in an “anti-allegorical” phase of history, where, on his sliding scale of pure allegory versus pure realism, we prefer realistic modes of representation and literal modes of interpretation. Similar observations have been made by nearly every theorist of allegory of which I am aware, including Fletcher himself. At the same time, these theorists maintain that in various, not immediately obvious ways, allegory remains relevant and powerful—Fletcher, for instance, posits a postmodern “Allegory Without Ideas,” wherein we still have the tendency to allegorize, but not believing in a Platonic realm or transcendent order, return to materialism and nominalism in the kind of “broken,” world-bound allegory Benjamin describes. Fletcher also notes that twentieth-century allegories, such as Kafka’s or Borges’, are frequently called “parables” or “fables,” or eliding terms such as “mythic” are used to describe their overtly allegorical elements.

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xi Remember, too, that the seeking man is tempted, fatally, by “a radiance that streams forth inextinguishably from the door of the Law” (216). Seductive and deadly: on the one hand, the will to know; on the other, its impossibility, marked by the non-negotiable limit point of death itself. Recall the seductive shimmer of the bright living thing beneath the canvas.
Indeed, allegory has not receded or ceased to exist in the contemporary world—it has simply changed its form; adopted a new structure and garb. It is not simply that we are dealing with “the suppression of allegory by modern theory” resulting from its negative aesthetic evaluation by the Romantics, as Owens puts it, though this too is true in the sense that, as he writes, we persistently refuse to recognize allegory where it appears in its “contemporary manifestations.” The problem, however, is not merely a suppression of allegory by theory, but also, and for me crucially, that the structure of allegory itself has changed, so while we may be looking for straightforwardly allegorical elements, or elements that correspond to a received understanding of allegory, we do not see allegory in its contemporary mode of appearance, which does away with the stigmatized three term surface/curtain/depth structure, and appears instead in its flattened form, as in Louis’ Veils.

This change in structure is what makes it possible for Owens to describe a set of procedures manifest in postmodern art as forming “a whole when seen in relation to allegory, suggesting that postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and that criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error.” This allegorical impulse, defined by artistic strategies like appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, and hybridization, often involves a circular or self-referential logic, wherein works refer the viewer back to, if not their literal surface, then back to the work itself in all its self-sufficiency. David Joselit has argued that “the term flatness seems to have stealthily crossed and recrossed the modern/postmodern divide,” and “possesses significant explanatory force in analysing so-called postmodern art as well.”
Indeed, it is possible to show, as I do elsewhere, that procedures specific to postmodern art, such as collage, participate in a logic of modernist flatness, though they do not declare themselves as doing so.\textsuperscript{xiii} Following Joselit, I choose to de-emphasize the separation between modern and postmodern in favor of seeing a broader structural change in allegory, one in which a three term hermeneutic structure becomes a one term structure involved with its own surface, and which does not necessarily respect these imposed categories of periodization. Flatness and surface are the defining characteristics of postmodern allegory; the shape allegory takes at this particular time. The qualities Owens identifies as allegorical \textit{are} indeed allegorical, as are those presented by Louis’ incredible Veils. They are also, however, specific to a particular historical moment, one in which the above-described structural change takes place.

To understand flatness as allegorical is to read allegory in 2015, not to grasp it in a universal or unchanging form. To a pre-modern sensibility, this model would not be recognized as allegorical—indeed, it might not even make sense. To quote Fletcher, whose gathering of sources on this topic is unparalleled in the literature and summarized in terms especially appropriate here: “the oldest idea about allegory” is “that it is a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a \textit{properly veiled godhead} [emphasis mine].”\textsuperscript{94} This understanding, still present in earlier manifestations like Peale’s \textit{Museum}, where revelation of the natural, if no longer divine world is still possible and expected, is radically different from the metaphysics of immanence found in Louis or the anguish of a frustrated desire to unveil dramatized by Tansey. Whether or not we recognize its manifestations and structural shifts, allegory, as a basic human imaginative capacity

\textsuperscript{xiii} This paper was originally meant to include a section on allegorical constellation, surfaces, self-referentiality, and collage, examining the shift occurring between Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis’ \textit{Fairy Tale of Kings} (1909) and Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{Allegory} (1959-60). This section would have considered collage as a type of postmodern flatness indicative of the collapsed two-term structure of allegory in our contemporary moment. I plan to add this section to this discussion in the context of a longer, thesis-length work.
to make something mean other and more than what it literally appears, cannot be eliminated wholesale, through theoretical suppression or otherwise—Louis’ anti-representational Veils, mute yet pregnant with meaning, show us this. Allegory is an enduring entity, subject to change only in the form in which it appears.

The form of allegory available to us is directly related to our assumptions about what it is possible to discover in the world. Jameson, who identifies flatness and a proliferation of surfaces as key aesthetic conditions of postmodernity, writes that such aesthetics constitute no less than “something like a mutation in built space itself,” one where strange and non-mimetic models must be understood as “peculiar new forms of realism (or at least the mimesis of reality).” The veil of allegory, in its collapsed surface-heavy mode, is precisely such a form, describing our relationship to a number of categories, including epistemology and metaphysics, and our expectations about the existence, or non-existence of these things. Allegories are excellent “natural mirrors for ideology,” capacious containers willing to hold whatever is offered, even if doing so necessitates a change in structure.

It is unsurprising that Nietzsche, the great emptier of metaphysical categories, exhorts us to stop at surfaces. A world without metaphysics is a world in which allegory cannot exist in its hermeneutic surface/depth form. To quote Fletcher: “A world like ours, in which theological values are doubtful, cannot hope to represent the goods of existence, whether material or spiritual, in the higher terms of metaphysics, and there is therefore a falling off in dignity in modern allegory.” Further, “allegory recedes into the background of works whose literal surface becomes a self-sufficient, nakedly adequate, ‘realistic fiction.’” What is at stake here is a specific understanding of conditions of metaphysical possibility, and the incompatibility of this understanding with a rhetorical structure of veiling/unveiling. When a concern with metaphysics
is understood as naïve or superfluous, and we take surfaces at face value, no form of allegory that takes seriously the possibility of epistemological unveiling can remain rhetorically viable.

This is made obvious by the most recent theories about allegory. Take, for instance, Brenda Machosky’s *Structures of Appearing: Allegory & the Work of Literature* (2013). Taking a phenomenological approach, Machosky argues that allegory is not primarily a structure of meaning (a hermeneutic structure), but rather one of appearance. For Machosky, allegory defies the logical prohibition against two things appearing in the same space at one time, participating in a model of phenomenological revelation and concealment not unlike that posited by Heidegger’s aletheiac mode of the veiling and unveiling of truth in perpetual flux (upon which Machosky repeatedly draws). In this model, the rhetorical or interpretative move of unveiling by drawing the curtain aside is meaningless, and external to the structure of allegory itself.

Machosky outlines her project thus:

> I propose instead an understanding of allegory through its own structure, which is specifically not a metaphysical structure, not a structure of meaning. While I do not want to suggest that allegorical texts have no meaning, I do want to argue that allegorical works are not just about meaning. They go “beyond meaning” by staying within their own structure, not seeking a transcendent position outside of it.99

This model defines allegory as radically non-referential and non-transcendental. Indeed, for Machosky, “allegorical art has the distinction of being singularly autoreferential.”100 Here, the subject of discussion is a theoretical description of the same object that Louis’ Veils display in visual terms. The preservation of meaning within the object itself, with no reference to an outside world or problematic metaphysics, is a relation of immanence. Like the modernist work of art, the postmodern allegory is self-sufficient, and the “phenomenology of allegory suggests a transcendence that is not a reaching beyond or crossing between, but one that exists within what
is said. It is not a gesture toward the outside of the text, but rather points deep within it, deep into language.”

In its collapsing of hermeneutic levels and insistence on the importance of lingering at the surface, within the boundaries of the object itself, Machosky’s argument draws on an extensive history of theories that reformulate allegory in order to make the mode make sense within a historical moment hostile to it. It represents a continuation of deconstruction’s project of reading allegory as self-referential and circularly allegorical of the condition of language itself (and, consequently, as safely non-metaphysical). Indeed, Paul de Man figures frequently in Machosky’s account, though she does him one better: gone is the de Manian melancholy about a world of broken and confused reference. Instead, the concern with metaphysics is totally eliminated in favor of the allegorical structure’s radical self-sufficiency—a conceptual solution that has long been known in the world of art. Machosky’s argument is also of a piece with the recent call for “surface reading” in literary criticism, where critics abandon what they perceive as the dominant mode of symptomatic reading and its surface/depth hermeneutics in favor of attention to a text’s literality.

Theory is never simply descriptive; it is also always productive of reality. Discussing the move in which depth models of interpretation and art practice are replaced by multiple surfaces, Jameson writes that contemporary theory “has among other things been committed to the mission of criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside and of stigmatizing such models as ideological and metaphysical.” What he identifies is no less than theory’s complicity in reinforcing a set of critical assumptions that make the completion of the hermeneutic gesture, wherein a surface symptom is taken for an indication of a vaster reality and ultimate truth, impossible. Jameson reminds us that post-structural critiques of the
hermeneutic depth model are themselves a phenomenon of a given time, a “significant symptom” of their cultural moment. Similarly, I would argue that it is unsurprising to see theories about allegory as an auto-referential structure emerge at the same time that depth models are broadly acknowledged as flawed, and we understand meaning as material rather than transcendent. Description, here, is also always reflection and construction.

Significantly, contemporary theories of allegory frequently work to naturalize their claims as transhistorically valid rather than thinking critically about allegory’s history and its relation to broader cultural assumptions and interpretative contexts. Machosky, for instance, believes that allegory has been “buried under a ‘sedimentation of tradition’” and requires the work of a Husserlian “phenomenological reduction” whose goal is to “discern the most fundamental and distinctive features of the object under inquiry,” ultimately allowing one to develop an understanding of what allegory truly, essentially is. She writes:

However one defines or identifies the term, allegory as such has been buried under many layers of sedimentation that have each in turn claimed to be allegory.

There are two notable traditions of allegory, and both of these prejudiced views must be suspended. In the medieval and early modern periods, allegory was often confused with typology and was conceived as a four-fold structure of meaning, with three increasingly idealized levels of meaning hovering above the literal level. This understanding developed into a flawed tradition of allegory [my emphasis] that even Dante claimed to embrace but did not (or could not) practice.

The second tradition, for Machosky, is the Romantic devaluation of allegory in relation to Symbol, which she, like many, criticizes for its ahistorical myopia. For her, neither of these understandings encompass the true nature of allegory, which she endeavours to reveal as non-metaphysical and unrelated to meaning-making activities. Yet how can there be such a thing as a “flawed tradition of allegory,” from which a transhistorical, essential object must be rescued and restored? Despite framing her project as critical of Hegelian conceptions of “history as progressive, particularly in dialectic form, with a final resolution in Absolute Knowledge,”104
Machosky’s argument is ironically teleological—it maintains that for hundreds of years, people were unable to ‘see’ allegory for what it truly is, whereas today, at this moment of synthesis and penetrating philosophical insight, we can finally identify its true nature. Similarly, Gordon Teskey argues that the “history of allegory, from antiquity to the Enlightenment, is impelled by the suppression of irony and the haunting of noise.”  

Now, of course, from our modern perspective, this noise can be uncovered and understood for what it really is.  

Such theories contend with the history of allegory by setting up a single temporal moment—the present—as a privileged point of observation toward which understanding tends and at which is culminates. In other words, they are not really historical at all. In contrast, I am interested in structural changes over time, not in immutable transhistorical objects of an essential type. There is a very real shift that occurs in how the symbolic mode called “allegory” organizes itself, one visible even within the work of a single artist.

What is behind the veil?

But aren’t you still curious, even with all this talk of the impossibility of actually stripping away the curtain, about what really lies behind the veil of allegory? About the source of the seductive blinding light breaking from behind Tansey’s magnificent floor-to-ceiling curtain? Perhaps Louis’ Veils, which grow and change in a way more appropriate to plants than to inorganic acrylic entities, can hint at an answer to this burning question of the Egyptian youths.

Toward the end of his short life, Louis stopped painting Veils and began painting what are now called his Unfurleds, a series of approximately 160 canvases that negatively invert the Veil structure, the pure white of untouched canvas blooming where the colors of the Veils had previously hung.  

These colors are still present, though in more linear and rarified
manifestations relegated to the edges and corners of the canvas. It is as if the curtain of the previous Veils has literally been drawn aside to expose, to the patient viewer, the seductive teasing thing beneath (Fig. 22). In the words of Lucie-Smith, who sees the Unfurleds as the natural successors of the Veil paintings, “In dramatic terms, the veil, the original concealment, is portrayed in the process of splitting and falling away in order to reveal a void.”

Indeed, critics have noted that the blank space in these painting functions as does the contour of the initial Veils. Near the end of the Veil cycle the hint offered by the billow and shimmer of the great swaths of colour absorbed into the canvas became more explicit than ever before, with sections of the Veils opening up to allow blank space into the fabric of their folds (Fig. 20; Fig. 21). By the time Louis had moved on to his Unfurleds, the white space “behind” the Veils (ie, the blank canvas itself) had come to fore, unveiled for all to see. The shaft of blinding light intimated by Tansey is here on view, everything available to sight and there to be seen—nothing more, nothing less than what appears to the naked eye.
Michael Fried has argued, examining the Symbolist connections of Louis’ work, that these enormous vibrating voids exposed by the open curtain are not in fact negative, or blank, but evoke the spiritual, directly present, non-temporal quality of an immanent conception of nature itself. Imitating nature’s radical self-sufficiency, these blank spaces of the picture’s support become “an almost living tissue that is at once the final arbiter of pictorial coherence and the embodiment of the idea of nature the picture presents—an uninterrupted, non-objective continuum of light.” It is something like Jameson’s “radical eclipse of Nature itself”—
Nature appears unveiled and depersonified, utterly mute, exposing, even in its unveiled state, nothing that had not already been evident, as reticent and unexpressive as Tansey’s Sphinx. But more than reticent, more than mute—Nature, in the Unfurleds, appears faceless.

This is precisely what horrifies Don Gately in his haze of unmedicated pain: “The girl’s silence and the blankness of her veil frightened him after a while, and he wished he could ask her to come back later.”112 It is the featurelessness of her appearance that he cannot stand:

What was disconcerting was that when her head was down the veil hung loose at the same vertical angle as when her head was up, only now it was perfectly smooth and untextured, a smooth white screen with nothing behind it. A loudspeaker down the hall gave those xylophone dings that meant God knows what all the time.

When Joelle’s head came back up, the reassuring little hills and valleys of veiled features reappeared behind the screen.113

Why Joelle, an otherwise normal and to all appearances attractive young woman from the American South, chooses to wear a veil is never explained to the reader or anyone else. No one
knows what she looks like beneath the thin breathable fabric hanging over her face. Various accounts are given: It is strongly suggested that she may be horribly disfigured; at other times it appears the veil is intended to hide her unbearable, inhuman, and perhaps fatal beauty. Pulled between these alternatives while brimming with the desire to look, the reader, like Gately, is left in a state of unresolved undecidability, here punctuated by the recurring fear that perhaps there is nothing to see beneath the veil, or that, like Nietzsche puts it, “Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons.” To both fear and want something is a feeling the addict understands well. Joelle, as near to a personification of Nature or Truth as twentieth-century fiction has produced, embodies these tensions, raising many of the same questions as those confronting the seeker positioned before one of Louis’ Veils.

Her veil, as she leans down, forms a smooth white screen with nothing behind it, a space not unlike the energetic void opening up in the Unfurleds, a center of blinding light. It matches, perfectly, Elderfield’s description of the “blank screen of the center” of Louis’ penultimate cycle of paintings.\textsuperscript{114} Not coincidentally, this is exactly how Gately experiences the veiled woman’s visage in his “next, even more unpleasant Joelle van Dyne pain-and-fever dream,” which features the veiled woman,

except without her veil, and what’s more without any clothes, as in starkers, gorgeous, with that same incredible body as in the other one except here this time with the face not of a jowly British P.M. but of a total female angel, not sexy so much as angelic, like all the world’s light had gotten together and arranged itself into the shape of a face. Or something. It looks like somebody, Joelle’s face, but Gately can’t for the life of him place who, and it’s not just the distraction of the inhumanly gorgeous naked bod below, because the dream is not like a sex-dream. Because in this dream, Mrs. Waite [Gately’s mother], who is Joelle, is Death. As in the figure of Death, Death incarnate.\textsuperscript{115}
All the world’s light gathered there so as to be blinding, and so as to reveal to starkest truth the veil can expose to a demystified world: that the space of Nature, blinding white, Nietzsche’s center of ceaseless creation and destruction, Mallarmé’s blank spaces between the words on the poem’s page, Louis’ pregnant voids, is consummate with and identical to the space of Death.

Figure 22: Morris Louis, Gamma Mu, 1960. 102 in. x 166 1/2 in. (259.1 x 422.9 cm), Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1970.

The Place of the Skull

Her silhouette leans and says, ‘And Lo, for the Earth was empty of form, and void.
‘And Darkness was all over the Face of the Deep.
‘And We said:
‘Look at that fucker Dance.’

-Joelle van Dyne’s introduction to her weekly radio program, Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis116
In Novalis’ version of the story, the one disciple of Sais who succeeds in raising the veil sees—“wonder of wonders!—himself.”117 While this conclusion could be read as a Romantic realization that Nature is a mirror of the Spirit, and that there is a relationship between inner life and universal life realizing themselves as Spirit,118 reading the passage through Nietzsche yields a very different understanding: to lift the veil and see oneself is to confront the reality of a world emptied of meaning, where the logical endpoint of all investigations, or unveilings, is not revelation, or transcendence, but mortality. In subjecting truth to the same stripping, rationalizing move that de-animates commodities to make them “clear as noon-day,”119 or undergirds Enlightenment schemas of organizing the natural world within a transparent, regimented space, one raises the goddess’s veil and finds only death’s head—one unveils to behold not a face, but a skull.

The skull is the perfect allegorical image for a demystified world, the personified equivalent to Peale’s clean, open, regimented, and crucially, dead museum. Here everything is visible, but nothing is alive. As an image, the skull dramatizes the epistemological consequences of a thorough and programmatic unveiling in visual terms, constituting a pole in a spectrum that also contains Peale’s museum and the mastery of The Magician. It also asks us to think about how the rhetoric of unveiling, through the changes embodied in its very form, undermines the possibility for the existence of meaningful figural representation. If one’s relationship to the world is that of incessant unveiling, and the world is composed only of surfaces, one inevitably arrives at an epistemological and existential crisis in which the motions of lifting the veil must be performed, though what lies beneath the surface is never mysterious or surprising. We look, through exegesis, for Truth, or the Absolute, and find instead, like Marx, that the world is composed of only things. Acts of exegesis become perfunctory, predictable, and disappointing.
What we end up with is total visibility, whether in the form of Peale’s perfectly transparent, organized space, compared by Ward to the total visibility of the panopticon,\textsuperscript{120} or in the form of Machosky’s insistence that considering allegory as a structure in which nothing needs to be unveiled because everything is already \textit{there}, present at the surface, provides “a new perspective and a different kind of clarity.”\textsuperscript{121} When we are asked to “return to the significance of the literal sign, and to grant it preference over the abstraction of the signified,”\textsuperscript{122} we are working within a mode specific to modern allegory. We should not fail to notice that literality itself is a form of aspiration to mastery just as much as the ambition to tear the veil away—in the clarity of exposed surfaces we feel confident that we can know all there is to see, since nothing is actually hidden. This, too, is a mode of rationalizing the natural world and a denial of its mystery. With Nietzsche,

We looked at the drama…whose most profound meaning we almost thought we could guess and that we wished to draw away like a curtain in order to behold the primordial image behind it…Its revelation, being like a parable, seemed to summon us to tear the veil and to uncover the mysterious background; but simultaneously this all-illuminated, total visibility cast a spell over the eyes and prevented them from penetrating deeper.\textsuperscript{123}

Total visibility is itself a form of epistemological blindness, one appropriate to a disenchanted world and the forms of allegory found therein.

The skull makes its appearance in the work of Walter Benjamin, whose theories about allegory in modernity link this figural mode to death, ruin, and fragmentation. “For it is precisely,” Benjamin writes, “visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha […] can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figure.”\textsuperscript{124} Golgotha is the place of the skull, and suggests not only the skull as an allegorical form, but also as the site of Christ’s crucifixion, where hopes of the transcendence of
human life go to die. Indeed, “death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance.”\textsuperscript{125} In a world where everything beneath the veil can be explained and classified, there is a loss of transcendence, and with the loss of transcendent meaning there is the loss of allegory as a form of idealization. Allegory becomes something else entirely, a figure of ruin and loss. If it idealizes anything at all, it is fragmentation, the failure of mere things to correspond to profound depths.

“Alllegories are,” Benjamin writes, “in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”\textsuperscript{126} Consider Pieter Claesz’s \textit{Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill} (1628), a \textit{vanitas} painting allegorizing the futility of human endeavor (Fig. 23). The skull itself is a ruin, hollow and void of life and meaning. It mimics the surface of the veil and the nothingness beyond, since the human head literally veils the mind, soul, or whatever force one believes animates the human body. It is mute materiality without natural signification, holding no immediate or inherent meaning. The skull refers to nothing deeper than itself, and thus ceases to be a figurally adequate form of representation—when there are only fragmented surfaces, the move to unveil ceases to make any sense. In a demystified world empty of mysterious underlying forces, such as that Weber describes, allegory becomes a state of mourning: “the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it.”\textsuperscript{127} In Claesz’s still life, objects that once signified an active life, such as the writer’s quill and books, or the recently extinguished candle, now lie abandoned and decontextualized, as void of meaning as the skull of their late owner.\textsuperscript{xiv} The painting’s spatial logic, with the literal void of its dark flat background, does not allow for the transformation of

\textsuperscript{xiv} As in Albrecht Dürer’s \textit{Melencolia I} (1514), an allegorical portrayal of the mind incapacitated and overwhelmed by an insatiable need for knowledge, in which “the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation.” Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 139.
these objects through an unveiling that might move them into the intelligible space of a rationalized system, where they might be, like Peale’s reassembled mastodon bones or his regimented glass display cases, made into meaningful parts of a whole. The only glass here is that of the empty, reflective, perfectly transparent tumbler lying inverted by the skull—an object that, like the skull, constitutes a totality of surface with no possibility of depth, and is in fact interchangeable with the skull, or with any of the other objects, all of which could perhaps signify some enigmatic wisdom, but are really only “dry rebuses:” “for the eidos disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up.”

![Figure 23: Pieter Claesz, Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill, 1628. Oil on wood. 24.1 x 35.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1949.](image)

The extreme example of this allegorical logic would be none other than Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God* (2007), a work exemplary of the glories of surface in a wildly commercial context (Fig. 24). Here the surface is encrusted with literal diamonds—a literality probably unimaginable to Jameson as he wrote about Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) and its “gratuitous frivolity of this final decorative overlay.” In this postmodern *memento mori*, Death
figures as immanence, both potential and limit. Contrasting the piece to earlier vanitas scenes, such as Claesz’s, art historian Rudi Fuchs writes that in traditional still life paintings about the vanity of human life, the fragile skull is always the dominant object: surrounded by spent candles, mute musical instruments, dusty old books full of useless knowledge. These still, intimate arrangements were invariably lit by weak, pale light. In this shadowy light the yellow-grey skull was the focus of mournful melancholy and tender lamentation—the opposite of the severe vigour that emanates from the Hirst skull. That skull is out of this world, celestial almost… Compared to the tearful sadness of a vanitas scene, the diamond skull is glory itself. Covered by diamonds as by mail, it became an object of eternal life in death, blazing with light, resistant and heroic—yet still unspeakably ambiguous, as Damien Hirst always uncannily succeeds in making ambiguity itself into a seductive, axiomatic image. The glory of surface, the immanence in physical materiality, the seductive ambiguity of a seemingly transcendent object: These are the qualities already present in the ideal Greenbergian art object, here taken to their logical extreme. Hirst says of his piece, “You don’t like [death], so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable—to such an extent that it becomes something else.” In this allegorical structure, the viewer is referred back to the surface, where it is possible to linger, in the best Nietzschean way, in the glory of appearance, revelling in illusion rather than attempting to hermeneutically move beyond it. We do not need to raise the veil, because we know what we will find.
Finding the skull beyond the veil, allegory can go no further than to highlight its status as representation and its inability to signify anything but its own surface—an understanding of allegory that finds its articulation in linguistic theories such as those of Paul de Man, where the point of allegory is to show that all language is only ever rhetorical, unable to point to meaning in external realities beyond language itself. It is crucial to understand that Benjamin was writing at what he perceived to be a moment of great epistemological skepticism and theological decline, conditions of modernity that mirrored the historical period he was so fascinated with: the Baroque. Astonishing as it is, contemporary theories of allegory almost universally miss this fact, taking Benjamin’s description of allegory and its theoretical and epistemological attributes as descriptions of features that are universal and unchanging, proper to the symbolic mode
regardless of when it is taken up. This is obvious in the work of critics like Owens, who cite Benjamin’s descriptions of allegory as straightforward empirical characteristics of the mode rather than as historically contingent ones. The fact that allegory possessed a highly ideal quality prior to modernity is frequently missed, resulting in an ahistorical view. When the world was still enchanted, and people believed in gods, magic, and mysteries that could not be grasped with the naked eye, the veil of allegory would have possessed qualities far more similar to those of the ideal Romantic Symbol than we would like to admit. Erich Auerbach, for instance, has pointed out that the mixture of spirituality and sense of reality that characterizes the European Middle Ages seems baffling to us, because it is so far removed from our secular understanding of incarnation as a non-literal phenomenon. People really do see the world differently at different times, and so it doesn’t make sense to say, as Machosky does, that certain understandings of allegory are flawed, while others are immutably true. It all depends who you ask, and when.

Hans Blumenberg argues, in his Paradigms for a Metaphorology, that certain key metaphors in the tradition of Western thought are so foundational that they cannot ever be fully translated into concepts. These metaphors, such as that of unveiling, become commonplaces in rhetoric and influence attitudes, arguments, and possibilities for thought. They are, in turn, structured by such possibilities. The container we call “allegory” is a repository for our assumptions, our attitude toward the world, our deepest epistemological hopes and fears. Is it possible for the face of the envelope to remain unaltered by what it holds?

With the notable exception of Benjamin Buchloh, who identifies Benjamin’s analysis as specific to the European Baroque, though he too frequently refers to “truly allegorical qualities,” such as site specificity, separation of signifier and signified, and scriptural features, without specifying whether (and how) these are particular to modern allegory. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” in Formalism and Historicity: Model and Methods in Twentieth Century Art (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015): 173-226. Shorter version of this piece previously published in Artforum 21 (September 1982): 43-56.
Thinking about the correspondence between visual and textual allegorical modes is productive, not only because it foregrounds any given rhetoric’s assumptions, but also because it prompts us to think about how an allegorical rhetoric might function differently. Must raising the veil always erase all magic and expose only the face of the skull? Unveiling is a visual mode of grasping an existential and epistemological difficulty—not only that of appearance’s reluctance to correspond with reality, but also the much more mysterious question of how we can be presented with one thing and know it means something else. In other words, the question of how something like allegory can exist in the world in the first place. The veil is not just a barrier between ignorance and knowledge, or wonder and mastery, but also the very canvas that facilitates the profound transformation of one thing into another, whether it be of Nature into a veiled goddess or of a commodity into a series of human power relations. In that sense the veil embodies the mysterious element in any allegorical representation, where between corresponding schematized spaces, something very much like magic occurs. What form this gap between meaning and appearance will take in the future is difficult to say, but I would wager that the forms of allegory that make sense to us structurally will always be intimately related to their cultural moment.

I would like to leave you with the final image of the Argo, that capacious form sailing the seas of time:

A frequent image: that of the ship Argo (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This ship Argo is highly useful: it affords the allegory of an eminently structural object, created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution, but by two modest actions (which cannot be caught up in any mystique of creation): substitution (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and nomination (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts): by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the origin: Argo is an object with no other cause than its name, no other identity than its form.
Allegory is itself this structural object, calling from port to port with only its name to lend it continuity of being. Under this name reside contingent forms that must be understood not as essential, but as provisional and reflective. Through these forms we construct our relationship to meaning, working with the tools available to us. Understanding how and why allegory appears to us in its contemporary manifestations is synonymous to understanding how we relate to our world, and what we allow ourselves to find therein.
3 Ibid., 260.
6 Ibid., 306.
9 Ibid., 54.
10 Ibid., 77.
12 Fletcher, Allegory, 182.
13 Ibid., 191.
14 Ibid., 97-99.
15 Ibid., 107.
16 Ibid., 104.
18 Ibid., 176-7. The critic quoted is Carl Horst who, like many of his Romantic counterparts, perceives the violation of symbolic unity and self-sufficiency as an aesthetic shortcoming. Allegory’s mode mixing, here, is a “harsh disturbance of the peace and a disruption of law and order in the arts,” because it compromises the purity of artistic feeling by permeating it with conceptual content. (Carl Horst, Barockprobleme, Munich 1912).
19 Fletcher, Allegory, 64.
20 Ibid., 67
24 Ibid., 222.
25 Ibid., 225.
27 Ibid., 22.
29 Ibid., 76.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 94.
32 Ibid., 77.
33 Ibid., 76.
38 Ward, Charles Willson Peale, 162.
41 Marx, Capital, 69.
42 Ibid., 87.
44 Ward, Charles Willson Peale, 163.
45 Waite, Pictorial Key, 75.
46 Ibid.
52 Hadot, Veil of Isis, 234-235.
53 Ibid., 267.
54 Ibid., 237.
55 Ibid., 237; 265-267.
56 Waite, Pictorial Key. 76.
57 Hadot, Veil of Isis, 269.
58 See Ibid., 91-98.
61 Ibid.
63 Elderfield, Morris Louis, 33.
65 Ibid., 862.

Ibid., 16-17.


Ibid., 136-137.

Ibid., 144.

Ibid., 136.


Ibid., 50.


Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 139.


Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 160.

See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 91-92 on the modern critic’s aversion to non-literal interpretation and emphasis on irony and paradox.


Owens, “Allegorical Impulse,” 68.

Owens, “Allegorical Impulse,” 75.


Ibid., 365-366.

Ibid., 323.


Ibid., 26.

Ibid., 14.


111 Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 77.
113 Ibid., 857.
116 Ibid., 184.
119 Marx, *Capital*, 76.
122 Ibid., 188.
125 Ibid., 166.
126 Ibid., 178.
127 Ibid., 139.
128 Ibid., 176.
132 Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 61.