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Narrativizing Theory: The Role of Ambiguity in Religious Aesthetics

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Narrativizing Theory: The Role of Ambiguity in Religious Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This project expands S. Brent Plate's "invented religious aesthetics" by bringing it into conversation with Umberto Eco's theory of ambiguity. It articulates the space that ambiguity opens within the field of religious aesthetics when viewed as a liminal or interdisciplinary theory that neither privileges the starting points of transcendental aesthetics nor the "neo-arches" of theories of materiality. It hints at new ways of studying and describing religious worlds while also illustrating the porous borderlines between narrative and theory. It argues that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

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INTRODUCTION

"Many years later she does do that—pour an offering for Shen Liu—but only after the immediate past has become the distant past. How we remember changes how we have lived. Time runs both ways. We make stories of our lives."[1]

—Guy Gavriel Kay, *Under Heaven*

While I was writing about ambiguity in religious aesthetics, Philip Salim Francis published his 2017 work, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind*.[2] Whereas his book approaches aesthetics from the social scientific divide of religious studies, mine is thoroughly theoretical. What is important about *When Art Disrupts Religion*, however, is that, at the outset of *Narrativizing Theories*, it offers an important reminder while also setting up the questions that I explore.

Francis rightly points out that much of modern aesthetic theory focuses on what he calls aesthetic disruption. "The arts," he writes, "possess a unique capacity to unsettle our entrenched ways of thinking and believing . . . When we are immersed in an aesthetic experience, it is argued, our conceptual, categorical, and binary ways of thinking give way."[3] This line of reasoning inevitably leads to questions of art's salvific potential,

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[1] Guy Gavriel Kay, *Under Heaven* (New York: ROC, 2010).

[2] Philip Salim Francis, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] Ibid., 4–5.

secular aesthetic religions, and the universalization of aesthetic theories. Francis recognizes this and argues that modern aesthetic theory is "in dire need of a dose of its own historicizing medicine."[4]

I could not agree more with Francis. Aesthetic theory assumes categorical rupture, universalizes it, and then foists it onto aesthetic experience. And yet, as the conclusion of *Narrativizing Theories* shows through Jonathan Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*,[5] this is not always the case. Art also has the frightening tendency to reify beliefs and practices that are unpalatable to the liberal, academic world.

While Francis does not present a solution to this conundrum of aesthetic theory, he does, unwittingly, open a space for me to inject my theory of ambiguity. If art does not always disrupt, and there are alternate ways of moving in the world, then how does one choose between competing narrativizing theories? "It may be," Francis writes:

> that much of the failure to understand 'fundamentalism' results from a refusal to place the structure of one's own mind in familial relation to that of one's relatively conservative cousins . . . Do we not all, in our different ways, maintain certain beliefs intractably? Shouldn't we? Are not some beliefs worth *preserving*?[6]

He goes so far as to say, in fact, that some beliefs and practices are worth maintaining even amidst the defamiliarizing experience of aesthetics.[7]

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[4] Ibid., 9.

[5] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Marines, 2012).

[6] Francis, 140.

[7] Ibid., 141.

The question that follows then is the question that governs much of this text. How do we "distinguish acceptable (or ethical) methods of belief and identity preservation from the unacceptable?"[8] I answer this question, though articulated differently at times, in six academic chapters, two excursuses, and one short story embedded throughout the length of this book. These parts argue that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

In Part I of this work I define ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility so that, in Part II, I can turn my attention to analyzing Umberto Eco's theories and novels through that lens. Grossly summarizing both parts, I claim that ambiguity, seen as a coexistent incompatibility, is that which violates, questions, and challenges to expose the epistemological provisionality of any given narrativizing theory, which is an arrangement of a cultural encyclopedia. While that last sentence reads as if ripped from the jargon riddled text of a continental philosopher, I promise, I do define my terms and carefully unpack my argument. But the "Introduction" is a place of signaling, not arguing.

It might be helpful to think of ambiguity as a boiling cauldron filled with the churning verbs: "violate," "question," and "challenge." Whereas I do not add my definition of "coexistent incompatibility" to the pot, I paint it on the front of the cauldron in capital letters. It is important to remember that coexistent incompatibility is not a binary construction. It is, rather, an awareness of the plurality of equiprobable realities that can arise from any given encyclopedia. And before you accuse or dismiss my argument as something akin to a naïve relativism, know that Chapters Two and Three

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[8] Ibid.

deal with just that issue by tossing Charles S. Peirce's "Firstness" and Eco's "lines of resistance" into the boiling reality of ambiguity.

In the excursuses then, I employ my theory of ambiguity outside the orbit of Echian planets. In the first of two, I engage Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. In the second, Emmanuel Carrère's *The Kingdom*. I show, rather than tell, the arguments of Parts I and II. The last part of this work is the short story, "The Composer," which is hidden throughout various parts of this text. Though I run the risk of didacticism, I have my reasons for doing this.

"The Composer" performs or shows the title of this work, *Narrativizing Theories*. If the arrangement of an encyclopedia is a kind of narrative that is embodied in the world, then this dissertation is the encyclopedia to the arrangement of "The Composer." This interweaving of dissertation and short story might, perhaps, feel like didacticism, but only because the reader is confronted with the unique opportunity to encounter both encyclopedia and narrative simultaneously, which so rarely happens. The reader is oftentimes solely confronted with "The Composer" and is given the difficult task of working backwards to the matter of arrangement. The desire to reverse engineer any given text is, of course, dependent upon the operative hermeneutic, but, in my case, the dissertation/short story entanglement serves to show the way in which a given percept is intimately connected to the encyclopedia that swirls around it. Imagine confronting "The Composer" outside the confines of this dissertation and asking yourself: Could this story have been arranged otherwise than it is? If your answer is, "Yes," then you are well on your way to understanding the role of ambiguity in religious aesthetics.

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While violating, questioning, and challenging sounds a lot like Francis'
"disruption," my coexistent ambiguity is both more and less than modern aesthetic
theory. First, when I speak of "aesthetics," I do so in such a way that holds its etymology
in tension. Aesthetics is both art criticism and sense perception or intuition. I am not
saying that art only disrupts, but rather experience itself has the potential to open
unforeseen potentialities. These potentialities, however, are value neutral, as judgment
can only take place within an already given cultural encyclopedia.

Second, even though my project is theoretical in nature, the world of things is
never far off. I am using theory and narrative to understand better the fictions that we
map onto reality and embody subjunctively, thereby constructing equiprobable worlds
that can be held up against and compared to other, similar worlds. The question of choice
or judgment then is always lurking beneath my argument, like a lidded cauldron waiting
to explode. It is one of my assumptions that religious aesthetics, however, can play an
important role in articulating the choices of any given community, in so far as it uncovers
the communal practices and embodied narrativizing theories that comprise any given
community's encyclopedic stew.

Third, I am most interested in the material, religious aesthetics as espoused by S.
Brent Plate. And while what I have written up to this point might seem to be at odds with
Plate's work on materiality, it is not. I, too, am interested in discovering "a religious
aesthetic that does not take as its starting and ending point, Beauty, Truth, or God."[9] But
rather than focus on only one side of materiality, I am, in this project, exploring the ways

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[9] S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005), viii.

in which "beliefs preserve practices as practices preserve beliefs" and how both function "to signify a sufficiently coherent identity to self and other."[10]

Fourth, and finally, it is only fair at the outset that I define religion and how it connects to narrativizing theories. While much more is said below, "religion" is, in this project, something akin to the theories of implicit religion that define their subject matter as the various conscious or subconscious "commitments" that I hold and embody in the world. Implicit religion is useful in that it intentionally nudges the secular/sacred balance off kilter and allows me to conceive of religion as something other than that which slots so easily into Western, Protestant categories.[11]

One way to view my project then is as an analysis of both the commitments that I make in response to ambiguity but also how I navigate the choice between one commitment over another. Pointing towards Part II of this work, my reading of Captain Simone Simonini in Eco's *The Prague Cemetery* is simply an analysis of Simonini's commitments that he seeks to map onto the world as if they were true. It is a study of Simonini's implicit religion. In my view, I can conceive of nothing more important than connecting ambiguity to implicit religion and analyzing the embodied commitments that any individual or community makes in the vast sea of experience.

In the end, as the epigraph suggests, time runs both ways in the fictions that construct an embodied existence. We do make stories out of our lives, we live them as if

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[10] Francis, 139.

[11] Edward Bailey, "Implicit Religion," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 271–78 and "Implicit Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion,* ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

they were true, and, embedded in the concrete world, they are in the constant process of emergence. It is not my intention to universalize a theory of ambiguity in a world that defies universalization. In fact, it is the opposite. For even ambiguity is a narrativizing theory that, like all the rest, is provisional.

PART I: A THEORY OF AMBIGUITY

Part I of this work seeks to define ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility so that, in Part II, I can turn my attention to analyzing Umberto Eco's theories and novels through that lens. Taken together, both parts will argue the thesis that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

In Chapter One, I outline three modes of engaging ambiguity: literary, philosophical, and scientific. I examine current trends in ambiguity theories and religious aesthetics as both transcendental and material. I also define religion, aesthetics, and ambiguity, and, of course, an ambiguous religious aesthetic. If ambiguity is a coexistent incompatibility that highlights the proliferation of meaning and the polyvocal nature of reality, then religious aesthetics is the provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans subjunctively embody.

In Chapter Two, I outline Eco's theory of ambiguity by contextualizing it in his theories of information and communication. I then look at various essential concepts of Eco's that go into fully understanding ambiguity: semiotics, cultural units, and the encyclopedia. I connect all of this to current trends in ambiguity studies and material religious aesthetics. Ambiguity, in the end, is that which violates, challenges, and furthers

knowledge, while also constructing a religious aesthetic that both creates and highlights religious commitments and narratives as they mutually exist as polyvocal percepts.

In Chapter Three, I discuss Charles Sanders Peirce's influence over Eco and the way in which Peirce's theories of Firstness and the Dynamical Object are essential to grounding ambiguity. I then look at Eco's seminal essay on the creation of aesthetic messages. I conclude Part I by fully defining ambiguity and its connection to a material religious aesthetic. The goal of Part I is to set out the parameters in which I articulate how a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

CHAPTER ONE: AMBIGUITY AND RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought.

> —Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*

Introduction

How does one begin a book? It seems easy. After the reading ends and the outline has been fleshed out, one simply sits down and allows the muses to flow through her. That which was thought materializes into, well, material. But it is the opening sentence that always causes me to stumble. I want it to zip, to catch the reader off guard while simultaneously inviting her into another world. The pressure is too great. What if I fail? What if the opening sentence falls flat and the reader closes the book, lays it down, and picks up her smartphone instead? Perhaps underlying the anxiety of the opening sentence is the question: How does one invite the reader into a space of interpretation, a space that is clear and concise, to be sure, but that allows her to complete that which confronts her? Perhaps this is too much to ask of any first sentence and I should move on to other, pragmatic urges. I find, however, that it introduces my topic in an irregular and tangential way.

In this chapter, I have a few goals, the primary of which is to introduce my topics: ambiguity, religious aesthetics, and, of course, the need for putting both in conversation

with S. Brent Plate and Umberto Eco. More fully, after situating this project within the academic discourse of ambiguity, I sketch out religious aesthetics and its various approaches. I then introduce S. Brent Plate's religious aesthetic as a counter weight to much of what has come before it. While Plate was certainly not the first, his emphasis on materiality has shifted the way in which religious scholars tackle aesthetics. While I tend to agree which much, if not all of Plate, the last section in this chapter takes Plate's religious, material aesthetic and begins the long process of placing it in conversation with ambiguity. Not just any ambiguity, mind you, but as I will show,[12] the ambiguity of Umberto Eco, which is rooted in the quantum revolution, information theory, and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce.

Before I begin, however, I need quickly to answer one, niggling question. Why does religious aesthetics need a theory of ambiguity to inform it? Far too long has religious aesthetics been held captive by *the* transcendentals. Not only has it concerned itself with Beauty, Truth, and the Good, but also with that mother of all transcendentals— God. Left to rot in the sun, materiality, sense perception, and embodiment were eschewed for their perfect brethren. In other, generalizing words, religious aesthetics has been traditionally Plotinian over against the πάντα ῥεῖ of Heraclitus or the swerve of Lucretius. Plate, however, sets out to fix this minor imbalance, by introducing Walter Benjamin's aesthetic to the religious subspecies. This resulted in a turn towards materiality, and one, quite frankly, that I celebrate.

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[12] In later chapters.

While I accept religious aesthetic's turn towards materiality (a story that I will tell below), I do not embrace it naïvely. To take in the continuum of sense perceptions and from that to formulate any kind of understanding about the world one needs both thing and concept.[13] The thing, object, or percept, should not be taken for granted. While it is there, confronting and pushing back on me, I cannot know it fully for it is already a semioticized thing. And, to finally answer my question, that is why religious aesthetics needs ambiguity. One is neither confined by the object nor the concept. When I confront a percept,[14] it has the ability to open new possibilities, categories, and ways of understanding. Neither I nor it—nor its category—is fixed.[15] This is what ambiguity brings to religious aesthetics and what I will begin to discuss in this chapter. Ambiguity is like the opening sentence of an exciting new book, it confronts the reader and establishes itself as that which *is* while also beckoning her towards the horizon of the unknown.

On Ambiguity

Ambiguity, at the outset, should not be confused with vagueness.[16] It is *not* the antithesis of clarity. And while the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several definitions,[17]

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[13] And the question of which came first, thing or concept, is too tiring and laborious a conversation. We simply do not know. But we need both to make sense of the world and if one needs *a priori* categories to accept that, then so be it.

[14] By "percept," I mean, simply, an object of perception.

[15] As a brute and physical fact, the percept, obviously, is fixed. I cannot, in other words, by a sheer bending of the mind manipulate the physical compound of a rock. I can, however, change both my understanding of it and its position within my cultural encyclopedia. In doing so, the rock's cultural category is subject to changing, stretching, and slipping between categories. In this way, a brute, physical fact is not fixed.

[16] Cf. Adam Sennet, "Ambiguity," ed. Edward N. Zalta in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016): https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/ entries/ambiguity/; Christoph Bode, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in *Actas Del XII Congreso Nacional de La Asociacion Espanola de Estudios Anglo-*

all of which leave something wanting to those concerned with the academic literature, what I am interested in is that which is capable of "being understood in two or more ways." Artificial, perhaps, but I would like to divide ambiguity into three separate but overlapping academic discourses: literary,[18] philosophic, and scientific. Building towards the latter, I will finally show how Eco's theory of ambiguity fits into the larger, and current, academic discussions on ambiguity[19] before turning my attention to religious aesthetics.

<div align="center">Literary Ambiguity</div>

When one thinks of ambiguity, one most likely brings to mind literary ambiguity. Immortalized by William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, ambiguity is defined "as an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has

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Norteamericanos (Alicante 19-22 Dez. 1988, 1991): 73–83; Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion, 2002); Israel Scheffler, *Beyond the Letter: A Philosophical Inquiry into Ambiguity, Vagueness, and Metaphor in Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); Craig J. N. de Paulo, Patrick Messina, and Marc Stier, eds. *Ambiguity in the Western Mind* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966); Susanne Winkler, *Ambiguity: Language and Communication* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015); Guiseppe Caglioti, *The Dynamics of Ambiguity* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012); and Patrizia Violi and Wendy Steiner, "Ambiguity," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics, Tome 1: A-M*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1986).

[17] "ambiguity, n.," *OED Online*, (Oxford University Press, March 2017): http://www.oed.com.du.idm.oclc.org/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/6144 (accessed May 02, 2017): "wavering of opinion . . . an uncertainty . . . capability of being understood in two or more ways . . . a word or phrase susceptible of more than one meaning."

[18] By literary, I mean, generally speaking, aesthetics, where aesthetics means the academic study of art. In other words, this is a broad section in which visual and pictorial art are also represented.

[19] Admittedly, the majority of this work is taken up in the remaining chapters of this book. What I say of Eco here, is simply an appetizer.

several meanings."[20] A literary ambiguity then can be summarized as a lexeme having two or more lexical entries or, as I suggested, a word or cultural artifact capable of being understood in two or more ways. When I come across the word "bank" in any text, I am, due to its lexical possibilities, struck by an instance of ambiguity. Does it mean "a place where money is exchanged" or "the place whereupon young lovers meet to ingest their egg salad sandwiches?"

Ever so close to literary ambiguity is the definition posited by semioticians. Writing the entry for ambiguity in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, Patrizia Violi and Wendy Steiner extend ambiguity to that of the *context* of a given lexeme. "A sentence," they write, "is ambiguous when it can be interpreted in two or more different ways."[21] For them, ambiguity is tangled up with both homonymy and polysemy, an entanglement, they argue, that is the base of creative language in so far as "aesthetic messages are generally of an 'ambiguous' nature."[22]

Why is that? Because literary texts are less constrained in their communicative goals than nonfictional texts (a proposition that I will later call into question).[23] This is seen, for example, in the New Critics who located the essence of poetry in the tension between word and context, between the intensional and extensional meanings of its terms, and in the polysemy and compression of meaning of its metaphors.[24] Literary

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[20] Empson, 5.

[21] Violi and Steiner, 23.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Winkler, 17.

[24] Violi and Steiner, 25.

ambiguity is also discussed, to name a few, by Charles Morris[25] in regards to the icon and the Prague Structuralist school, most notably by Jan Mukarovsky.[26] It is there that the sign has a dual semiotic orientation, referencing both "outward toward the extra-aesthetic world and inward toward itself."[27] Jacques Derrida's differance is at play here, too, wherein nothing but ambiguity is possible.

The central question that literary ambiguity now sets itself, according to Susanne Winkler, is how do the tools which are used in the construction of the text influence the interpretation of the reader? Though old, this is not, she insists, a trivial question, since "ambiguity triggers are manifold." Literary ambiguity, in other words, seeks to address the problem of multiple interpretations coexisting at the same time.[28] This is similar to the visual arts wherein, for example, Dario Gamboni asks the question: who is responsible for generating meaning—the viewer or the creator? For him, ambiguity is "the character of what is susceptible to several interpretations" and that which "can also be said to express the character of what belongs to two categories" and "of what lacks precision and disturbs."[29]

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[25] Cf. Charles William Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).

[26] Jan Mukarovsky, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," in *A Prague School Reader*, ed. P.L. Garvin (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 17–30.

[27] Violi and Steiner, 25.

[28] Winkler, 17.

[29] Gamboni, 13.

Before drawing any provisional conclusions about literary ambiguity, it is important to consider the work of Christoph Bode.[30] Ambiguity, for him, is "the conspicuous proliferation of multiple meanings."[31] What is different here is that which generates the multiple meanings. For many, it is the text or object in concert with the reader or viewer that generates any meaning. For Bode, however, that which generates meaning is the event. Why is that? Because those who would say a sign or a text in its *literariness*—that which is outside the use of everyday language—is both ambiguous and self-referential commit an error. A sign, at its most general, is that which points to something else.[32] If it must point to something else in order to signify, Bode asks, then how can it also be self-referential? This question, far from naïve, devastatingly calls into question so much of semiotic aesthetics. A sign that is self-referential is no longer a sign and, hence, cannot signify. This, of course, poses a problem for literary critics who want to claim both that *Moby Dick as a text* signifies *x* and is simultaneously self-referential in that it breaks from everyday language and therefore opens new possibilities for the condition of language itself. Both cannot be true. Rather than seeking a referent or that to which a sign points, Bode's aesthetics of ambiguity searches out events or that which "just is."

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[30] Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer, eds. *Amphibolie, Ambiguität, Ambivalenz* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009); Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich, *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); and Christoph Bode, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in *Actas Del XII Congreso Nacional de La Asociacion Espanola de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos* (Alicante 19-22 Dez. 1988, 1991), 73–83.

[31] Bode, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," 73.

[32] Umberto Eco, "Sign," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics: Tome 2*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 936.

Bode takes us dangerously close to Eco, which I will later show, when he argues

that for a writer to create an event, he or she must break all primary codes.[33]

> The aesthetics of ambiguity offers access to <<meaning as an event>>, to the
> experience of experience . . . art and a literature which, by striving after auto-
> referentiality, transcend their former semiotic status and present themselves as
> free offers of experience meet with an aesthetics which, knowing it can never
> prove conclusively the objectivity of what it talks about, can only submit the same
> offer: to enter, to expose oneself to an experience and to see what happens.[34]

While there is much here that is admirable and important, I do not wholeheartedly agree

with all that Bode is doing. Or, rather, I think that some of Bode's work deserves more

qualification than I can now give it.[35] What I do affirm, however, is that which I will

continually revisit throughout this project—the nature of experience to call into question

our cultural categories and concepts while also simultaneously probing the boundaries of

that which we define as "reality."

In the end, I think it best to define literary ambiguity as that which takes a word,

sentence, text, object, or visual artwork and sees it as pointing to multiple meanings in

any given cultural encyclopedia.[36] To some this object is aesthetic only insofar as it is

self-referential, but to others self-referentiality is an undoing of the concept of the sign

itself. In these cases, the focus is shifted ever so slightly to the category of experience

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[33] Bode, 82.

[34] Bode, 82–3.

[35] For instance, Peirce's category of Thirdness might call into question Bode's notion or understanding of experience if by experience Bode means something that is outside a cultural semiosphere. Cf. James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[36] I will use "cultural encyclopedia" throughout this chapter, but I will not define it until Chapter Two, wherein I turn my full attention to Umberto Eco.

over against the concept of sign. Literary ambiguity is concerned with the coexistence of multiple meanings and the way in which the artifact and the reader or viewers work together to create or establish a possible meaning.

<center>Philosophic Ambiguity</center>

While much of that which literary ambiguity is concerned overlaps with philosophic ambiguity, it is important to reiterate that my categories of ambiguity are arbitrary, if useful heuristics. They are not concrete, even though my handprints are permanently set in them. If my understanding of literary ambiguity houses both semiotics and the visual arts, then my definition of philosophic ambiguity holds within it classic, analytic, and speculative philosophy, as well as some good old fashioned metaphysics. Where the distinctions that I draw are most porous, however, is in the distinction that I pencil between philosophic and scientific ambiguity, but I will save that for my next section.

Both Aristotle and the stoics discussed ambiguity. Where Aristotle defined ambiguity as an instance of an expression or name having more than one meaning,[37] the Stoics, or at least Chrysippus, argued that one person may understand a word in various ways.[38] So far this is little different from literary ambiguity. Things changed, however, when analytic philosophers started to analyze lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguities. It was important for them, in doing so, to say what ambiguity was not.

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[37] Aristotle, "On Sophistical Refutations," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes and trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 280–1.

[38] Cf. Sennet, 5 and Catherine Atherton, *The Stoics on Ambiguity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<center>18</center>

Philosophic ambiguity is not polysemy, vagueness, context sensitivity, under-specification and generality, or sense and reference transfer. If ambiguity is here an instance of two lexical entries corresponding to the same word, then polysemy is a single lexeme with multiple meanings,[39] vagueness is a lack of precision in meaning or reference,[40] context sensitivity is variability of content due to changes in the context of utterance without change in the convention of word usage,[41] under-specification and generality fails to specify some detail without being ambiguous to that detail,[42] and sense and reference transfer is the phenomena of taking, "I am parked on Third Street," to mean the car and not the driver.[43]

So then, what is philosophic ambiguity? A distinction is often made between lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic. Lexical ambiguity is having more than one entry in the lexicon for a lexeme.[44] Syntactic ambiguity occurs when there are many Logical Forms (LFs)—where LFs have replaced the notion of the lexicon to study the rule-governed derivation of syntactic forms—that correspond to the same sentence.[45] Pragmatic ambiguity deals with both speech acts and truth conditional pragmatics.[46] While Adam

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[39] Sennet, 6.

[40] Ibid., 7.

[41] Ibid., 8.

[42] Ibid., 8–9.

[43] Ibid., 10.

[44] Ibid., 12–3.

[45] Ibid., 11 and 13–20.

[46] Ibid., 20–2.

Sennet discuss numerous other cases of philosophic ambiguity, for my purposes his introduction should be sufficient to show the ways in which philosophic ambiguity differs from the literary variety. For philosophic ambiguity, at least in its current state, is both analytic in nature and concerned with logical forms. If a reader is confused by the proliferation of philosophic ambiguity, however, then she can consult "Ambiguity Tests and How to Fail Them," which should, I believe, help her to avoid any common errors of ambiguity in her day-to-day speech.[47]

An important book in this vein of inquiry is Israel Scheffler's *Beyond the Letter*,[48] wherein he defines ambiguity as reference to difference in intension or the converse of synonymy. Given that definition, he then goes on to distinguish several types of ambiguity. Elementary ambiguity corresponds to what most people call semantic or lexical ambiguity.[49] Indecision ambiguity corresponds to psychological ambiguity, where we are unable to decide which of two meanings a speaker intends on a given use of a semantically ambiguous expression.[50] And, finally, there is a third type of ambiguity, multiple ambiguity, in which a semantically ambiguous expression is used in two ways at once, so that we have to assign it multiple interpretations.[51] For my purposes, again, this

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[47] Arnold M. Zwicky and Jerrold M. Sadock, "Ambiguity Tests and How To Fail Them," in *Syntax and Semantics*, *Vol. 4*, ed. John P. Kimball (New York: Academic, 1975), 1–36.

[48] Israel Scheffler, *Beyond the Letter: A Philosophical Inquiry into Ambiguity, Vagueness, and Metaphor in Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

[49] Ibid., 13.

[50] Ibid., 16.

[51] Ibid., 17.

summary is meant to be useful in carving out philosophic ambiguity's unique space, over against literary ambiguity.

While on the surface, *Ambiguity in the Western Mind* sits within the world of literary ambiguity due to its aim of rethinking the great books of the western canon, I want to end this section by looking at one philosophic essay, "In Praise of Ambiguity."[52] Ambiguity is here "the condition that makes meaning possible by making pure and unambiguous meaning impossible."[53] For John D. Caputo, in other words, binaries not only found each other but make each other possible. If unreadability is the condition of possibility for reading, then, to take another example, progress is only possible when anomalies force any smoothly running system to reconfigure.[54] By analogy then, ambiguity is the ground that makes meaning possible. "Clarity and ambiguity," he writes:

> should not be viewed as simple logical opposites on a timeless spectrum but different stages in the process of making meaning, or producing meaning as an effect. Clarity is a late product . . . at the end of the process . . . Ambiguity . . . belongs to an earlier matinal stage, to a deeper stratum of meaning . . . Ambiguity is ambi-valent . . . bristling with multiple values, indeed poly-valent, alive with possibilities that cannot be neatly ordered or contained.[55]

Philosophic ambiguity, in the end, is distinct from literary ambiguity in its focus. Whereas literary ambiguity is concerned with the proliferation of meaning, holding multiple interpretations in tension, and the role of the reader, philosophic ambiguity is by and large analytic in its focus on the systems of language, communication, and Logical

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[52] John D. Caputo, "In Praise of Ambiguity," in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, eds. Craig J. N. de Paulo, Patrick Messina, and Marc Stier (New York: Peter Lang, 2005): 15–34.

[53] Ibid., 20.

[54] Ibid., 22.

[55] Ibid., 25.

Forms. But as Bode ended the former section with a shift away from sign to that of event, Caputo does the same for philosophic ambiguity. For him, ambiguity is the condition of possibility for meaning in its insistence on making unambiguous meaning impossible. Ambiguity, in other words, is a constant reminder to philosophic ambiguity that its quest, while admirable, is ultimately quixotic.

Scientific Ambiguity

While so much of science values clarity and precision, which is a good and necessary thing when my daughter is ingesting her dose of amoxicillin, it is not without its ambiguities. But here, ambiguity takes on the strange properties of paradigm shifts, the breaking of symmetry, and quantum indeterminacy. It is also, I show, an ambiguity rooted in theories of information and chaos.[56]

To begin with the most general, ambiguity can be understood as something akin to Thomas Kuhn's meaning of "anomaly."[57] Rather than incremental progress by the accumulation of signs, an anomaly arises that contradicts the prevailing paradigm. When the anomaly can no longer be ignored, scientists are forced to grapple with it, test it, and ultimately account for it. This, of course, leads to a scientific revolution or to a new, unforeseen possibility in the description of reality. Anomaly then is a scientific ambiguity—it is that which calls into question the traditional codes.

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[56] Though a full analysis of ambiguity and information theory will have to wait until the following chapter wherein I discuss information theory's influence over Eco's theory of ambiguity.

[57] Cf. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Roald Hoffmann, *The Same and Not the Same* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). The latter is a study of ambiguity from the perspective of chemistry.

Another way to think about scientific ambiguity is through the concept of oscillation in sense perception. Confronted with a constant stimulus, pattern perception fluctuates between two or more possible interpretations. This plurality of possibility is called, "multistability,"[58] which can be understood as switching between two or more different attractors.[59] Looking at figure 1.1,[60]
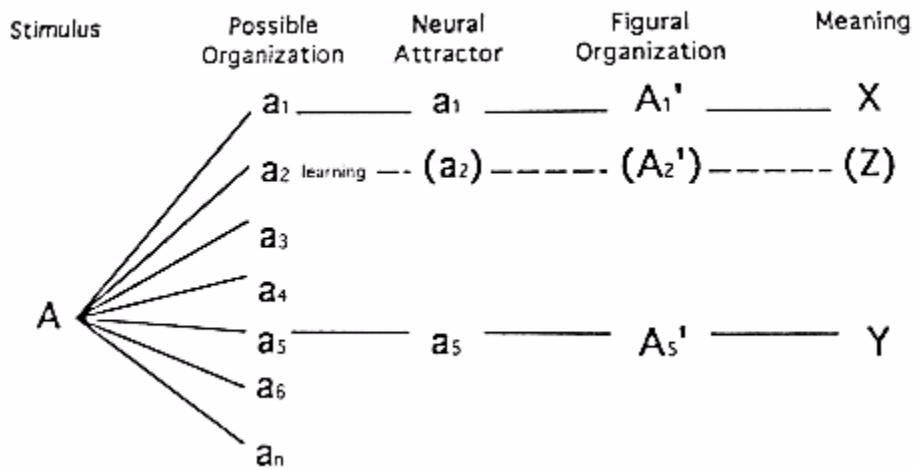
fig. 1.1

I find ambiguity best represented by the six "possible organizations" that correspond to "A," the one, concrete stimulus. Notice, too, that how one organizes a sense perception is separate from that sense perception's meaning, and that three different meanings are possible given six possible organizational schemes. Aligning with Eco's theory of ambiguity, as I show later, the possible organization of "a_2" is interesting in that it represents an organizational schema that is not given, automated, or spontaneous. It has,

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[58] Peter Kruse and Michael Stadler, "The Function of Meaning in Cognitive Order Formation, in *Ambiguity in Mind and Nature: Multistable Cognitive Phenomena*, eds. Peter Kruse and Michael Stadler (New York: Springer, 1995), 5.

[59] Ibid., 11.

[60] Ibid., 10.

in other words, no entry in the cultural encyclopedia and must, therefore, be learned, which, of course, then leads to the possibility of new meanings.

Ambiguity, according to Giuseppe Caglioti, can also mean "the coexistence or confluence of two or more incompatible aspects in the same reality."[61] While this, at first glance, seems paradoxical, it is the result of having to rethink science and human perceptions of reality in the wake of the quantum revolution. If Aristotle can say that no substance can simultaneously host opposites, then one can say of Aristotle that he has a non-procedural view of essences. Ambiguity, in other words, is not something that Aristotle's substance can account for and is therefore seen as something negative. This changed in the twentieth century, however, via a fresh analysis of time and probability.[62] Ambiguity came positively to mean: the coexistence or confluence of two or more incompatible aspects in the same reality.[63] With discoveries in science (Albert Einstein, Werner Karl Heisenberg, etc.), philosophers began to focus on the "dynamics of the processes of transformation rather than on Aristotle's statics of the objects."[64] "In conclusion," Caglioti writes:

> complex concepts of quantum physics and the structure of matter are intimately connected with optical illusions, paradoxes, and ambiguities, features usually attributed to the world of art rather than to science. Both art and science are produced, emotionally and rationally, by our thinking. And our thinking proceeds chaotically, on the jagged watershed of a permanent cultural value: ambiguity.[65]

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[61] Giuseppe Caglioti, "Ambiguity," in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), 53.

[62] Cf. James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History* (New York: Pantheon, 2016).

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., 54.

[65] Ibid., 55.

This cannot be stressed enough for Caglioti, ambiguity, "taken as bivalency," is the "simultaneous presence of two aspects of reality that are incompatible with each other."[66] Rather jarring to the mind, the reader is well within her rights to ask the question: How can reality have two simultaneous presences? To understand this conundrum fully, one needs to view ambiguity as holding the center between entropy and conservation, on the one hand, and symmetry and information or order, on the other (cf. fig. 1.2).[67]
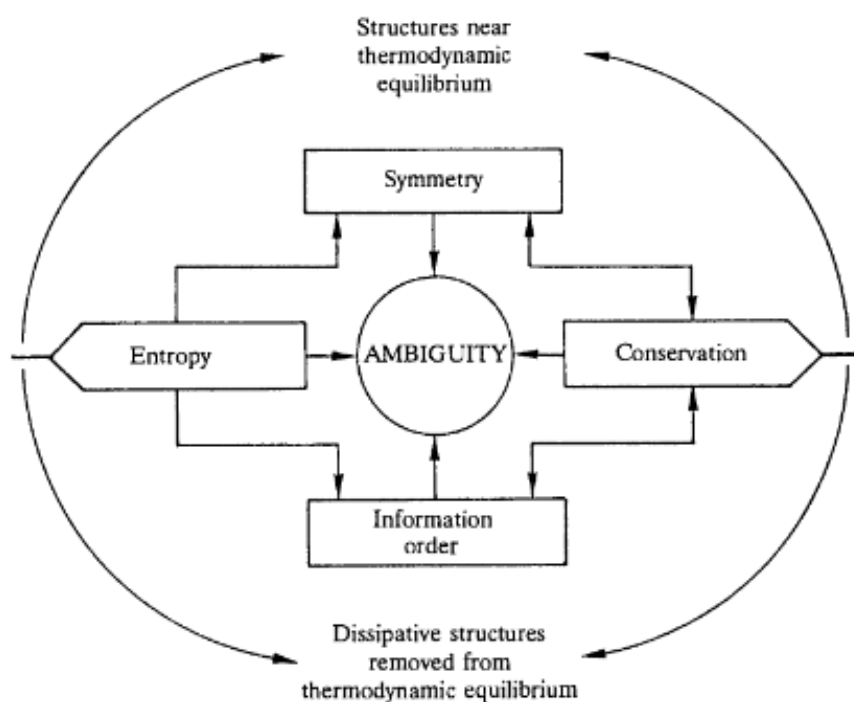
fig. 1.2

[66] Paolo Fenoglio, "Preface to the Italian Edition," in *The Dynamics of Ambiguity*, Guiseppe Caglioti (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), xv. Cf. Guiseppe Caglioti, "Perception of Ambiguous Figures: A Qualitative Model Based on Synergetics and Quantum Mechanics," in *Ambiguity in Mind and Nature*, eds. by Peter Kruse and Michael Stadler (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 1995), 463–78.

[67] Caglioti, *The Dynamics*, 14.

What does all this mean and how can a humanities scholar understand that which appears to be a "hard science?" The point is that ambiguity shows up in the sciences as well as in the humanities, and that Caglioti's brand of scientific ambiguity bleeds into literary theory via Eco. In other words, when Eco describes ambiguity as that which "must be defined as a mode of violating the rules of the code"[68] or as an important device that functions as an introduction to the aesthetic experience,[69] he is not elucidating literary, semiotic, or philosophic ambiguity. He is, rather, drawing on a scientific ambiguity rooted in information theory[70] and bringing that to bear on aesthetics, an aesthetics understood as a discourse on art and literature but not wholly divorced from sense perception.[71] I am, however, getting ahead myself.

Let me conclude this section with a clearer description of Caglioti's ambiguity. For him, ambiguity can be defined as the breaking of symmetry (where symmetry is defined as invariance under transformation), the "coexistence, at a critical point, of two

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[68] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 263.

[69] Ibid., 274.

[70] Again, I will show this in the following chapters.

[71] Not alone in this pursuit, see also, to name a few: N. Katherine Hayles, "Turbulence in Literature and Science: Questions of Influence," in *American Literature and Science*, ed. Robert Scholnick (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 229–50; N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Fields & Literary Strategies in the 20th Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Bruno Latour and Michel Serres, *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Conversations on Culture, Science, and Time*, Trans. by Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995); Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, ed. David Webb, trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester: Clinamen, 2014); Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos* (London: Bantam, 1984); and Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

aspects or schemes of reality which are mutually exclusive and which have become physically observable"[72] or "as the coevolution or coexistence of two mutually incompatible aspects of a same reality inside a single structure."[73] Imagine turning an empty wine bottle in your hands, labels removed, and being unable to perceive any change in the structure even though the bottle is changing over time. That is symmetry. When it is broken, because of, let's say, a bubble or streak in the glass, your perception of the bottle will alter. The reality of the bottle spinning or changing over time will be made visible. Symmetry breaking, for Caglioti, is a prerequisite for not only obtaining an information (measured in bits), but also as a foundation for the process of perception.[74]

While the spinning wine bottle elucidates the idea of invariance under transformation, it is not entirely accurate. Perhaps better would be to picture an ice cube sitting on a table under the high sun of Colorado. As the cube begins to melt, a phase transition takes place that implies symmetry breaking. The cube, at some point, will arrive midway between entropy (transformation) and conservation, and it is at this point that one perceives the coexistence of two aspects of the same reality—incompatible with each other.[75] This is, of course, one aspect of figure 1.2. The other feature is the cube's middle point between "symmetry or indiscernibility on one hand, and information or the removal of uncertainty on the other."[76] Will the cube remain cube-like or will it melt into

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[72] Caglioti, *The Dynamics*, 17. Cf. Caglioti, "Perception of," 464.

[73] Caglioti, "Perception of," 477.

[74] Ibid., 468.

[75] Caglioti, *The Dynamics*, 12.

[76] Ibid.

something that a human could drink? Knowing the answer, it is easy to see how information arises. For Caglioti then, ambiguity is a crossroad or intersection placed squarely between natural structures and humanity's cultural relationship with them.[77]

Perception then is a dynamic instability that implies ambiguity. It leads, Caglioti writes, "from a disordered state of the functionally engaged part of the mind to an ordered state via a dynamic instability involving a symmetry breaking."[78] He continues:

> At the level of conceptual synthesis, a structure appears qualitatively symmetrical until the moment in which, following a scansion of the structure itself, a dynamic instability of the perceptive process is produced: and one realizes that he has extracted information, or given a new meaning, or has been enlightened by an idea.[79]

This is true in science, art, music, and even those funny pictures that oscillate between both a duck and a bunny. How a mind decides what to see given any percept is wrapped up in chaos theory's notion of the attractor. But, here, I have strayed a little too far from my purpose.

What I set out to do was not to indulge a scientific curiosity, but to establish the distinctions between literary, philosophic, and scientific ambiguity. These heuristic categories were not meant to be exhaustive, but rather representative of their general fields of inquiry. In summary, literary ambiguity is concerned with the proliferation of meaning, holding multiple interpretations in tension, and the role of the reader; philosophic ambiguity is by and large analytic in its focus on the systems of language,

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 463.

[79] Caglioti, *The Dynamics*, 110.

communication, and Logical Forms, but also deals with the foundation of meaning itself; and scientific ambiguity—rooted in the quantum and chaos revolutions—concerns itself with the possibility of two simultaneous realities inside a single structure, but also, I think, with quantum entanglements, strange attractors, and the generation of information.

Ambiguity's Conclusion

In her introductory essay in a 2013 book on the state of ambiguity theory across disciplines, Winkler suggests that the governing question of modern ambiguity theory is the question of where ambiguity occurs—in the production or perception of a given precept?[80] Following from this is another, though connected, question: Is ambiguity— produced or perceived—strategic or nonstrategic? For Winkler and others, this results in four potentialities: 1) strategic production, 2) nonstrategic production, 3) strategic perception, and 4) nonstrategic perception.[81] All four potentialities are present in both literary and philosophic ambiguity, but perhaps not in scientific, where scientists set out to analyze and understand nonstrategic perceptual ambiguity.

For my purposes, however, I am interested in examining the strategic production of ambiguity in literary texts. Why? "Strategic production of ambiguity," Winkler writes:

> is a central issue in literary criticism and rhetoric . . . While the premise that ambiguity is employed strategically in literary texts can be deemed valid, it is often difficult to identify its effects. It is precisely for this reason that literary texts lend themselves extremely well to examining the functions of ambiguity.[82]

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[80] Winkler, 17.

[81] Ibid., 18.

[82] Ibid.

If this section on ambiguity has helped my project in any way, then it has established what I mean by ambiguity and therefore has set up its confrontation with religious aesthetics, which will come in the next section.

First, I am interested in what I have called literary ambiguity: the proliferation of meaning, holding multiple interpretations in tension, and the role of the reader. I am not, however, concerned with any literary ambiguity, but that which is best depicted by Eco. The question you are no doubt asking yourself, however, is why Eco? Because, as I will begin unpacking in the next chapter, Eco's literary ambiguity is an ambiguity rooted in scientific, perceptual ambiguity. Without saying too much here, I can say that Eco's ambiguity takes the polysemy of "aesthetics" seriously. It is an ambiguity that stresses both the creative construction of meaning and the hard perception of the senses. And, in a strange twist, it also takes into consideration Caputo's foundational ambiguity, which can best be seen in Eco's use of Charles Sanders Peirce.

Second, by ambiguity I mean the coexistence of two or more incompatible aspects in the same reality. This coexistent incompatibility is what I propose to bring into conversation with religious aesthetics generally and S. Brent Plate's material aesthetic more specifically. Ambiguity taken this way can arise from any given percept, whether that percept is an object or a cultural artifact, like a text. Given my emphasis on a literary ambiguity informed by its scientific sibling, it is no surprise that most of this project will be focusing on literary analyses or the strategic production of ambiguity.

Finally, as I turn my attention to defining what I mean by a material religious aesthetic, I ask that you keep in mind my definition of ambiguity as a coexistent

incompatibility in both senses of the aesthetic endeavor of which more will be said below. Religious aesthetics, in short, has traditionally focused on the transcendentals of Beauty, Truth, and God. In recent years, however, religious aesthetics has shifted towards the material realm and that which confronts the senses. The question, moving forward, is How does an ambiguity understood as a coexistent incompatibility inform both a transcendental and a material religious aesthetic?

THE COMPOSER

I

"Are you familiar with the Voynich manuscript?"

"No. Should I be?" I sat back, searching my memory.

"*The Atlantic* ran a story about it—a fifteenth-century manuscript written in gibberish. No one knows what it means."

"And?"

"The claim is that someone solved it. Figured it out. Some old lady's," Gina glanced at her MacBook, "herbiary."

"Herbiary?"

"Like bestiary, but with plants."

"Bestiary? Look, I—"

"Spare me your jokes, Ed. Point is that *The Atlantic* story had over two-hundred thousand clicks, and we need that kind of traffic."

"So you want me to write a story on Voynich?"

"No, not that. It's been done. We need another angle." Gina ran a hand through her thin hair. "A *Da Vinci Code* kind of story."

"What do you have in mind?"

She turned the rose-gold computer to face me. "This."

"C'mon. That's legend. It never happened."

"Couldn't care less, Ed. That's not the point. Clicks are. You write it, they'll click. Get out there, dig around. Find someone who was there."

"They're all dead, Gina."

"Then a daughter or a granddaughter of someone who was. I don't really care. I just want a copy on my desk by the fourteenth."

"Three weeks?" I titled back my chair. The tiled ceiling suddenly felt confining, a prison of dunces. "Who's paying for this?"

"Whatever you need, Ed. Just ask. This is serious. Patrick wants to see it, too."

"Why the hell does corporate care if *The Atlantic* beats us on clicks? They always beat us."

"That's the wrong question. In fact, questions are meaningless when it comes to Patrick. Just get it done."

"Okay, fine. But why not Paguyo or Martinez? Both know music better than I do."

"True. But that's the point. Patrick wants someone to write it who can communicate it to the masses without all the jargon. So don't use 'tonic' or 'allegro' or even 'measure.' Write it so I could understand and enjoy it."

"You hate music."

"Exactly."

———

I left Gina's office and caught the "Q." I exited three blocks from the public library. Walking always cleared my mind. The white noise. The anonymity. The sheer movement of city streets. I was part of a process from which I couldn't extricate myself.

There's a word. "Extricate." Couldn't use that in my story. Or "from which." Ending with prepositions is fine now. Why? Because people need simplicity, and journalists need a third-grade intellect. It's our screens, and our all-consuming Google.

Once upon a time.

That's how I should begin, since this whole thing's a fairytale anyway. Like Atari's *E.T.* or UPN's *South Beach*, a story like this could ruin my career.

I turned the corner and saw the pillared building. It loomed overhead, stern and imposing. The marble steps, leading upwards, implied an ordered reality, an eye in the middle of process's storm. As much as I loved this place, desired it even, it frightened me.

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"Classical music?"

The librarian looked up. "Yes?"

> "I'm looking for anything you have on the composer, Zuravel Ostrava Martynov."
>
> His fingers were a blaze of clicking. "Floor three. Section seven. Would you like me to show you?"
>
> "No. I can find it."
>
> The thick stacks ran endlessly beneath the vaulted ceiling. I could smell the bindings. Feel the ink. The vertigo of knowledge hit me.
>
> I always left the library with three or more novels. Books I wanted to read, but couldn't find the time. Maybe Saturday. Didn't Gaiman just release a new one? Now there was a storyteller. I wonder what he could do with Martynov?
>
> Here it was. The book that Gina had told me about, *The Composer: A Symbol Burnt in St. Petersburg* by Nikolayevich Romanov Diletsky.

On Religious Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a strange category rife with slippage. Its use is often indeterminate, idiosyncratic, and disparate.[83] While it did not begin properly as an academic field until 1750 when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" from the Greek *aisthesis* (perception by the senses),[84] aesthetics has a much older lineage wherein the Greek τεχνή (craft, skill, or technical trade), ποιήσις (making, creation, or the poetic arts), and τὸ καλόν (beautiful, useful, or good) are all jumbled together in a grab-bag of curios

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[83] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (New York: Blackwell, 1991), 3.

[84] Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

and miscellany. Aesthetics, on the one hand, is concerned with that which is beautiful—

or *B*eautiful—and therefore with the fine arts or, when capitalized, with theology.[85] That

is, until recently, when aesthetes turned their attention towards culture, pop or

otherwise.[86] On the other hand, aesthetics is interested in perception, cognition, and

knowledge. It questions how one might come to know reality through the continuum of

the senses, while problematizing the role of language, categories, and culture in

understanding the world.[87] But it also has a long and august theological and religious

tradition that considers the role that the senses play in divine revelation,[88] as well as,

more recently, the materiality of religious practices.[89]

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[85] This is a tradition that moves from Hegel to Bell to Adorno, to name a few. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art (2 Volumes)*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Clive Bell, *Art* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2015); Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[86] Cf. S. Brent Plate, "Inventing Religious Aesthetics: Word/image/body/other in Walter Benjamin and Gary Hill" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1999); Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed: Essays by Umberto Eco*, ed. Robert Lumley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[87] This is a tradition, to name a few, that runs from Kant to Croce to Crowther. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith, rev. Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1978); Paul Crowther, *How Pictures Complete Us: The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Divine* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[88] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco and New York: Ignatius Press, 1983–1991); Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

[89] S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon, 2015); S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred. Crosscurrents 62, no. 2 (June 2012): 162–80; S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Manuel A. Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Though not religious studies scholars, this trend towards materiality can also be seen, to name a few, in Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

With these possible meanings and launching points, it is the burden of any

aesthete to describe what she means when using the word "aesthetics." That is my

purpose in this section wherein I not only carve out my usage from the muddled history

of the term, but also begin to describe what an aesthetics of ambiguity might look like. I

focus mostly on religious aesthetics and its trajectory towards materiality, but also on the

way in which my understanding of ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility confronts

religious aesthetics. Moving forward, I discuss two forms of religious aesthetics before

turning my attention to an aesthetic informed by ambiguity. These two forms of religious

aesthetics are distinct but mutually informing. They are what I call transcendental

religious aesthetics and material religious aesthetics. In both cases, however, the two

camps overlap in their usage of the term. Depending upon the scholar, aesthetics can

mean sense perception, art criticism, or a conflation of both. And, as I will show, the

category of "aesthetics" is far from regulated.

<div align="center">Transcendental Religious Aesthetics</div>

A transcendental religious aesthetic engages the categories of the Beautiful, the

True, and the Good (not to mention God) and considers how these transcendentals

illuminate divine revelation. While this field of discourse has a long history, of which

Eco is a part (though, it must be said, from a non-confessional standpoint),[90] it has been

most recently dominated by Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is nearly impossible to summarize

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[90] Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*; Umberto Eco and David Robey, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, trans. Ellen Esrock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011); Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010); Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

the voluminous writings of von Balthasar. While I do not have the time, space, or inclination to do so, it is important to get a sense of what von Balthasar was up to. I must stress, however, that I grapple with von Balthasar, ever so briefly, not to understand him better, but to understand what *I* mean by religious aesthetics.

Von Balthasar's basic aim is to treat beauty (*pulchrum*) as the way God's goodness (*bonum*) "gives itself and is expressed by God and understood by man as the truth (*verum*)."[91] What is key is that Balthasar sets out to distinguish between an aesthetic theology and a theological aesthetics. The former tries to comprehend the experience of divine beauty by means of some preconceived notion of the beautiful and thus corrupts biblical values and limits Christian perception. The latter beholds the unique beauty of a revelatory form as something freely given by God. In the end, Balthasar seeks to give an account of the "subjective evidence" of revelation, considering how the beautiful form(s) of the divine are beheld by the faithful, before turning to the "objective" basis for such experiences of revelatory beauty, which is absolutely and inescapably God's Incarnation in Christ—a reality that Balthasar regards as the foundation of any possible Christian theological aesthetics.

If I can put it bluntly, von Balthasar takes the two-thousand-year history of aesthetics and rethinks it through the "injected narrative" of Jesus' incarnation or *forma Christi*.[92] By positing this as a starting or initial point, von Balthasar is able to order his

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[91] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco and New York: Ignatius Press; Crossroad, 1983–1991), 13 and 151.

[92] Cf. Benjamin John Peters, *Sigurd's Lament: An Alliterative Epic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 53–5 and 206–8 for what I mean by an "injected narrative." See also, E. Thomas Lawson, "Cognition," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, eds. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 83 and Adam B. Seligman, et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25 for

cosmos in such a way that he can arrive at a properly understood aesthetic (in the sense of

both perception and art). But, as Paul Crowther has shown, much of von Balthasar's

logic, even when read generously, falls flat.[93] Perhaps another way to examine von

Balthasar regarding my project is to suggest that his aesthetic seeks to do away with any

coexistent incompatibilities in the Christian worldview. In this way, von Balthasar's

univocal aesthetic is extremely low in ambiguity.

Helpful, here, however is the definition of Christian transcendence that one of von

Balthasar's main commentators provides:

> Christian transcendence is the encounter of the human person with God in the
> world, an encounter in which the empirical facticity of the external world is
> sacralized in light of God's creative activity, and in which those subjective human
> limitations that can be ascribed to egoism are healed by a grace whose ever-
> receding horizon makes any exhaustive understanding of salvific transcendence
> impossible to attain.[94]

If this kind of transcendence can be understood as a human's encounter with God in the

world, then an aesthetic informed by this focuses on the phrase "in the world" and the

ways in which Beauty enraptures a human as she beholds an object. Before I move on

then, I can summarize von Balthasar's transcendental religious aesthetic as that which

focuses on Beauty, Truth, and the Good in so far as they reveal the form, from within

themselves, of the divine, which is the *forma Christi* or the illumined humanity and

divinity of Jesus.

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a similar phenomenon known in ritual theory as the "initial point."

[93] Paul Crowther, *How Pictures Complete Us: The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Divine* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 159–160. See also, Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 167.

[94] Christopher D. Denny, *A Generous Symphony: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Literary Revelations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 8.

While von Balthasar has constructed a house that most transcendental religious

aesthetes cannot escape, very few engage von Balthasar without eventually remodeling.

One example of this is Christopher D. Denny's critical extension of Balthasar. To Denny,

one does not just behold a percept and through it that to which it points, but rather

participates with the percept. It is in that participation or performance that the form is not

only revealed but also appropriated for any given community[95]—likewise, Frank Burch

Brown, Alejandro García-River, and Jeremy Begbie[96] all of whom, in some way, build

upon, critique, and extend that which von Balthasar has done. In most cases, the operative

transcendental religious aesthetic seeks to place the transcendental—Beauty, Truth,

God—into conversation with culture, power, or identity. Brown's "neo-aesthetics"

exemplifies this approach, "which is distinguished by the attempt to take seriously such

complex aesthetic responses and judgments and to recognize the extent to which they are

an ingredient in all of culture, and not least in religion."[97]

In an interesting move, Brown takes a transcendental aesthetic and, placing it in

conversation with culture, argues that there is no pure aesthetic object and therefore

nothing outside of the gaze of the religious aesthete. In fact, he argues, many artists—

though materialists—seek to account for the "unknowable more" of experience.[98] In this

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[95] Denny, 275.

[96] Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993); Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

[97] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 13.

[98] Cf. Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Magdalena Maczynska, *The Gospel According to the*

way, a transcendental religious aesthetic focuses on neither religion nor art, but rather an integration of the two that has the power to formulate a theological ethic. And, in the end, that is the concern for a transcendental religious aesthetic.

Whether of the von Balthasarian type or the more culturally oriented approaches of Denny, Brown, and García-Rivera, a transcendental religious aesthetic is preeminently concerned with how either God illuminates experience or experience engages, appropriates, or symbiotically relates to God. A transcendental religious aesthetic, in other words, is theologically driven and rarely, if ever, operates outside the "reality" of God. This, of course, raises the question: Is the very idea of God antithetical to a theory of ambiguity understood as coexistent incompatibility? Or could someone like Brown argue that all ambiguities resolve in a Christian conceptualization of God even if not all are accounted for in a theological ethic? If God implies a univocalization of reality, then how does one account for a plurivocality in perception, and particularly regarding incompatible perceptions that are coexistent?

A transcendental religious aesthetic, in the end, can be summarized by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, who writes:

> Beauty is not an extra, it is essential to all existence. Truth or goodness without becomes dull, lifeless, boring, formalistic and cold. It is beauty . . . which excites and nourishes human feeling, desire, thought and imagination. It is the splendour of beauty that makes the true and the good whole. The magnitude of beauty in nature and in all human creation, wherever it is experienced, gives us a glimpse of the beauty of God, therein lies its saving power. In this way beauty becomes a

way to God and a manifestation of God at the same time. God's beauty is what draws us to God.[99]

I am not, however, interested in a transcendental religious aesthetic. If this section has done anything for me, then it has fulfilled an apophatic function. When I say religious aesthetics, I do not mean a transcendental religious aesthetic or an aesthetic that either starts from God, desiring to illuminate experience via Beauty or an aesthetic that seeks to explore a perceived fundamental Beauty and its entanglement with creation. If there is a critical unawareness in this perspective, then it is in the thoroughly western assumption (rooted in τὸ καλόν) that the beautiful and the good are somehow intertwined or entangled. This raises the question: Could one imagine an aesthetic that accounts for both sense perception and the philosophy of art that is not caught in the transcendental traps of beauty and goodness equaling a neo-Platonic unity, oneness, or God?

S. Brent Plate's answer to this question is a simple, "yes."[100] He desires "to see a religious aesthetic that does not take as its starting and ending point, Beauty, Truth, or God."[101] Turning my attention to what I call a material religious aesthetic, I will show how Plate's project differs drastically from that of von Balthasar's, how it relates to what

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[99] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed. *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 6.

[100] S. Brent Plate, "Inventing Religious Aesthetics: Word/Image/Body/Other in Walter Benjamin and Gary Hill," PhD diss. (Emory University, 1999); S. Brent. Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon, 2015); S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005); S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred," *CrossCurrents*, 62, no. 12 (June 2012): 162–80.

[101] Plate, *Walter Benjamin,* viii. This raises the question, of course, of why is a material aesthetic more appealing than a transcendental one? Though this has to do, no doubt, with the inclinations of the scholar, it also opens up aesthetics to new potentialities and directions.

I mean by religious aesthetics, and, finally, how ambiguity fits into a religious aesthetic that spurns the transcendentals.

Material Religious Aesthetics

If philosophical aesthetics (via Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant) at first asked the question of how materiality, sense perception, and the body related to the supersensible, reason, and logic, then this was largely forgotten after Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who transformed aesthetics into a discourse on fine arts. Terry Eagleton, though certainly not the first to recognize this, recalled the foundation of aesthetics as sense perception and began to hold that in conversation with aesthetics as the philosophy of art. Plate taking his cue from Eagleton, raises this strange history of aesthetics and argues that a religious—as opposed to theological—aesthetic should account for both materiality and semiotics, for both experience and idea.

In this way, a religious aesthetic should be concerned with what Plate calls the "skinscape" or that liminal space between *aesthetica naturalis* and *aesthetica artificialis*.[102] Going back to his dissertation, Plate conceives of a different aesthetics, one

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[102] "Aesthetics" can be defined in two ways: one, aesthetics is sensory perception (things perceived) and is distinct from conceptual knowledge (things known). Two, aesthetics is the philosophical study of style, art, beauty, and taste. The former is considered to be *aesthetica naturalis*, while the latter is considered to be *aesthetica artificialis*. By "religious aesthetics," I am relying on Plate's definition and understanding of how religion and aesthetics are mutually informing. In one sense, aesthetics focuses on how we perceive and create our worlds through sense perception, which is then responsible for the formation of community and society. Here Plate sees the dialectic between *naturalis* and *artificialis*— between embodiment and objects/arts—as forming an originary point for the study of religion. How? Because "fundamental to this," Plate writes, "is the contention that sense perception is a central point of mediation for the reception, creation, and reproduction of social-sacred space." A religious aesthetics then is that which focuses on the liminal space between the dialectic of *naturalis* and *artificialis* and, from that vantage point, analyzes religious worlds. Likewise, by an "invented religious aesthetics," Plate means that which is informed by Walter Benjamin's anti-beauty aesthetic that focuses on fragments and interconnection over transcendentals and individual contemplation. S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred," *Crosscurrents* 62, no. 2 (2012): 167–8; S. Brent Plate, "Inventing Religious Aesthetics: Word/Image/Body/Other in Walter Benjamin and Gary Hill," *PhD dissertation*

that does not rely on transcendence and representation. His key concerns are the way the

"body perceives the words and images of the world, and the way these bodily perceptions

interact with other human bodies."[103] He accomplishes this shift away from

transcendental aesthetics and towards material aesthetics by closely examining Walter

Benjamin's insistence that aesthetics should concern itself with communal dispersal (the

theater) rather than the disembodied consciousness of a single individual (the novel).

Materialist in orientation, Plate writes of Benjamin:

> Once in the realm of the corporeal, the emphasis on the aesthetics of the single
> individual is shifted outward to the aesthetic interaction in and between others.
> Among these 'other' interactions are the interactions between word and images,
> between bodies and technology, between words and technology, or between
> others.[104]

This move towards materiality and the body is necessarily away from the beauty

and goodness of τὸ καλόν. Instead of beauty, there is only fragment. Instead of the neo-

Platonic good, there is only movement (like that of Lucretius). While he changes the

name throughout his career, Plate begins by calling his material aesthetic, "an invented

religious aesthetic."[105] It is that which emphasizes interconnection and is beyond the

individual logocentric self. Aesthetics, in Plate's reading of Benjamin, is about taking the

world apart, rummaging through its ruins, and putting it back together in creative ways.[106]

This would suggest an inventive approach to studying religion, one that would pull

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(Emory University, 1999).

[103] Plate, *Inventing*, 1.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

traditions apart and put them back together in new ways. This is an allegorical model (as opposed to a symbolic) and viewed as a "process of demythologizing and remythologizing without a final stable order."[107]

The shift away from Beauty, Truth, or God then—a transcendental religious aesthetic—is towards a materiality, which leaves open the possibility for that which is "mystical."[108] Plate's aesthetic is not an arche, but only "one fertile field from which to begin."[109] Plate grounds aesthetic experience "in an-other place: in a dialectic between material culture and the human creative activities of religious practice."[110] This "other place" is, of course, Plate's skinscape, wherein natural aesthetics deals with cognition and perception while artificial aesthetics deals with medium and message. "The skinscape of religion," he writes, "stands at the crux of the matter, the heart of religion: it happens at in-between, mediated places. From this focal point, it unfolds outward to become the foundation stone in the construction of social-sacred space."[111]

Where there is an overlap between Plate's position and mine is in considering the skinscape as an instantiation of ambiguity. Plate's aesthetic, in other words, both highlights and accounts for plurivocality—in distinction to von Balthasar's univocality—

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[107] Plate, Walter Benjamin, 79.

[108] Cf. Mary Dunn, "What Really Happened: Radical Empiricism and the Historian of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 881–902 and Tyler Roberts*, Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[109] Ibid., 3.

[110] Ibid., 4.

[111] Plate, *Skinscape*, 173.

in sense perception and meaning making. In many ways, it is an aesthetic that recognizes coexistent incompatibility, though by utilizing a different bibliography. The main difference between Plate's skinscape and my understanding of ambiguity is that ambiguity seeks to show how Plate's skinscape both arises and functions, while also going one step further in seeking to account for potentialities and the creation of new knowledge. Coexistent incompatibility, in other words, opens and extends that which Plate has outlined. Throughout this project, it is one of my aims to show this through bringing Eco's ambiguity into conversation with Plate's religious aesthetic.

In summary, and before I turn to aesthetics' confrontation with ambiguity, I have discussed both a transcendental and material religious aesthetic. I have shown how aesthetics turned from sense perception to art and from art to transcendentals (though this movement was never linear). I have discussed the entanglement of beauty and the good, and the desire for transcendental aesthetics to make lower-case beauty reveal the upper-case Beauty that is God. I have also examined Plate's insistence that this perspective is ultimately flawed and in need of a thorough revision. For him, this means not only accounting for but also starting from an encounter with the materiality of everyday experience.

This leads me to ask the question: What does a material aesthetic achieve or do that a transcendental aesthetic does not? First, I think, it seeks to do away with or at least account for injected narratives or what I have called univocalities. It acknowledges that, while we all have our starting points, when considering the construction of reality via sense perceptions, we can, at the very least, work from the ground up. Second, it

maintains that this ground up approach is inextricably linked to the semiotic world. Once

sense perception is received or the continuum partitioned, it nearly instantaneously enters

a semiotic or cultural world. A material religious aesthetic acknowledges this and seeks

to maintain a balance between the material and semiotic. A transcendental religious

aesthetic, however, often takes the material as contentless, meaningless, or empty in that

it only points to the truer reality which is revealed through form.[112] In this way then, a

material religious aesthetic is neither fully sense perception nor imaginative creativity

(cultural semiosis). It is somewhere in between, accounting for both, while—and this is

where coexistent incompatibility is at work—suggesting new possibilities.

So how does this section on materiality help me to define what I mean by

"religious aesthetics" and how does that better set up religious aesthetics' confrontation

with ambiguity? You will have noticed, no doubt, that I have yet to define the religion in

my religious aesthetics. And though tedious, defining what I mean by religion is a

necessary task, since I purport to be a religious studies scholar. If von Balthasar wears

religion on his sleeve and Plate's religion comes into play through his emphasis on

analyzing religious objects, seen most clearly in one of his more recent works, *A History

of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects* and his role as managing editor of the journal, "Material

Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief," then what exactly do I mean by

"religion?"[113]

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[112] Though, as I have shown via Brown, some transcendental religious aesthetes have set out to correct this.

[113] In both instances, Plate's use of "religion" is indebted to William E. Paden's work on religious worlds. William E. Paden's description of religious worlds are distinct from religious beliefs. For Paden, a "world" is a "descriptive word for what a community or individual deems is the 'reality' it inhabits." It is not something "out there" that we all share. In this way, a "religious reality" is constituted through mythic

I have previously suggested three things that I take into consideration regarding religion. One:[114]

> Religion is a cultural system or process stemming from the encyclopedia of any particular culture or language that, in turn, is negotiated or embodied in the world—an encyclopedia constructing and shaping a reality,[115] a reality formulating and informing an encyclopedia.[116] Religion is that narrative—wrested from the relationship between a culture's encyclopedia and reality—by which any community orders and makes sense of its world. It is that subjunctive, 'as if' reality that any particular community posits and embodies.[117] This understanding of religion is not meant to be a universal definition that transcends culture and language, but rather an emic category negotiated by any particular culture and language and that, within any framework, is both absolute and absolutely fluid.[118]

Two, I see religion similarly to theorists of implicit religion. In this way, religion is seen as one or more "commitment(s)" that intentionally nudge the secular/sacred balance off kilter.[119] And finally, "I am highly influenced by Mary Dunn's radical empiricism, which

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language and prototypes, ritual times, the engaging of gods, and the distinction between pure and profane behavior. "These forms of religious life, the forms of the sacred," Paden suggests, "are at one and the same time the forms of world construction and world expression." Cf. William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 7–9 and *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 7.

[114] Benjamin John Peters, "Reading Religion: Chivalry in the Alliterative Morte Arthure as an Instance of Cultural Negotiation," *Literature and Theology* (September 2016): 2.

[115] In what is becoming an endless introductory chapter on definitions, I should, no doubt, define what I mean by "reality." I will, however, defer to Umberto Eco and his explorations into both "lines of resistance" and "common sense." Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastiar McEwen (New York: Harcourt,1999), 54 and 133.

[116] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 66–80 and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 46–86. See also, Paolo Desogus, "The Encyclopedia in Umberto Eco's Semiotics," *Semiotica* 192 (2012): 506–8.

[117] Cf. Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

[118] Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?," in *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 38–54.

[119] Benjamin John Peters, "Telescope + Mirror = Reflections on the Cosmos: Umberto Eco and the Image of Religion," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 52, no. 2 (June 2017): 345. Cf. Edward

seeks to account for the 'unknowable more' that juxtaposes a multiplicity of narratives in the hopes of engineering an encounter between the scholar's world and that of her subject's."[120]

Taking these previous statements into account along with the preceding section, by "religious aesthetics" I mean, first, an aesthetic that distends into both everyday experience and the creative accounts of experience that humans manufacture to make meaning. This is an aesthetic that considers both sense perception and the poetic (ποίησις) arts. By religion, I mean something like the celebration (both semiotic and embodied) of a communal narrative that is *committedly* lived in the subjunctive. And, slamming the two together, "religious aesthetics" is an approach to aesthetic theory that seeks to account for the meaning making processes—the commitments and narratives— of humans, grounded in the everyday, but takes into consideration the unknowable more. In other words, my religious aesthetic is never a last word, but rather a provisional exploration into the meanings that humans create.

An Ambiguous Religious Aesthetic

If by ambiguity I mean coexistent incompatibility and by religious aesthetics I mean the provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans subjunctively embody, then one final question remains: How does the one inform the other? In many ways, this project is founded on that question, in so far as it seeks to argue

Bailey, "Implicit Religion," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 271–78 and "Implicit Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[120] Peters, "Telescope + Mirror," 345–6 and Mary Dunn, "What Really Happened: Radical Empiricism and the Historian of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84, no. 4 (December 2016): 881–902.

that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality. What I write here, however, is not exhaustive, but rather preparatory for what is to come. As I seek to answer this question *and* argue this thesis throughout the remaining chapters, I would like to stress that, one, and perhaps most importantly, ambiguity functions as a reminder that all human commitments are ultimately perspectives or equal centers in an infinity of meaning.[121] This is most true on micro or local levels that must be generalized the further out one goes. When localizations and their perspectives clash, then negotiations must ensue. But as far as ambiguity is concerned, there is *no* deferral to rules established outside of human experience.

Two, ambiguity emphasizes the need in aesthetics for both semiotics and materiality. While its initial point is often that which is perceived, ambiguity never eschews the cultural encyclopedia or that which makes meaning possible given any percept. Three, coexistent incompatibility stresses that all knowledge is provisional, and that the structures that facilitate meaning are fluid, procedural, and always expanding and contracting.

Finally, ambiguity is important to a religious aesthetic as I have defined it because it reveals, when it comes to meaning, that neither the encyclopedia nor the object is fixed. Both cultural knowledge and the ways in which I understand reality can grow, morph, and radically change. Ambiguity, in the end, is important because it asks religious

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[121] Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

aesthetes to pause before viewing the double slits and remain in the discomfort of not knowing, and then, when all light has passed, to consider the other, incompatible reality.

Conclusion

Never a fun or exciting chapter, the first part of any lengthy project both defines terms and provides a map for the reader. I apologize if I have droned on, but it is my hope that you can walk away with three things: an understanding of ambiguity, religious aesthetics, and the ways in which I put the two together. In summary, I have defined ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility, and am concerned here with the proliferation of meaning, holding multiple interpretations in tension, and the role of the reader. Greatly informed by S. Brent Plate, I have carved out a niche in religious aesthetics that moves towards materiality without eschewing semiotics. Religious aesthetics, for me, is the provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans subjunctively embody. And, finally, placing the two together, I discussed in the final section some of the ways in which ambiguity informs religious aesthetics. These were, however, provisional claims. I will now turn my attention to Umberto Eco's corpus so that I can better situate and understand his theory of ambiguity and the unique contribution it makes not only to theories of ambiguity, but also to religious aesthetics.

EXCURSUS ONE:

THE DISPOSSESSED: AN AMBIGUOUS UTOPIA

"But was not a theory of which all the elements were provably true a simple tautology? In the region of the unprovable, or even the disprovable, lay the only chance for breaking out of the circle and going ahead."[122]

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Introduction

Science fiction and ambiguity are strange bedfellows. Ambiguity is challenge and violation. It calls into question the encyclopedia and suggests new possibilities. But science fiction? It is escapist, low-brow, and better suited for the beach than the vaulted ceilings of academia. While the one conjures "art," the other covets profit. The purpose of this excursus, however, is twofold. One, to suggest that science fiction is one of ambiguity's strongest allies. And two, that an aesthetics of ambiguity transcends the work of Umberto Eco. To accomplish these two goals, I briefly ruminate on Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* and argue that ambiguity flourishes in science fiction's potential to comment on the present.

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[122] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. Reprint Edition. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 278.

"Where, then, is Truth? . . . In the hill one happens to be sitting on."[123]

Imagine a future wherein capitalism and socialism are entrenched to such a degree that both parties can no longer inhabit the same planet. And rather than continue their age-old war, the two agree upon a cosmic armistice. The socialists can colonize the moon to pursue their communitarian project, but at the expense of never again setting foot on earth.

Consider two-hundred years passing. Neither the moon nor the earth have been in communication. The lunar colony, having created its own language, cultural encyclopedia, and economic system, no longer considers itself the same race as those who inhabit earth. For the living, the moon is the only home they have ever known.

Picture this new world with all of its idiosyncrasies, differences, and assumptions. It is not our world. It is foreign and strange. It is a culture wherein "family" has no meaning and sex and sexuality are shared and fluid. There is no personal property. Individuality is frowned upon. And intellectual property is not a functioning concept. It is a society that is flawed, no doubt, but one that operates well for its inhabitants.

Now imagine a scientist on that world. He is a theoretical physicist concerned with the nature of time. Working on a theory of simultaneity that stitches together time as arrow and time as circle, he reaches out to earth. He desires to share scientific research, to learn, to grow, and to stretch his epistemological horizon. He not only learns earth's language, but also freely shares his theories. After a time, the scientist decides to visit

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[123] Ibid., 41.

earth. He hopes to utilize earth's vast resources in order to solve the problem of simultaneity. He is the first and only lunar colonist to return to the home planet.

While at first glance that which is violation, challenge, or epistemological growth is encountered when I read about the strangeness of the lunar world, I wonder if ambiguity is not better understood here as self-reflexive? My encyclopedia grows, in other words, not only when I consider the ambiguity of the other, but also when I consider how the other defamiliarizes my already given. When I listen to the other speak about my world and its strangeness. Ambiguity as novel then—but particularly science fiction—is about constructing a possible, as-if world in such a way that I experience or see my embodied, narrativizing theory in a new light or from a slanted perspective.

What is ambiguous here is not the foreignness of the socialist, lunar colony—though it is that—but rather seeing the earth for the first time through the eyes of the scientist, Shevek. In this way, ambiguity is a confrontation with the taken for granted. It allows me to conceive of a world in which things are ordered differently and, in doing so, critique my own ordering or arrangement of realty.

Science fiction as ambiguous, read through *The Dispossessed*, performs this task by creating a critical distance between this world and that. It breaks down the dogmas of the present and allows for the possibility of epistemological provisionality. By entering into an imagined extension of the present, I am able to gain unique insights into what may or may not be. I am able to play with choice and consequence, and conceive of alternate ways of being in the world.

Shevek then not only encounters ambiguity in his travels—that which violates, challenges, and questions his own encyclopedia—but he also represents ambiguity as self-reflexivity for his readers. And, on a larger scale, Shevek's genre is uniquely suited for strategically produced ambiguity in that it provides critical distance on the present and functions as a foretelling of what might be.

Crossing the Wall

"Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on."[124]

There is a wall that separates the lunar colonies from the moon's spaceport. Walls are enigmas, however. When one does not possess, what use are walls? And yet, this wall is more than its material. It represents, among many things, the boundary between encyclopedias, between the lunar social world and earth's. When Shevek crosses that boundary in order to travel to earth, he realizes that "you shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again."[125] To cross that boundary is, in lunar terms, to become a profiteer and an egoist.

Shevek is neither, of course. He his only hungry for knowledge and intellectual community. But his reception is less than he had hoped for. Befriending the ship's doctor, Shevek asks why the Second Officer is afraid of him. "Oh," the doctor responds, "with him it's religious bigotry. He's a strict-interpretation Epiphanist. Recites the Primes every night. A totally rigid mind." To the Second Officer then, Shevek is ambiguous. He is an

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[124] Ibid., 1.

[125] Ibid., 54.

event that challenges his encyclopedic arrangement, his narrativizing theory. Recognizing

this, the Second Officer rejects the possibility for ambiguity as self-reflexive. He rejects

provisionality. This prompts Shevek to ask: "So he [,the Second Officer,] sees me—

how?"

> 'As a dangerous atheist.'
> 'An atheist! Why?'
> 'Why, because you're [from the lunar colony], Anarres—there's no religion on Anarres.'
> 'No religion? Are we stones, on Anarres?'
> 'I mean established religion—churches, creeds—' Kimoe [,the doctor,] flustered easily. He had the physician's brisk self-assurance, but Shavek continually upset it. All his explanations ended up, after two or three of Shevek's questions, in floundering. Each took for granted certain relationships that the other could not even see.[126]

What is revealing about this exchange is not necessarily the response of the

Second Officer to Shevek, but rather the admission at the end. "Each took for granted,"

the narrator claims, "certain relationships that the other could not even see." And by

"relationships," the narrator is suggesting, to use my language, relationships between

cultural units in either's respective encyclopedia, which result in a coexistent

incompatibility. For each cultural unit, Shevek and Kimoe not only have different

content, but also different interpretants. For both, <<Religion>> is not a shared cultural

unit, but one that breeds ambiguity, a confrontation with the other's unconceived of

referent.

For Shevek then:

> Kimoe's ideas never seemed to be able to go in a straight line; they had to walk
> around this and avoid that, and then they ended up smack against a wall. There

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[126] Ibid., 14.

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were walls around all his thoughts, and he seemed utterly unaware of them, though he was perpetually hiding behind them.[127]

And so walls return. Here, however, they are not separating cultural encyclopedias, but rather the potentialities of the encyclopedia—those connections that one makes leaping from interpretant to interpretant. Shevek is frustrated by Kimoe's inability to navigate the lunar encyclopedia but, consequently, is blind to his own inability to make connections from Kimoe's point of view.

But walls are undoubtedly a repeated theme in *The Dispossessed*, and later represent that which ambiguity must challenge. "Those who build walls," Shevek suggests, "are their own prisoners. I'm going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I'm going to go unbuild walls."[128] In this way, Shevek's encounter with ambiguity results in a formulation of the work of ambiguity, which is the shattering of cultural givens, while also facilitating new connections across the cultural network.

The Inventor-Destroyer

"Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who's got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A satirist, a man who praises through rage."[129]

The lunar colony is a utopia, but an ambiguous one. By that, I think, Le Guin meant it was not perfect. It was only utopian in that it sought to correct earth's flaws. In doing so, however, it created its own set of encyclopedic imperfections. It was, in other words, as human as its neighboring planet. One of the ways it failed was in its inability to

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[127] Ibid., 16.

[128] Ibid., 331.

[129] Ibid., 327.

recognize humor, satire, or any ironic critique of the socialist systems that it had
established.

Tirin, a childhood friend of Shevek, was an artist. "He was," in fact, "so funny,
and so alive."[130] He had written a play that he endlessly edited, added to, and adjusted,
but only performed once. In the play, "he was marvelous."[131] But it offended the
sensibility of those in power, and so Tirin was forced to live in the moon's therapy
colony. He was, after, a broken man. And what broke him? "The play broke him."

> 'The play? The Tuss those old turds made about it? Oh, but listen, to be
> driven crazy by that kind of moralistic scolding you'd have to be crazy already.
> All he had to do was ignore it!'
> 'Tir was crazy already. By our society's standards.'
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'Well, I think Tir's a born artist. Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-
> destroyer, the kind who's got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A
> satirist, a man who praises through rage.'[132]

But the question must be asked: Was not Tirin a free colonist? Could he not do
what he liked, reject what he did not? Could he not be the lunar colony's ambiguous
conscience? According to Shevek, no.

> 'The social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of
> striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we *obey*. We fear being outcast,
> being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more
> than we respect our freedom of choice . . . We force a man outside the sphere of
> our approval, and then condemn him for it. We've made laws, laws of
> conventional behavior, built walls all around ourselves, and we can't see them,
> because they're part of our thinking . . . [Tirin] never did it, he never could build
> walls.'[133]

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[130] Ibid., 326.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 327.

[133] Ibid., 329.

And so, according to Shevek, even the lunar colonies had an encyclopedia and a narrativized theory that they took for granted, as if. They were incapable of escaping that narrative, because it was muted, hidden away. It played in the background of their imagination, and disallowed genuine innovation. There was no room for lightness. Shevek recognized his culture's low tolerance for ambiguity, and understood Tirin's life as an unfortunate consequence of that fact.

Shevek was lucky, however. Even though he was also an innovator, he was provided with more leeway. But why? Because Shevek was a scientist, not an artist. "A scientist can pretend that his work isn't himself, it's merely the impersonal truth. An artist can't hide behind the truth. He can't hide anywhere."[134] The scientist, in other words, hides behind Firstness or capital "F" fact. Science strips *poesis* out of its narrativizing theory. It is not a making. It is that which is. But for the artist and poet, it is a different story.

What I see then, on the part of Shevek, is a strong desire to enact an aesthetic of ambiguity, which is the desire to peel back the layers of the already given, to question it, and to expose its *as-ifness*. It is a longing for a provisional epistemology. A knowledge that eschews certainty and dogma for process.[135] It is an acknowledgment that Tirin could not hide, not like a scientist, because he was responsible for both his creation and his choice in mapping a fiction onto reality. But what Shevek points out is that we all—artist

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[134] Ibid., 329–30.

[135] Ibid., 332.

and scientist alike—are responsible to and accountable for the creative or reifying choices we make.[136] I am, in other words, never finitely bound by my narrativizing theory.

The World We Know

"Is there no alternative to selling? Is there not such a thing as the gift?"[137]

Shevek encounters ambiguity and desires to enact it. He alludes to breaking walls, coexistent incompatibility, and choice. But he also represents ambiguity for the reader, the possibility of confronting that which I take for granted. Shevek, in his ambiguity, conjures a world in which things are ordered differently, which allows me to critique my own ordering, my narrativizing theory. Shevek, in other words, accounts for the self-reflexivity of ambiguity.

In *The Dispossessed*, there is Anarres, which is the lunar colony, and there is Urras, which is the capitalistic home world of the socialists. But there is also our earth, which is encountered in the climax of Shevek's journey to Urras.

Shevek flies to the home world. He lives there, learning the cultural world of high capitalism. He is confused and often missteps, but also stretches his own cultural encyclopedia. Eventually, however, he comes to represent for the lower classes a divergent social option, one that breaks down the walls of capital oppression.

Shevek, as icon, unwittingly starts a socialist revolution. In doing so, he is no longer welcome on Urras, but he cannot yet return home. For Anarres no longer recognizes him as a citizen. So what is a cosmic scientist to do? He seeks asylum at

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[136] Ibid., 224.

[137] Ibid., 344.

earth's consulate on Urras. Once granted, his discussion with the Terran Ambassador

implies a self-reflexivity for the reader.

> 'We are both aliens here, Shevek,' she said at last. 'I from much farther away in space and time. Yet I begin to think that I am much less alien to Urras than you are . . . Let me tell you how this world seems to me. To me, and to all my fellow Terrans who have seen the planet, Urras is the kindliest, most various, most beautiful of all the inhabited worlds. It is the world that comes as close as any could to Paradise.'[138]

That which is repulsive to Shevek, a high capitalism that strips its lower classes of

free choice, is a paradise to the Terran ambassador. A clash of narrativizing theories, the

two are nearly impossible to reconcile. Shevek's perception of Urras and the

ambassador's are, in fact, coexistent incompatibilities. Where the one sees greed,

injustice, and waste, the other sees goodness, beauty, and vitality.[139]

"Now," the ambassador continues, "you man from a world I cannot even imagine,

you who see my Paradise as Hell, will you ask what my world must be like?"[140]

And here, in-between sentences, self-reflexivity rears its head. That which follows

allows me, as reader, to encounter my world anew.

> 'My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first . . . We can only look at this splendid world, this vital society, this Urras, this Paradise, from the outside. We are capable only of admiring it, and maybe envying it a little.'
> 'Then Anarres, as you heard me speak of it—what would Anarres mean to you, Keng?'

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[138] Ibid., 346.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid., 346–7.

'Nothing. Nothing, Shevek. We forfeited our chance for Anarres centuries ago, before it ever came into being.'[141]

Ambiguity here is the question that the text poses to its reader. Is this the trajectory upon which you see yourself? This is ambiguous because it asks me to reflect upon and analyze my own encyclopedia, that which is taken for granted, and the way in which I have ordered it, my narrativizing theory.

Perhaps I agree with Keng, and I nod in approval. Perhaps I do not, and the notion of consumption is new to me, and forces me to rethink the choices I make now. For science fiction is rarely escapist and, I think, always about the present. It is a critique of trajectories, a foretelling of how a contemporary narrativizing theory might embody the future. But for that, I must approach ambiguity as self-reflexive. I must think, wrestle, and engage that which is before me. I must hold that which I know as provisional. And I must adjust, stretch, and grow my cultural encyclopedia.

Conclusion

"What is like," she said, "what can it be like, the society that made you? I heard you speak of Anarres, in the Square, and I wept listening to you, but I didn't really believe you."[142]

The Dispossessed is a narrative of ambiguity, clashing encyclopedias, and narrativizing theories. It is a work of science fiction, which is also a text of the present. It reveals, through Shevek, coexistent incompatibility and the role of ambiguity in religious aesthetics—the way in which I peel back the layers to understand the ordering behind the

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[141] Ibid., 347–8.

[142] Ibid., 345.

embodiment. It also results in ambiguity for the reader, in so far as it allows me to rethink my own encyclopedia, my own present. It reveals the potentiality for provisional thinking, an epistemology that holds itself loosely and is always self-reflexive. *The Dispossessed*, in the end, is representative of ambiguity's process and the alliance between science fiction and the aesthetics of ambiguity.

CHAPTER TWO: UMBERTO ECO AND THE MATTER OF TEXTS

The talking fresco was just a delusion and Ern had gone round the bend like his old man.
Or, on the other hand, he was still sane and this uncanny intervention was a real event,
was genuinely taking place there in the dangling loft about St. Paul's, there in Ern's
world, there in his life. Neither of these alternatives was bearable.

—Alan Moore, *Jerusalem*

Introduction

Umberto Eco has said many things about ambiguity. He has explained it as that

which "must be defined as a mode of violating the rules of the code."[143] He has posited

its importance as an introduction to the aesthetic experience that focuses attention and

urges interpretation. He has claimed that it produces further knowledge because it

"compels one to reconsider the usual codes and their possibilities."[144] And in *Kant and*

the Platypus, he writes: "The work of artists always tries to call our perceptual schemata

into question, if in no other way than by inviting us to recognize that in certain

circumstances things could also appear to us differently."[145] If this and the next chapter

seek to do anything, then they seek to contextualize Eco's statements on ambiguity. This

is necessary for a few reasons.

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[143] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 263.

[144] Ibid., 274.

[145] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 223.

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One, it usefully places Eco in conversation with other theorists of ambiguity (as outlined in Chapter One). Two, it elucidates the reasons why I think Eco's ambiguity is best suited to confront religious aesthetics. And three, it provides me with a foundation upon which I can begin to analyze Eco's use of ambiguity in both his theoretical and creative works. It must be stressed, however, that this chapter is not seeking to crystalize the career of Umberto Eco, semiotician, novelist, and literary critic. For that, you can look elsewhere.[146] This chapter, rather, seeks to contextualize Eco's ambiguity so that I can better wield it within the cross-disciplinary discourse of religious aesthetics.

That being clear, I will proceed by first examining *The Open Work's* essay on Information Theory.[147] Though often overlooked for other exemplary essays in *The Open Work*, I see this essay as the backbone to Eco's theory of ambiguity. Through it, I will show that Eco's ambiguity is not so much literary as it is a scientific ambiguity utilized within the field of literary criticism. After reading *The Open Work*, I then turn my attention to *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*,[148] *From the Tree to the Labyrinth,*[149] and *A Theory of Semiotics*[150] to contextualize further Eco's ambiguity

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[146] Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Gary P. Radford, *On Eco* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2002); Rocco Capozzi, ed. *Reading Eco: An Anthology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Peter Bondanella, ed. *New Essays on Umberto Eco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[147] Umberto Eco, "Openness, Information, Communication," in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989): 44–83.

[148] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[149] Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Harvard University Press, 2014).

[150] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

through his discourses on semiotics and aesthetics, cultural units, and encyclopedias. While I do consider his other works, these few are the spine of my argument around which his other works wrap as clarifying ribs.

To those familiar with Eco's work, the omission of his seminal work on ambiguity, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language,"[151] might seem strange. I agree, which is why this chapter is but a contextualization of that which is to come. To understand Eco's ambiguity, in other words, one must first have a general sense of what he was up to in his larger corpus. Once understood, however, the pieces of any specific puzzle much more easily fall into place. In the following chapter then, I will take up the Peircean lines of resistance as espoused in *Kant and the Platypus*[152] as well as Eco's edenic language and engage both through the contextualizing lens of this chapter.

If the larger argument of this book is that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality, then this chapter further clarifies not only what kind of ambiguity I am discussing but also how that ambiguity is indebted to the work of Umberto Eco. In this way, an ambiguity defined as coexistent incompatibility is best understood as one rooted in information theory, encyclopedias, and cultural units.

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[151] Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1979: 90–104.

[152] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

Information Theory and Aesthetics

Any time a scholar of the humanities reaches into the sciences and pulls out a convenient metaphor or analogy, you should be wary. I am. Why? Because there is no way that I can understand the ins-and-outs of another, highly specialized, scientific or mathematical discourse. It is enough for me to toil in the fields of texts, let alone the abstract worlds of probability, attractors, or bits. And yet, the revolutions in quantum mechanics, chaos, and information cannot be overstressed for our time. They were and are transformations of the modern social imaginary. We engage the world, think, and construct reality differently because of these monumental scientific paradigm shifts. And so, as I move forward, there are three questions both guiding and underlying this chapter, which, to thrust my cards onto the table, will probably go unanswered. Unless, of course, you find in the matter of this text that which resolves. One, is it enough to understand the implications of a scientific outcome—the philosophy of it, so to speak—without grasping its underlying mathematics? Two, must one get the science right to pull from it a meaningful observation? And three, are science and the humanities mutually informing?

Eco, too, feels the burden of these questions. "Some people will object," he writes, "that there can be no effective connections between aesthetics and information theory, and that to draw parallels between the two fields can only be a gratuitous, futile exercise. Possibly so."[153] His solution to this conundrum is to spend the next twenty or so pages proving that he fully understands information theory and its consequences—an honorable labor. I am in a different position, however. I do not need to examine either the

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[153] Eco, *The Open Work*, 44.

workings of information theory or its current scholarship. Rather, I need to reflect on Eco's version of information theory and how he employed it regarding aesthetics. For it is there, in the end, that I will find the roots of his theory of ambiguity. And so, by way of qualification, if you are either Claude Shannon or Norbert Wiener raised from the dead, I apologize in advance.[154]

To Umberto Eco, information theory "calculates the quantity of information contained in a particular message."[155] This can be summarized in a word: surprise. If I am told on August 4th that it will *not* snow, then I am being given a message with very low information. If, on the other hand, Channel 9 News tells me that it will snow tomorrow despite my past experiences, then, "given the improbability of the event," the information contained within the message is extremely high.[156] Information, according to Eco, is an additive quantity, "something added to what one already knows as if it were an original acquisition."[157] This fact, seemingly inconsequential, plays large in Eco's aesthetics of ambiguity.

Tied up in probability, statistical entropy,[158] and redundancy, Eco's information is a measure of "the levels of order and disorder in the organization of a given message."[159]

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[154] Should one desire to correct any errors that either I or Eco make, then she could do little better than James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

[155] Ibid., 45.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Statistical entropy is distinct from thermodynamic entropy that, in the popular imagination, leads to the apocalyptic doom of the cosmos. The former is, rather, "the measure of that state of maximal *equiprobability* toward which natural processes tend," Ibid., 48.

[159] Ibid., 49.

An act of communication, a message, is an organized system governed by fixed laws of

probability—a code—and is often disturbed from within or without by disorder. This

disorder is Eco's notion of entropy or noise, which he often refers to as "dis-order."

Because for him, disorder is only possible given a previously established order (even if

only an order of probability). If this is all a bit confusing, then you can imagine it in

relation to the rules of English grammar. In that case, the alphabet, along with its

grammatical laws, serves as a probabilistic order or a code by which any message can be

communicated. If I write, "TRLTSEE" or "TT/RLS/EE," then I have told you nothing,

because the given letters were not organized utilizing the code of a shared alphabet. In

order to tell you something, I must first organize my communication according to a set of

agreed upon probabilistic codes. Utilizing the same grouping of letters but within the

framework of our agreed upon code, I could also write, "LETTERS." In this way, the

code serves two purposes, among others. One, it is redundant. Given a set of consonants

(LTTRS), you could most likely guess at the corresponding vowels. Second, it reduces or

constricts possibility. There is only so much that I can do within the code that will be

intelligible to you, the receiver of any message that I might send.

If the order of the code is what allows any message to be understood, then it is

also what makes any message predictable. "The more ordered and comprehensible a

message," Eco writes, "the more predictable it is."[160] But the more predictable, and this is

key, the less information it conveys. Counterintuitive perhaps, but according to Eco,

TRLTSEE is richer in information than LETTERS. Why? Because the former is packed

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[160] Ibid., 52.

with surprise given our established and agreed upon probabilistic code. This is only possible, however, if you separate information from meaning. "Monday follows Sunday" is both clear and direct in meaning, but does not, Eco urges, tell you anything that you do not already know. It is a statement high in meaning but low in information (and remember, information is additive, it must add to something that you already know). In this way, meaning and information are related, on one side, to order and probability and, on the other, entropy and disorder. If you can, think back to Figure 1.2.[161] Like Caglioti's symmetry then, Eco's informational ambiguity sits at the middle point between these competing factors in any message. A probabilistic order allows for communication that is predictable, intelligible, and meaningful, but information requires a certain amount of entropy and dis-order. Quoting Norbert Wiener, Eco writes:

> 'A piece of information, in order to contribute to the general information of a community, must say something substantially different from the community's previous common stock of information' . . . [for example] great artists, whose chief merit is that they introduce new ways of saying or doing into their community.[162]

This transitions Eco out of information theory and into the application of information to aesthetics and, ultimately, to aesthetics as sense perception. In regards to the former, ambiguity in an aesthetic message—like a poem or novel—is the result of the "deliberate 'dis-ordering' of the code . . . precisely in order to violate that system of laws and determinations which make up the code."[163] When encountering an aesthetic message

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[161] Cf. Chapter One, 22.

[162] Ibid., 53.

[163] Ibid., 66.

then, you are confronting a message that deliberately violates or questions "the very order—order *as system of probability*—to which it refers."[164] In this way, a poetic message is also high in entropy, as it accounts for equiprobability in meaning.

As an example of this, consider W. Scott Howard's "Ember Amen," a poetic text that intentionally calls into question the probabilistic code of the English language, while simultaneously reminding its readers that all languages are codes.[165] The effect is heightened by the juxtaposition of the poetic text with its rendering in Morse code. In both cases, the text is pregnant with information, and particularly for one (like me) who does not know Morse code. To read the first line of the English text, however, is an exercise in information as surprise.

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[164] Ibid.

[165] W. Scott Howard, "Ember Amen," *Spinnakers* (Boulder, CO: The Lune, 2016), 14–15. For the full effect of the poem, I have included a copy of the poem and its opposite page as fig. 2.1.

Ember Amen

In the edges of visible things silent islets reversible seed hinge oft

ego shift reveries raven eye otherself arias simulcast fie ghost

unmasked his open-access sidewalk prayer to breathe our protest a slim naked sum

that is life thundering heart underheard is it not here human as if this late

whisper still invulnerable should rise back-beaten present-borne no ship will rest

remembrance a splinter-thirst demand against wave-split timber arc ember amen

whose taste for woe what common cause oh first unsay unseen leap second waste ethos.

silent   ever

ove   as

side   breath

heart   here

rise   sent

thirst   wave

oh   leap

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... .. ·.. .   ·... .·. . .·· ....
.... . .·.·. ⁻   .... . .·. .
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· ....·. .... ⁻   .⁻ .·...·. .
⁻ ....   .·. . .·.⁻

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Taking the first half into consideration, "In the edges of visible things silent islets," I am confronted by a text that establishes the norms of the code as predictability. While it is clearly an aesthetic text, it still, according Eco's information theory, means. I can, in other words, understand it—on one level—with little effort. In the second half, however, "reversible seed hinge oft," predictability breaks down as the probability of the code is thrown off kilter. I am left "unhinged." I must—recalling the definition of spinnakers[166]— navigate what comes next with little reliance on the code itself.[167] The whole of the line, in this way, can be taken as information rich. Given Eco's aesthetic reading of information theory, I can say that Howard's dis-order is a disorder in relation to the order of the codes of the English language. The sense that *I* make of the text is one among many senses and in this way is, in accordance with statistical entropy, high in equiprobability. Packed with surprise, Howard's text both stretches and opens new possibilities for English and, presumably, Morse.

If this connection between aesthetics and information theory makes mathematicians cringe, then, along with Eco, I can claim that the information contained within Howard's poem cannot be precisely quantified.[168] And, as unquantifiable, information theory morphs into a theory of communication. "Information theory," Eco writes:

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[166] "spinnaker, n.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, May 2017): http://www.oed.com.du.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/186738?rskey=g3YhRs&result=5&isAdvanced=true#first Match (accessed May 25, 2017): "A large three-cornered sail carried by racing-yachts, boomed out at right angles to the vessel's side, opposite to the mainsail, and used in running before the wind."

[167] Ibid., 14.

[168] Eco, *The Open Work*, 67.

provides us with only one scheme of possible relations . . . as the quantitative measurement of the number of signals that can be clearly transmitted along one channel. Once the signals are received by a human being, information theory has nothing else to add and gives way to either semiology or semantics, since the question henceforth becomes one of signification.[169]

Information theory turned communicative articulates well the role that ambiguity—and what kind of ambiguity—plays in Eco's aesthetics. When Eco speaks of ambiguity, he is referring to the use of "conventional linguistic structures to violate the laws of probability that govern the language from within."[170] An aesthetics of ambiguity is concerned with rupture then, a rupture with or departure from the probabilistic linguistic system. It does not do this for the sake of rupture and disorder, however. Ambiguity pursues rupture to "increase the signifying potential of the message."[171] This results, conjuring Caglioti,[172] in an oscillation "between the institutionalized system of probability and sheer disorder . . . an original organization of disorder."[173]

Information theory is helpful in defining an aesthetics of ambiguity as a violation of the rules of the code. While this makes sense of aesthetics as a reflection on art, how

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[169] Ibid.

[170] Ibid., 55.

[171] It is important to note that an aesthetics of ambiguity is value neutral. It is neither better nor worse than other aesthetic approaches, which Eco clearly articulates elsewhere. What he is concerned with here is showing the particular aesthetics that emerged, within Modernism, from the quantum, chaos, and information revolutions. For other aesthetic approaches, cf. Umberto Eco and David Robey, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, trans. Ellen Esrock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1989; Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011); Umberto Eco, ed. *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010); Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

[172] I am aware that Caglioti wrote after Eco. What I am "conjuring" here is the first chapter of this work, not Caglioti's influence on Eco.

[173] Eco, *The Open Work*, 63.

does it engage aesthetics as sense perception? For Eco, the latter half of an aesthetics of

ambiguity is concerned with considering the interpretation of any message as happening

within a context. This leads to a "transactional rapport" between a percept and the world

of the receiver "that constitutes the very process of perception and reasoning."[174] The

world of the receiver or cultural patterns or cultural encyclopedia are not given, they are

learned. They are useful assumptions about reality that facilitate the construction of

reality and, hence, embodiment in the world. These cultural patterns—Eco does not refer

to them as an encyclopedia until later of which more will be said below[175]—that facilitate

cognition's analysis and integration of perception can be likened to a code. The role of an

aesthetics of ambiguity regarding sense perception is to create a space in which a given

set of cultural patterns can evolve, be interpreted, and exploited.[176]

Perception then is also seen as a probability in an aesthetics of ambiguity, in so far

as any percept is only a "temporary stabilization of a sensible configuration resulting

from the more or less redundant organization of useful information that the receiver has

selected from a field of stimuli during the perceptual process."[177] What is key here is the

idea that a receiver *selects* from a probable field and could, in fact, select otherwise. An

aesthetics of ambiguity as sense perception sets out to highlight that which is otherwise,

again, not with a *telos* of rupture, but so that any given cultural system stretches, grows,

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[174] Ibid., 71.

[175] Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Harvard University Press, 2014), 3–94.

[176] Eco, *The Open Work*, 79.

[177] Ibid., 81.

evolves, and, most importantly, is revealed as a selection. For Eco, the aesthetics of ambiguity results in perception being a "form of commitment" in that there are "different ways in which one can commit oneself or refuse to commit oneself."[178]

And with that last statement, I arrive back at Plate, religion, and an aesthetics grounded in materiality. Before moving forward to contextualize ambiguity within Eco's encyclopedia, however, let me briefly summarize where I have gone and how it connects to the larger picture of this work. Eco's ambiguity best fits into the category of scientific ambiguity. This is an important distinction to make because it alerts his readers to the fact that he is utilizing a different bibliography—separate from literary ambiguity's—to define his concept. He articulates, however, the shortcomings of using scientific metaphors and then explicitly states where science's ambiguity breaks down and the communicative variety begins. In this way, I understand Eco's scientific ambiguity to be a metaphor, not an endeavor to get the science "right." It is later, of course, that I will show how Eco's scientific ambiguity, via communication theory as semiotics, applies to the world of literature.

Eco's ambiguity—a violation of the rules of the code—has two important consequences for the study of aesthetics. One, ambiguity ruptures and then expands any given cultural code. Two, ambiguity highlights perception as commitment. In both cases, I can say that ambiguity is similar to Plate's skinscape, that liminal space between perception and our cultural representations of it. The skinscape, for Plate, is the foundation of the construction of social-sacred spaces. This is a little different for Eco's

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[178] Ibid., 82.

ambiguity. He would agree with Plate before extending the scope of Plate's skinscape,

for it, taken as an instance of aesthetic ambiguity, can be applied to all constructions of

reality, not just the sacred. In fact, or said differently, perception as commitment connects

to the discourses on implicit religion, wherein religion is considered as a set of

commitments. Linking Eco's ambiguity to Plate's skinscape then, raises the question: Is

all of perception religious?

Silly, perhaps, but this question probes the boundaries of religion[179] and the ways

in which it is utilized in cognition to order one's perceptions. In other words, religion, on

one hand, can be seen as a semiotic system or schema that is influential in the ordering of

one's reality. It can also be, through embodiment and ritual, the very means by which a

semiotic or schema is constructed. But in so far as one perceives an oscillating percept

and then decides upon a category to place it in—because of different schemata, embodied

experiences, or the creation of new knowledge—I wonder if one can call that religion as

commitment? It would seem to me that religion as perceptual commitment would only

work in so far as one does not confront ambiguity. Insofar as, in other words, one does

not have to choose, for the decision—through prevailing cultural forces—is already

made.[180] If ambiguity here is that which violates the rules of the code, then can ambiguity

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[179] A definition that includes all things, defines no thing.

[180] Cf. An interesting case is that of Saba Mahmood who had her liberal, cultural assumptions challenged while embedded with an Islamic women's group in Egypt. While she would have assumed that the women in question would have wanted to shuck off the authoritative Islamic discursive tradition, she found quite the opposite. Within this environment, Mahmood posed the question: must freedom entail action as a consequence of individual will rather than that of custom, tradition, or social concern? Her answer is that agency must be detached from the goals of progressive politics. "If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific," Mahmood writes, "then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance . . . [agency] can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment." It is important,

only facilitate religion during a conversion experience, at the height of code breaking? In many ways, this question aligns with contemporary concerns in ambiguity theory as described by Winkler.[181] The question there is where does ambiguity occur, in the production or perception of a given percept?[182]

I have veered a little too far, though not for the purpose of digression. The questions that are here raised will be answered as I move into a fuller contextualization of Eco's ambiguity. As I now turn my attention to Eco's encyclopedia, I ask that you keep in mind Plate's skinscape, religion as commitment, and, of course, my own definition of ambiguity—coexistent incompatibility.

THE COMPOSER

II

DILESTKY: But you have to understand, what Martynov did was unheard of. No one expected it. Why? That's the question. Why invent only to destroy?

ABERNATHY: And you don't have a good answer to that question?

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she continues, to account for a desire that submits to recognized authority. Regarding ambiguity, this poses an interesting question. Can a violation of the rules of the code result in a reification of tradition? As far as Eco is concerned, the answer is no. In Mahmood's case, the ambiguity is present not in her subjects of study, but within her own shift towards a critique of her liberal, free, and Western position. Ambiguity, in other words, must violate the code and, in doing so, open it up to new possibilities. It cannot reject that which is new in favor of tradition. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 14–15.

[181] Cf. Chapter One, 19.

[182] Winkler, 17–8.

DILESTKY: No. Not really. I researched. Compiled. But could never answer that most basic question, at least not fully. Kseniya thought she had an answer, but it was ultimately of little worth.

ABERNATHY: Martynov's daughter?

DILESTKY: Granddaughter. His only living relative still alive when I was conducting my research. According to her, he knew his ability to compose was derivative. Perhaps it was the anxiety of influence, as one of yours says. And who could blame him. Korsakov. Stravinsky. Borodin. Men of genius. Who would want to follow them?

And so Kseniya, her idea, was that Martynov sought to be remembered the only way he could—through infamy. But that doesn't make sense, you see? By all accounts, it really was the most beautiful, and beautifully structured, composition in history. Rubinstein was there. You can still find his journal online, circulating the conspiracy websites.

ABERNATHY: Yes. I read that. "An unknown force," he wrote, "illuminated by the Creator." Strong words, no doubt. But everyone spoke that way. Religion and art were mixed up back then.

DILESTKY: Ah, but aren't they still. We have a different palate today, no doubt, but it is neither better nor worse. It only is. Rubinstein was a critic with no vested interest in Martynov. Why lie?

ABERNATHY: That is the question, isn't it? But if there was one loophole in your book, and forgive me for being so blunt, then it is certainly the question of memory.

DILESTKY: I see you've read Thomson. He hated my book. Perhaps people only remembered it that way, perhaps it was the act and not the music they recalled.

ABERNATHY: Compelling.

DILESTKY: But wrong. We all order our experiences, file them away. And memory, no doubt, participates in that ordering. It even manipulates it. That cannot be refuted. But to say that an entire audience remembered the thing in only one way or even participated in some kind of musical hoax is just silly.

ABERNATHY: So if you disagree with Kseniya and Thomson, then what is your theory?

DILESTKY: You read my book. It is a simple thing, really. Martynov preceded Bulgakov.

ABERNATHY: "Manuscripts don't burn."

DILESTKY: It's better in Russian, but, yes, that's the gist. Compositions are an arrangement of time, an ordering of experience. That's all that music is. And that's the question that Martynov was examining. Can time, once ordered and arranged, be undone? Can the work exist without the artifact?

ABERNATHY: Look, I see what you're saying, but it's a bit naïve. Without the thing—

DILESTKY: Without the thing we have only the symbol. But symbols matter, as much as the thing. Music is a created order related to the dynamics of the material world. They run in parallel, mutually informing one another.

But you have to remember, Martynov's Russia was not your America. You believed in the power of something as simple as a flag. In Russia, it was a different story.

Chernyshevskii spread his grand materialism, before he was banished to Siberia, by touting the power of the object. Martynov was trying to transcend that, to say something about the inescapable more.

Look, you're a writer?

ABERNATHY: Yes.

DILESTKY: Have you ever read a book and been so deeply moved by its resonance that you asked yourself—resonance with what?

ABERNATHY: Not in those words, no, but I understand what you're saying.

DILESTKY: And perhaps that's the mystery of art. It's a thing, but not a thing. It's an ordering, but not for all time. It shapes reality, but not the reality into which it was given. It is both thing and not thing.

ABERNATHY: A paradox of positivism, then?

DILESTKY: You might say that, yes. But I prefer to think of Martynov's gesture as a window into reality. A glimpse into the world as it is. The audience created the movement that they wanted outside the constraints of the already known,

a known to which they could no longer visit—and then they lived it. That was

Martynov's gift.

Encyclopedia and Aesthetics

In the previous section, I established that Eco utilized information theory to elucidate an aesthetics of ambiguity. He was able, in doing so, to define ambiguity as a violation of the rules of the code. From this, I posed a series of questions about rupture (dis-order) and religious aesthetics, which, via Plate, focused both on the percept and the order into which a given percept is placed. With Eco's ambiguity and Winkler's fourfold approach to theoretical ambiguity in mind, imagine stumbling across, for the first time, someone wearing a rosary around her neck, a hijab on her head, or a kara around her wrist. The object itself, the categorical schema, and the percept's signification, to both parties, all present opportunities for the rules of *your* culture's code to be called into question. Not only that, but underlying the encounter is the troubling question: Who, finally, decides meaning? Given Eco, the possibility exists that, upon sorting the object into a schema, the observer's knowledge about the world changes and grows by expanding into new, previously unconceived of territories.[183] The possibility also exists, however, that the signification of the object—the code by which it arrives at meaning— changes for the religious practitioner by interacting with you. Codes, in other words, are not stable, and as they change so to do the objects of which they make sense. Through Winkler, of course, another set of questions arise. Was the possibility for a violation of

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[183] Do you recall the first time someone told you about quantum entanglement?

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the code "written" into the object or did the percept's culture or promulgator confer

ambiguity upon it? Was the encountered percept intentionally meant to violate the code

or was rupture a mere happenstance? With these questions, it now becomes necessary to

describe Eco's shift away from the code and toward the encyclopedia of culture, and, as I

articulate what Eco meant by "cultural encyclopedia," I will begin to answer one final

question: How does my coexistent incompatibility differ from Eco's violation of the rules

of the code?

In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco begins his chapter on the

encyclopedia[184] by posing the question: Is a definition an interpretation?[185] This question,

for Eco, is at the heart of the distinction between the dictionary and the encyclopedia. If a

sign is something that not only stands for something else but also demands interpretation

(a sign is never a given), then the sign also implies inference or, better, Peircean

abduction.[186] Given a case, percept, or sign, in other words, I must find its correlating

rule. So much of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is an exploration of this very idea.[187] The

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[184] Cf. Paolo Desogus, "The Encyclopedia in Umberto Eco's Semiotics," *Semiotica* 192 (2012): 501–21; Patrizia Violi, "Individual and Communal Encyclopedias," in *Umberto Eco's Alternative: The Politics of Culture and the Ambiguities of Interpretation*, ed. Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 25–38; Patrizia Violi, "'The Subject is in the Adverbs,' The Role of the Subject in Eco's Semiotics," in *New Essays on Umberto Eco*, ed. Peter Bondanella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 113–126; and Umberto Eco, "Dictionary and Encyclopedia," *New Literary History* 15, no. 2 (2014): 255–71.

[185] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 46.

[186] Peirce's abduction is an inferential process of fashioning a hypothesis to account for a state of affairs. See: Sandra E. Moriarty, "Abduction: A Theory of Visual Interpretation," *Communication Theory* 6.2 (May 1996): 167–187 and Cf. C.S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Justus Buchler, ed. (New York: Dover, 1955), 50–156; C.S. Peirce, *Essays in the Philosophy of Science,* Vincent Tomas, ed. (New York: The Liberal Arts, 1957), 126–143 and 235–255; Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds., *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 204.

[187] Cf. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*; M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Naming the Rose: Essays on Eco's The*

dictionary, which aims at correspondence, direct reference, and difference,[188] ultimately

fails because it seeks to reduce inference by articulating a finite set of universals.[189] This

proves to be an impossible task. If *ram* means male sheep, then one is not only in the

uncomfortable position of providing a definition for *sheep* but also clearly identifying a

strategy for arriving at a finite set of what Eco calls "primitive" terms. Those terms, like

Platonic ideas, that establish a ground for meaning. This leads to the inevitable paradox

that "either the primitives cannot be interpreted, and one cannot explain the meaning of a

term, or they can and must be interpreted, and one cannot limit their number."[190]

Another way of articulating the difference between the dictionary and the

encyclopedia is found in *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*. Where the dictionary accounts

for analytic properties, those that are necessary and sufficient to distinguish one concept

from another, the encyclopedia includes knowledge of the world.[191] As an example, the

dictionary, under the heading "dog" would include "animal," "mammal," and "canine,"

but it would not "assign to the dog the properties of barking or being domesticated."[192]

Accounting for knowledge of the world then is one of the distinguishing markers of an

encyclopedia, and one of the primary reasons why it, as a cultural universe, is a useful

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Name of the Rose (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988); Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Adele J. Haft, *The Key to "The Name of the Rose": Including Translations of All Non-English Passages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

[188] Eco, *From the Tree*, 8.

[189] Eco, *Semiotics*, 49–68.

[190] Ibid., 57.

[191] Eco, *From the Tree*, 3.

[192] Ibid.

metaphor for a religious aesthetics rooted in materiality. It is, in other words, a place in which Plate's objects can be stored, ordered, and recalled.

Rather than correspondence, reference, and difference then, an encyclopedia "assumes that the representation of the content takes place only by means of interpretants, in a process of unlimited semiosis."[193] The content or entry into the encyclopedia is a cultural unit or "anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity" and about which more will be said below.[194] But suffice it to say here that the cultural unit <<dog>> is comprised of an entry, in my culture, that includes <<K-9>>, <<Snoopy>>, and even <<Snoop Dog>>, the American rapper.[195] And what of the interpretant and unlimited semiosis, both ideas taken from Peirce?

If a sign, according to Peirce, "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity," then an interpretant is that which mediates the "standing for" relationship.[196] It is "another sign translating and explaining the first one, and so on *ad infinitum*."[197] While this processes or movement of unlimited semiosis jumps outward from interpretant to interpretant, it is important to recall that this leap does

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[193] Eco, *Semiotics*, 68.

[194] Eco, *A Theory*, 67.

[195] Throughout *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco uses distinguishing marks to clarify that which he is currently discussing. //xxxx// is the object corresponding to the verbal expression /xxxx/, and both refer to the content unit <<xxxx>>. In other words, //object//, /word/, <<content>>. Cf. *A Theory of Semiotics*, xi.

[196] Eco, *A Theory*, 15 and cf. T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Albert Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010): 1–18; Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (January 1878): 286–302; and Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (November 1877): 1–15.

[197] Eco, *A Theory*, 15.

not tell us something *else* about the sign (which is the criticism that Eco leveled against Derrida),[198] but rather *something more*. To start with <<dog>> and arrive at an American rap artist, in other words, does not imply that I am signifying something else (even though <<Snoop Dog>> has its own set of interpretants). This movement, rather, tells me something more about <<dog>> by articulating difference and expanding both its contents and capabilities or, perhaps, the starting content's cultural purchase or world knowledge. To clarify, the interpretant is not the interpreter of a sign. It is that which guarantees the "validity of the sign, even in the absence of the interpreter."[199]

Getting back to the encyclopedia then, each entry is a cultural unit that is circumscribed by interpretants, a series of clarifications that is continually in flux. Through unlimited semiosis, I can begin with one cultural unit and, given a string of interpretants, arrive at any other cultural unit. This is not an infinite play or regression, however, but a clarifying process that tells me something more about the cultural unit from which I started. The encyclopedia that Eco describes is the universe of human culture and structured like a labyrinth,[200] which is "a network of interpretants" that is "virtually infinite."[201] And this is key, "it does not register only 'truths' but, rather, what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true as well as what has been believed to be false or imaginary or legendary, provided that a given culture had

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[198] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 23–44

[199] Eco, *A Theory*, 68.

[200] Eco, *From the Tree*, 53.

[201] Eco, *Semiotics*, 83.

elaborated some discourse about some subject matter."[202] Within the encyclopedia then is

both <<unicorn>> and <<gravity>>, the former of which exists and is true not as a brute

fact arising from experience but as a content unit within Western culture. A cultural

encyclopedia, in this way, can never be exhausted. In fact, "it is the sum total of

everything ever said by humankind."[203]

The encyclopedia then is the semiotic world by which any given culture organizes

its precepts (fictional ones included). It is flexible, fluid, and nimble. It exists as a vast,

ever changing network.[204] But it also, locally,[205] has the potential to assume a given

tradition, or a "that's just the way it's always been" attitude. When a local encyclopedia

seeks global applicability, an ideological bias is produced.[206] Though, of course, global

biases can and do exist. It is whenever an encyclopedia is taken as natural—no longer

dexterous—that an aesthetics of ambiguity rears its head. "Sometimes," Eco writes, "a

poetic text aims at destroying exactly our most unchallengeable assumptions."[207] If

information theory led to a definition of ambiguity as a violation of the rules of the code,

then the encyclopedia leads to a definition of ambiguity as challenging a culture's

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[202] Eco, *Semiotics*, 84 and *From the Tree*, 26.

[203] Eco, *From the Tree*, 49.

[204] Ibid., 37.

[205] Ibid., 52.

[206] For more on the many levels of Eco's encyclopedia, as well as the role of the subject within any encyclopedia, see: Violi, "Individual and Communal Encyclopedias," 25–38 and "'The Subject is in the Adverbs,' The Role of the Subject in Eco's Semiotics," 113–126. Cf. Eco, *From the Tree*, 70–4.

[207] Eco, *Semiotics*, 85 and *From the Tree*, 38.

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assumptions.[208] As an example, at least in America, one need only think of "The Laramie Project,"[209] "Brokeback Mountain,"[210] or "Angels in America"[211] in reference to the cultural units <<love>>, <<marriage>>, or <<deviant>>.[212]

You will notice, no doubt, that just I committed the cardinal sin of academia. I cited Wikipedia. Why? Because it is the closest material artifact that we have to Eco's global encyclopedia. It is a network of cultural units and interpretants (hyperlinks) that is in constant flux and, at any given time, represents a sum of our *cultural*, as opposed to specialized, knowledge. It is that to which we defer and, in many ways, abdicate our cultural knowing.[213] Do I, in other words, have to know what "The Demi-Virgin" is or can I leave it to Wikipedia to store the cultural knowledge that awaits my recall?[214] With a mission to gather all recorded knowledge then,[215] Wikipedia is a cultural encyclopedia

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[208] Eco, *From the Tree*, 62.

[209] Wikipedia contributors, "The Laramie Project," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Laramie_Project (Accessed June 2, 2017).

[210] Wikipedia contributors, "Brokeback Mountain," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brokeback_Mountain (Accessed June 2, 2017).

[211] Wikipedia contributors, "Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angels_in_America:_A_Gay_Fantasia_on_National_Themes (Accessed June 2, 2017).

[212] To be clear, I am not calling homosexuals "deviant," but rather articulating how an encounter with an aesthetic text has the potential to break one out of a cultural paradigm in which "deviance" is equated with the LGBTQ community. In this light then, civil rights activism is an exercise in either breaking the circumscribing interpretants of a given cultural unit or creating new links that serve a more ethical end.

[213] Eco, *From the Tree*, 93.

[214] Wikipedia contributors, "The Demi-Virgin," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Demi-Virgin (Accessed June 3, 2017).

[215] Cf. Eco, *From the Tree*, 49.

that is dynamic and unstable. It serves as a reminder that "reality cannot be pinned down with finality."[216] This is true, too, for Eco's encyclopedia, which is both a collection of cultural experiences and a schema for ordering that which is continually in a fluid process of movement, reordering, and emergence. It can only be stable upon synchronic reflection. It is an ever-changing representation of a reality that is, even now, recreating itself every moment—established and policed by a swarming team of contributors.

If I can imagine Eco's encyclopedia as a kind of digitized, crowd-sourced network existing in the cloud,[217] then each entry into that wiki is what Eco means by a cultural unit. The hyperlinks existing within that entry together with its disambiguation can be likened to the interpretants circumscribing that cultural unit. I can begin at Maimonides and, seventeen tabs later, arrive at "The Philosophy of Time." The idiosyncratic nature of this example, however, is that the tabs between the one and the other might exist as interpretants only for me. But if they exist for me, then they must also exist as cultural potentialities at which anyone, given the infinity of Babel, could arrive.[218] The encyclopedia as network or labyrinth, in this way, is moved through or navigated via conjecture, a series of idiosyncratic hypotheses and inferences. And with any new set of connections a polydimensional network of possibility is created that "does

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[216] Gleick, *The Information*, 398.

[217] And the cloud is, of course, a material entity.

[218] Wikipedia contributors, "The Library of Babel," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Library_of_Babel (Accessed June 3, 2017).

not leave unaffected the collective encyclopedia."[219] The individual, in other words, affects the global.

Moving forward then, I see two depictions of ambiguity thus far in Eco. One is as a violation of the rules of the code. The other is as a challenge to the assumptions of a given culture. Both cases imply, however, a dis-order or rupture. Ambiguity is an encounter with that which, though relying on a preexistent order (code or encyclopedia), allows me either to see something new in the preexistent order, an opening, or to create something altogether unforeseen from the matter of that which came before. As I transition to the semiotics of ambiguity as articulated by Eco, I want to suggest that ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility is slightly different from either violation or challenge.

The former is an ambiguity that highlights the superposition, if I can unabashedly borrow that word from the sciences, of an encounter with an aesthetic object. It is less a violation or challenge and more of an awareness of the potentialities of cognition and interpretation. And, as such, it has the potential to expose the rules by which any culture collapses, from a plurality, into a univocality. Ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility also re-articulates Plate's skinscape as not only that which is liminal, but also as a space of sought after uncertainty. It is, in other words, that place in which I refrain from judgment. It is the space of the blinking cursor on Wikipedia's search bar that beckons to an infinity of *a posteriori* possibility, in between choice and encounter, order and disorder. It is a hesitation in the face of potentiality.

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[219] Eco, *From the Tree*, 69.

Semiotics and Ambiguity

Eco's semiotics stems from his work in the theories of information and communication. His seminal work in this phase of his academic career is *A Theory of Semiotics*.[220] A dense and altogether difficult text, *A Theory* is nearly impossible to summarize, and, fortunately, that is not my present task. My purpose in this section is to build upon an ambiguity informed by information theory and the encyclopedia by further elucidating it through Eco's semiotics. While it is outside the scope of this section to attempt a general summary of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce's influence on Eco cannot be overstated. I will not, however, discuss Peirce until the next chapter. It is important to clarify, as well, that Eco's semiotics have little in common with Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*[221] and those who follow in that school. Eco's semiotic is thoroughly Peircean and, much like his theory of ambiguity, utilizes a different bibliography. What follows then is a short summary of Eco's methodology, sign-function, and sign-production, before circling back around to rephrase Eco's semiotics so that they more fully articulate his position. The goal is, of course, to help me elucidate an ambiguity of coexistent incompatibility that is informed by both violation and challenge.

"The aim of [*A Theory*]," Eco ambitiously writes, "is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of

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[220] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

[221] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course In General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 2009).

signification and/or communication."[222] Broken into three parts: the first deals with signification and communication or how semiotics is a useful methodology for theories of communication. The second espouses Eco's theory of codes. And the third clarifies Eco's theory of sign production. Neither having the time nor space to analyze all three sections in detail, I will instead seek to express Eco's main themes in each part. If there is an overarching contribution of *A Theory* to the study of semiotics, then it is Eco's insistence that a sign is not a thing—it is, rather, a process.[223] When I engage semiotics I am not engaging signs, but rather sign-functions. This results in a distinction between communication and signification, between "things said" and "things meant."[224] That which is a thing said falls under Eco's *theory of sign production*. That which is a thing meant falls under Eco's *theory of codes*.

The first section sets out to define what Eco means by sign-function, as opposed to the static notion of a "sign." A sign-function is realized when expression and content enter into a mutual correlation.[225] This is in contrast to a sign—everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else[226]—which is "always an element of an *expression plane* conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a *content plane*."[227] Given these distinctions, Eco claims that a semiotics of *signification* entails a

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[222] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), 3.

[223] Eco, *A Theory*, 152.

[224] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 316.

[225] Ibid., 49.

[226] Ibid., 7.

[227] Ibid., 48.

theory of codes, while a semiotics of *communication* entails a theory of sign-production. In other words, signification necessarily relates to the cultural code and the way in which I decode any given message, while communication discusses the various ways in which any society or person constructs or creates its signs. For Eco then, semiotics views all cultural processes as processes of communication or sign-production.

To clarify further, if a communicative process is the passage of a signal from a source to a destination, then a signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible. "Every act of communication to or between human beings," Eco writes, "presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition."[228] In other words, and in line with the previous sections, to seek to communicate is to assume that there is a probabilistic code or encyclopedia by which any message can be decoded or understood.

In his second section, Eco defines what he means by "code." If a sign-function is realized whenever an expression and a content are in mutual correlation, then it is a code (usually, if not always cultural) that establishes the relationship.[229] This is an important point for Eco, because he wants to make it abundantly clear that an expression does not have a referent.[230] It has, rather, a content, which exists in the code of culture (encyclopedia) and is realized in what he calls "cultural units."[231] It is these cultural units,

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[228] Ibid., 8–9.

[229] Ibid., 50.

[230] Ibid., 58.

[231] Ibid., 61 and 67.

he claims, that are "circumscribed" by what Peirce calls the "interpretant"[232]. . . and "provide the conditions for a complex interplay of sign-functions."[233]

Though I have already introduced cultural units via <<dog>>, it is necessary to reiterate or more fully articulate the cultural unit here. If //automobile//[234] is the car or object that corresponds to the verbal expression /automobile/, then both refer to the cultural unit <<automobile>>. While this example is straightforward, it is important to remember that the content of <<automobile>> contains within it *all* that *could* go into an exhaustive (perhaps infinite) entry into a cultural encyclopedia. It would include not only //automobiles// but also their interpretants or those entries in the encyclopedia that are connected to the entry on //automobiles//, even if only tangentially (think of the previous section's discussion on Wikipedia).[235] While the example of the //automobile// is in no way flashy, imagine the West's cultural unit or encyclopedic entry on //Jesus// and all the other entries that it might connect to. What is important to remember is that neither //Jesus// nor /Jesus/ refers to the concrete historical figure of the first-century Mediterranean world, but rather the content comprising its entry in the encyclopedia. //Jesus//, in other words, refers not to that which is "actual" but to <<Jesus>>, its cultural content, which is circumscribed by a swirling network of interpretants or other, similar entries (cultural units) in the cultural encyclopedia.

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[232] Ibid., 68–69.

[233] Ibid., 56.

[234] Throughout *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco uses distinguishing marks to clarify that which he is currently discussing. //xxxx// is the object corresponding to the verbal expression /xxxx/, and both refer to the content unit <<xxxx>>. In other words, //object//, /word/, <<content>>. Cf. *A Theory of Semiotics*, xi.

[235] Like when an entry ends with, "see also."

In his third and final section, "A Theory of Sign Production," Eco suggests that utterances aim to communicate and are, in this way, acts of labor. To produce a signal one must first isolate and choose an expression-unit and then connect that unit, coherently (in so far as it aligns with any given culture's coding or encyclopedia), to an expression-string.[236] While Eco's theory is far more complex than I have the time to discuss, what is important here is that his theory of codes (things meant) is in service to his theory of sign production (things said), which is—together—in service to his understanding of semiotics as a socio-cultural process. Cultural codes tell me what expressions and contents (cultural units) I can and cannot match up for the purposes of sign production or concrete communication. Though, as I have already shown, the idea of a cultural code is far more fluid and flexible when conceived of as a cultural encyclopedia.

There are three ways, Eco argues, in which a sign can be produced: one, by shaping the expression-continuum; two, by correlating that shaped continuum with its possible content; and three, by connecting these newly produced signs to factual events, things, or states of the world.[237] While Eco, in great detail, shows how these three modes of sign production actually function, I will limit myself to a few words about sign-production as it relates to the aesthetic text, after which I will stitch all three sections together and connect them to the larger argument of this chapter.

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[236] Ibid., 151.

[237] Ibid., 157.

The aesthetic text is a manipulation of the expression-plane with the intended result being a reassessment of the content-plane.[238] I speak, in other words, to call into question the encyclopedia. This "aesthetic sign-function," Eco writes, "is based . . . [on] a process of code changing."[239] In his mind, one can study aesthetic texts to study all the aspects of sign-functions: "It can perform any or all productive functions . . . and it can require any kind of productive labor."[240] What makes an aesthetic text an aesthetic text? The fact that it is ambiguous and self-focusing. By ambiguity, Eco here means "a mode of violating the rules of the code," which is rooted in information theory, or forcing the "hearer to reconsider the entire organization of the content," which is rooted in the encyclopedia.[241] Ambiguity, as I have already suggested, is both a violation of and challenge to the codes and encyclopedias of a culture. In *A Theory*, however, Eco articulates this by suggesting that what is violated or challenged is the expression-content correlation.[242]

Putting all three sections together then, I can say that a theory of sign production is communicative. It is that message which moves from a sender through a channel to a receiver. It is not yet a signification (a thing meant), as that begins only once a message has been received *and* begun to be interpreted. In this way, an aesthetics of ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility is interested in things meant or the process of interpretation

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[238] Ibid., 261.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Ibid., 262–3.

[242] Ibid., 264.

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after encountering a percept. It is only, it seems to me, concerned with things said when, along with Winkler, it begins to ask questions about where ambiguity occurs—in the production or perception of a given precept.

If Eco were to respond to Winkler, then he might do so via his theory of communication and the labor required to produce a message. Communication systems (things said) have rules for combining and manipulating those messages that travel from sender or source to receiver or destination. This is what Eco calls a "syntactic system,"[243] which provides a structure "to communicative acts that limit the range of possible interpretations an addressee can give to a message."[244] To create a message then is to participate in four types of sign producing labor: recognition, ostension, replica, and invention. I am here, however, only concerned with the latter.[245] Invention relates to a producer of a sign-function choosing "a new way of organizing existing expression units" and then seeking to make her new way of correlation acceptable.[246] When it comes to ambiguity then, the labor of invention proposes novel ways of cultural organization. In Winkler's language, this means that Echian ambiguity when considered as an act of communication is that which is strategically produced, which potentially enables the

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[243] Eco, *A Theory*, 49.

[244] Ibid.

[245] Recognition relates to a pre-existing and coded physical correlation. Ostention relates to taking an object as an example of the class of which it is a member. Replica relates to referring "to items that can be replicated and intentionally produced and reproduced in order to signify." These can be phonemes and morphemes or flags and musical notes. See, Radford, 54.

[246] Ibid.

receiver to "view the world in a way different from the standard ways of viewing."[247] This is akin to Victor Shklovsky's defamiliarization[248] and is a deliberate violation and challenge to bring attention both to the nature of the code and encyclopedia.[249]

This leads me to the final piece of this chapter's puzzle regarding Eco's ambiguity. As an introduction to the aesthetic experience, it produces further knowledge because it "compels one to reconsider the usual codes and their possibilities."[250] This "further knowledge" is ascertained by what Eco calls "aesthetic abduction," proposing tentative codes—what I previously referred to as conjecture—to make the author's message understandable but which the reader will not know directly.[251] In other words, I have codes out of which I operate. I take these codes for granted. From these codes, messages are produced, received, embodied, and reified, only to be once again produced. This is the process of culture as Eco envisions it, a process, however, that can be arrested, interrogated, and restructured through ambiguity. And it is through the latter process that any given cultural code or encyclopedia can be rearranged or interrogated, and then said to have produced a knowledge that was previously unthinkable.

If I can make one further distinction or clarifying remark regarding ambiguity's potential for the creation of further knowledge, then it comes in the guise of ideology.

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[247] Ibid.

[248] Victor Shklovsky, "Art As Technique," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 2006), 775–84.

[249] Cf. Radford, 55.

[250] Eco, *A Theory*, 274.

[251] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 140.

The messages that any sign producer constructs propagates what Eco calls "coded ideologies," which are the labors of "selecting and preferring one worldview over another."[252] Ideological labor is a difficult work that "has to be actively performed on a potentially problematic reality."[253] If I am dissatisfied with the current state of the political order, then I could labor to confer an alternate view of the world upon that which I see, which would allow me to generate my privileged interpretation over against others. But, according to Eco, an ideological interpretation is always *a partial interpretation* of the world.[254] It is a message that starts with a factual description "and then tries to justify it theoretically, gradually being accepted by society through a process of overcoding."[255]

Perhaps I can say it this way: Ideologies force a particular reading (univocality) while ambiguity allows for possible readings (plurivocality). This is, of course, what interests me the most in the notion of an aesthetics of ambiguity, which, given a "text" or percept, creates a liminal space of possibility—readings and interpretations that not only violate, challenge, and create further knowledge, but also account for, by arresting judgment, coexistent incompatibility—the infinite probability of an uncollapsed superposition.

Conclusion

Information theory defined ambiguity as a violation of the rules of the code. The encyclopedia highlighted ambiguity's ability to challenge our cultural assumptions. And

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[252] Radford, 56.

[253] Ibid., 58.

[254] Eco, *A Theory*, 289.

[255] Ibid., 290. I will explore much further in Part II of this book.

the semiotics of Umberto Eco revealed the potential of ambiguity to create further knowledge. These distinctions allow me to delineate further what I mean by coexistent incompatibility and how it is both informed by but different from Eco's ambiguity. For me, ambiguity is a space wherein an aesthete refrains from judgment so that she can more fully acknowledge the plurivocality or potentiality of a given percept. It is an encounter with that which forces upon an aesthete the factuality of many, equiprobable realities. Ambiguity does not, however, provide a way forward. It is neither map nor guide. It is a hesitancy, a refusal to judge or, better yet, a position from which one can foresee the infinite possibilities of a possible future.[256]

Whereas S. Brent Plate speaks of a skinscape, a mediating position halfway between the semiosphere and the material world, perhaps I am articulating a nodal point in a network. From there, I can foresee the many, possible paths of traversal without yet committing to one over against another. All are coexistent but, once chosen, incompatible. A material religious aesthetic informed by an ambiguity seen as coexistent incompatibility would begin to articulate the possibility, given a set of cultural probabilities, that any percept potentially holds. A religious aesthetics informed by ambiguity would not view religious objects, rituals, or embodiments as univocalities. To do so, like von Balthasar, would be a labor of ideology. Ambiguity, here, is concerned with the ways in which religious aesthetics not only views or engages its subject matter as instances of violation, challenge, or further knowledge, but also as a coexistent incompatibility that has the potential either to create or highlight religious commitments

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[256] Cf. Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich, *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

and narratives as they mutually exist as polyvocal percepts. A religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity would not only examine this phenomenon but also those narratives that allow any observer to choose one vocality over another.

In the epigraph of this chapter, I referenced Alan Moore's *Jerusalem*.[257] Written over the course of a decade, Moore's novel is well over 1200 pages in length. Daunting to most, if not all, readers, his book was published to critical acclaim, being compared to both James Joyce and Cormac McCarthy.[258] Chronicling the life of Northampton's Boroughs, *Jerusalem* is jam-packed with many a tale sprawling from the middle ages of England to the not so distant future. Its protagonists are varied and, depending upon the chapter, tell the story of a Victorian housewife or a prostitute in the 2000s. Early on, Moore writes of Ernest Vernall,[259] an artist in 1865 commissioned with touching up the frescoes in St. Paul's Cathedral. It is no ordinary day for Ern, however, as it is the day he is destined—like his father before him—to lose his sanity.[260] "The fresco," Moore writes, "that Ern planned to clean up and retouch . . . was one that he was not familiar with from sermons . . . [he] decided to begin his restorations with a halo-sporting figure in the picture's upper left, angel or saint he couldn't tell."[261]

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[257] Alan Moore, *Jerusalem* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

[258] Jason Sheehan, "'Jerusalem' Is Alan Moore's Really Big Book — In Every Way," *NPR*, September 15, 2016, accessed June 3, 2017, http://www.npr.org/2016/09/15/493003885/jerusalem-is-alan-moores-really-big-book- in-every-way.

[259] And, as Moore reminds us, "A Vernall tended to the boundaries and corners . . . those that bent into the fourth direction . . . Vernalls overlooked the crossroads of two very different planes, sentinels straddling a gulf that no one else could see. As such they would be prone to certain instabilities, yet at the same time often were recipient to more-than-normal insights, talents or capacities," 428.

[260] Ibid., 43.

[261] Ibid., 55.

Beginning with the figure's clothes, Ern soon realizes with horror that the frescoed figure breaks "from the confines of its two-dimensional domain" and turns its massive face towards him.[262] "Jaw hung wide," Ern cannot scream, but only listen as the figure opens its maw and begins to speak an unknown language, but one that Ern can mysteriously comprehend.[263] And what does this figure, this aesthetic event now identified as an angel, communicate to Ern?

> It seemed anxious to convey instruction of profound importance on a staggering range of topics, many of them seeming to be matters of mathematics and geometry for which Ern, though illiterate, had always had a flair. The knowledge, anyway, decanted into him so that he had no choice as to whether he took it in or not . . . the lecture was expansive, introducing Ern to points of view he'd never really thought about before. He was invited to consider time with every moment of its passing in the terms of plane geometry, and had it pointed out that human beings' grasp of space was incomplete.[264]

When all was said and done, however, he came down from the rafters a broken, giggling, and sobbing man. "It was not as though there was no recognition there in his expression," Moore writes, "but more as if he had been away so long that he had come to think his former occupation and companions all a dream."[265]

Interpreted through a lens of ambiguity, I can say that Ern, the artist, was confronted by an artwork so overwhelmingly powerful that he had no concept space into which he could receive it. But, as outside of everyday experience as the event was, Ern could neither dismiss it nor pretend that it never happened. He was confronted with all

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[262] Ibid., 57.

[263] Ibid.

[264] Ibid., 61–2.

[265] Ibid., 65.

the forms of ambiguity that I have discussed in this chapter. An angel stepping out of a painting, clearly, is a violation of the rules of the code—in this case, the code of Western empiricism. It is also a challenge to the cultural encyclopedia in that, prior to this encounter, Ern could not have conceived of a corresponding interpretant for the entry on "Frescoes." Likewise, the confrontation with the angel created an opening so large in Ern's encyclopedia that further knowledge—new knowledge, in fact—was created or, in this case, decanted into him. But I wonder if all these interpretations cannot be attributed to the real and paradoxical encounter with a coexistent incompatibility. Frescoes do not talk. And, yet, this fresco talks. Given a choice then, a nodal point in a vast network in which all potentials are present because time has collapsed, Ern chose a path of non-integration. That which happened could not happen so, grasping onto his old categories, he chose a link in the network that led to insanity or madness. But, returning to that node, one wonders if perhaps there were no other, potential paths that he could have traversed.

As I previously wrote, ambiguity is concerned with the ways in which religious aesthetics not only views or engages its subject matter as instances of violation, challenge, or further knowledge, but also as a coexistent incompatibility that has the potential either to create or highlight religious commitments and narratives as they mutually exist as polyvocal percepts. A religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity would not only examine this phenomenon but also those narratives that allow any observer to choose one vocality over another. If that is given, then the task when analyzing Ern's encounter not only becomes probing the plurivocality of ambiguity, but also the underlying narratives that led Ern to choose one path over against another, equiprobable

path. It is also to claim Ern's position atop the scaffolding, circumscribed by a crumbling dome, as an ambiguous space in which the infinity of possibility had not yet collapsed, for that is the full awareness of ambiguity.

As I move forward now to discuss Peirce's influence over Eco and "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language,"[266] I continue to explore the question of what an ambiguity understood as coexistent incompatibility does for a religious aesthetic informed by materiality. In doing so, I move closer to a fuller explanation of an ambiguity that emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

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[266] Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1979: 90–104.

CHAPTER THREE: LIMITS, SURPLUS, AND CONTRADICTION

> "What a remarkably magical spot!" said Mr Honeyfoot, approvingly. "Your dream—so full of odd symbols and portents—is yet another proof of it!"
> "But what does it *mean*?" asked Mr Segundus.
> "Oh!" said Mr Honeyfoot, and stopt to think a while. "Well, the lady wore blue, you say? Blue signifies—let me see—immortality, chastity and fidelity; it stands for Jupiter and can be represented by tin. Hmmph! Now where does that get us?"
> "Nowhere, I think," sighed Mr Segundus.
> —Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*

Introduction

Echoing Mr Segundus and Mr Honeyfoot, I too ask: What does it mean? What do the infinite interpretants that lead to yet another node in the network illuminate? Truth? Being? Or less dramatically, things as they really are? If I have been arguing anything through ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility, then it is that there is no *one* reality. There is, rather, a multiplicity of possibilities that overlie one another and, at any given moment, an individual or a community makes that which is real by employing an ever fluid, ever dynamic encyclopedia. Another individual or community, however, could choose differently and, as a result, instantiate a reality that exists simultaneously as an entangled universe. What I have articulated then is two states, coexistent and entangled, but mutually incompatible. A recognition of this coexistent incompatibility is the *state* of ambiguity, which is also and often instigated by an *encounter* with that which is ambiguous in an Echian sense: a text that violates the rules of the code or an encounter that challenges cultural assumptions or an event in which further knowledge is produced.

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In any case, the ambiguous encounter reveals the state of ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility.

What I wonder and am, in fact, probing throughout this book is if it is possible to employ a non-judgmental aesthetics, defer the collapsing of any superposition, and remain in a state of ambiguity as long as possible. Why would I desire that? Because it seems to me that the longer I remain in a coexistent incompatibility, the longer I have to interrogate the codes, encyclopedias, and semiospheres that confine my ability to judge. And, as such, I am arguing that religious aesthetics is a space in which this non-judgmental analysis can take place. I am not only describing S. Brent Plate's skinscape, but I am arguing for a religious aesthetics that intentionally seeks to remain liminal—between the encyclopedia and the object, semiotics and materiality.

I must stress, however, that this is not a muted form of objectivity. I am not, by articulating the in-between spaces of coexistent incompatibility, suggesting that one can escape her encyclopedia. I am merely suggesting that by seeking to remain within the skinscape one can better reveal the systems and processes by which she judges and, in doing so, confront the ways in which the other orders and embodies her encyclopedia as an *equally valid instantiation of reality*. Ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility is not a way out of subjectivity, but rather an admission that individual and collective representations of reality are the sum of all that is—and furthermore, that those representations are not outside the scope of interrogation.

While this summary of my project might appear to be a full acceptance of a caricaturized poststructuralism, it is, in fact, no such thing. This chapter can be broken

into two parts. The first is not only a description of Eco's reliance on Peirce, but also the

ways in which Eco reconciled an ever-fluid encyclopedia with Peirce's Firstness,

Dynamic Object, and lines of resistance. The second part of this chapter is a reflection on

Eco's seminal essay, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic

Language."[267] This final section ties together the preceding chapters, sets up Part II of

this work, and argues that the state of *and* encounter with ambiguity are aspects inherent

to semiotic systems but also capable, à la Winkler, of being intentionally and strategically

manufactured. If this chapter sets out to argue anything, then it is that, even given

coexistent incompatibility, an interpretation assumes a *that-which-is-to-be-interpreted*.

This is a shift, in other words, from "To what do we refer when we talk, and with what

degree of reliability?" to "What makes us talk?"[268] I am arguing, in other words, that

there is something that induces us to produce signs.[269] In the end then, there is a thing and

I cannot know it outside the potentialities of my encyclopedia, which exist coextensively

with other constructions of reality. I cannot know it, but it is there, pushing back, and

instigating my interpretations of it.

<center>*Peirce, Eco, and the Sense of Sense*</center>

I have already discussed the ever-fluid encyclopedia and the way in which it

delimits cultural knowing, while also making it possible to produce further knowledge. I

am now interested in shifting back to the aesthetics of sense perception and discussing

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[267] Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 90–104.

[268] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 13.

[269] Ibid., 12.

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that which holds the encyclopedia accountable. If that is the wrong word, then perhaps all I mean is the *something* that catalyzes the creation of a cultural semiosphere. In this way, I side with Eco when he defines *Being* as "Something."[270] When I read a text and then interpret it, to put it differently, it is the text that causes or cultivates my interpretation of it. The text induces me to produce an interpretation. I am beholden or accountable to the text in so far as I want to interpret it and not something else. If I take that which induces me and drift widely afield, then I have not interpreted *it* but have, rather, used it. While Eco has discussed the difference between interpretation and use at length,[271] what I am doing here is clarifying the way in which Eco's hermeneutics were informed by Peircean categories and how both are necessary to understand an aesthetics of ambiguity defined as coexistent incompatibility and applied to religious aesthetics.

To summarize by way of an example, the text of *Moby Dick* has instigated countless interpretations. It is that *something*, in this case, that I could analogously call Being. I must, if I desire to remain faithful to that which presents itself to me, be accountable to it. If I do not, then I am none the worse—but I have not interpreted, I have used.[272] While I could argue at length the reasons why the White Whale represents a pink

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[270] Ibid.

[271] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler, Richard Rorty, and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Charlotte Ross and Sibley Rochelle, eds., *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

[272] Regarding sense perception, this seems true, too. One can make whatever she desires of a given percept, but that *poesis* will only have purchase within the encyclopedia insofar as her community ratifies that which she has judged. If the community does not ratify her meaning or understanding, then it has little chance of attaching itself as an interpretant to a cultural unit. If it does, however, then it has the added possibility (via ambiguity) of producing further knowledge. To put it differently, the community often decides what does or does not count as a permissible object/content linkage. For a critique of this position

pansy in the garden of Melville, I would be using the text and not interpreting it—that is, taking it as it presents itself to me. While the whale can signify many things, in other words, it is still a whale that instigates my signification of it.

Why digress down this little path? Because it illuminates the reasons why Eco so heavily relies on Peirce in both his hermeneutics and aesthetics. What follows then is a summary of Peircean ideas before I explicate the ways in which Eco employed them in his essay, "On Being."[273] For it is there, I think, that Eco most fully articulates his position on aesthetics as sense perception and the ways in which it connects to an aesthetics of ambiguity.

Peirce's genealogy is fully rooted in the categories of Immanuel Kant. After reading, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Peirce wrote that there is "a lacunae in Kant's reasoning."[274] It is this lacunae that Peirce sought to fill for the rest of his life. T.L. Short, one of Peirce's most well-known commentators, argues that Peirce filled this gap in Kant's work by addressing two problems: "to construct a naturalistic but nonreductive account of the human mind, and to explain and defend the claim that the sciences are objective in their mode of inquiry and in fact yield knowledge of an independently existing reality."[275] In this way, to single out Peirce's theory of signs is a bit unfair. To

as it relates to Echian studies, see, Clare Birchall, "Economic Interpretation," in Charlotte Ross and Sibley Rochelle, eds., *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 71–88.

[273] Umberto Eco, "On Being," in *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 1–56.

[274] James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 1.

[275] T.L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ix.

best understand what Peirce is doing in semiotics, one must first understand Peirce's

much larger, fuller background. I do not, unfortunately, have the time to place Peirce in

both his genealogical and historical context. I do, however, have the time to touch on his

major contributions to semiotics, how those contributions were in part due to his

continued wrestling with Kant, and how Eco has utilized Peirce throughout his career.

To begin, Peirce considered himself to be a realist who leaned towards the

empiricism of a nominalist.[276] He would, in this way, say things that did not always add

up. This was not due to any lapse in his critical thinking, but rather to his desire to

reconcile these two disparate camps.[277] In this way, he came to Kant and found him

wanting. "It is perfectly true," Peirce writes, "that we can never attain knowledge of

things as they are. We can only know their human aspect. But that is all the universe is

for us."[278] To fill Kant's gap then, Peirce would eventually reduce Kant's categories to

three—Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness—and make claims such as "thought is

internalized discourse" and "thought is inherently general."[279]

If Kant is one thinker that Peirce was fruitfully engaging, then he was also

engaging and discounting Cartesianism and foundational epistemology.[280] For Peirce

(and this is why he is considered to be the founder of pragmatism), philosophy must

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[276] Ibid., xv.

[277] Hoopes, 9.

[278] Robert Burch, "Charles Sanders Peirce," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce/.

[279] Short, 4–5.

[280] Burch, 60.

begin wherever it happens to find itself, not at some previously-picked beginning point.[281] "It is partly for this very reason," Robert Burch writes, "that Peirce steadily rejected Kant's claim about the *a priori* status of space and time . . . he regarded the structure of physical space and time as an empirical inquiry."[282] As Short writes, "Peirce consistently rejected Kant's claim that there is an unknowable."[283]

I can say, so far, that Eco picked up on Peirce's claims that, yes, all things are knowable, but that they are knowable only in their human aspect. This is, of course, the encyclopedia or semiosphere and the way in which it connects to materiality. Even if I am confronted by a thing, I can only know it insofar as its cultural unit allows me. While the encyclopedia's entry can expand by a challenged assumption that produces further knowledge—I am not indefinitely bound by the encyclopedia—the outcome is still what Peirce and Eco would consider to be a percept's human aspect. The encyclopedia is not a prison then, but it does facilitate the interpretation of that which confronts me. To fully explore this, I now turn to Peirce's signs and the way in which he defined Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

Peirce names a sign "anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former."[284] There are three parts to

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[281] Ibid.

[282] Ibid.

[283] Short, 27.

[284] Albert Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2010), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/.

any sign: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. If the sign is the signifier and the object is the signified, then the interpretant is "best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation."[285] This cannot be overstressed. The sign is triadic, relational, and significant (signifies) only in so far as it is interpreted. "This makes," Albert Atkins writes, "the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that, the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users."[286]

Peirce claims that all thought is in signs and, therefore, that the interpretant always comes before and after any given sign.[287] This conclusion has led many commentators to engage what they call Peirce's "unlimited semiosis." While it has become a theory that continues to be discussed in philosophical discourse, Peirce, for his part, later abandoned it. He did this by introducing the concepts Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness into his theory of signs. In other words, to point to the interpretant as that which mediates the sign/object relationship is to imply potentially that there is no ground that holds signification accountable. Without Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, there is no way, in Eco's scheme at least, to delineate between use and interpretation.

If a sign is a triadic relationship comprised of sign, object, and interpretant, then there are three kinds of signs:[288] icon, index, and symbol. The icon is a sign of resemblance. The index is a sign of causation (like a weathervane being moved by the

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[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid.

[287] Hoopes, 49 and Short, 34–5.

[288] Peirce later extended this to 64, but I do not have the time to outline each one here.

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wind). The symbol is a sign of convention.[289] Notice here that the sign is three as are the types of signs as are the three categories. Strange as it may seem, Peirce himself admits to finding threes in all things. In his essay, "One, Two, Three: Fundamental Categories of Thought and of Nature,"[290] Peirce reveals how his triadic sign, his sign distinction, and his fundamental categories are all interwoven. For my purposes, however, it is important to understand the role that his categories played in his semiotics and the ways in which the index helped Peirce to move away from his earlier idea of unlimited semiosis.

Briefly, Firstness is "the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation."[291] Following Peirce's phenomenological categories, I could say, "I *feel*. I feel *something*. I feel a *table*." To feel is first. To recognize it as some*thing* is second. And to name it as *table* is third. By recognizing Secondness or indexicality, "an immediate connection of [any] particular thought to its particular object, via which general concepts can be predicated of particulars" is established. There is resistance, in other words, in the *object that imposes*, which I must then make sense of and identify. All thought might be in signs, but signs are, for Peirce, material actualities that point any interpreter back to an object in the world, which in turn provides an imposing resistance.

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[289] Cf. Atkin, Hoopes, and Short.

[290] Hoopes, 180–5.

[291] Jan M. Broekman, "Firstness and Phenomenology—Peirce and Husserl on Attitude Change," in *Prospects of Legal Semiotics*, ed. A. Wagner and J.M. Broekman (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2010), 49.

I cannot know a thing in its Firstness, however. I can only know a thing in its

Thirdness or its human aspect, insofar as Thirdness is synonymous with the semiosphere.

Or, in other words, the category in which semiotics begins. As I have elsewhere argued,

the transition from Firstness to Thirdness happens at the speed of cognition, which results

in Firstness being that which I accept, am accountable to, but can never fully articulate.[292]

As I now transition back to Eco, what must be stressed is that Peirce's semiotics, taken

together with his categories, are hugely influential in Echian hermeneutics.

By analogy, Firstness is the text as it confronts the reader's encyclopedia,

which—via relation—is a Secondness. That which comes out of the encounter between

text and encyclopedia is a Thirdness or interpretation, but also a cultural unit that has the

potential to expand the encyclopedia, individual or communal. At the speed of cognition,

however, all that one can know from a text is her interpretation of it. Even if all she can

know of a text is at the level of Thirdness, she is still accountable—insofar as she wants

to *interpret*—to the text as Firstness. This results in viewing Firstness as that which

delimits or confines an interpretation. It also, when considered as an aspect of the

aesthetics of sense perception, limits any definition or construction of reality. While there

can be a plurivocality of coexistent incompatibility, all potential realities are—or should

be, according to Eco via Peirce—accountable to Firstness, even though Firstness can

never be known in itself.[293]

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[292] Benjamin John Peters, "Telescope + Mirror = Reflections on the Cosmos: Umberto Eco and the Image of Religion," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 52, no. 2 (June 2017): 343–60.

[293] This is like Eco's articulation of the Empirical Author, Model Author, Text, Model Reader, and Empirical Author. What I am showing is that those hermeneutical categories are rooted in Peirce's influence on Eco. Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 3–46; Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler, Richard Rorty, and

Transitioning to Eco then, how does he finally integrate Peirce's semiotics and categories into his schema, and how does that connect to a theory of ambiguity? To answer these questions, it is now time to turn my attention to Eco's *Kant and the Platypus* and particularly his essay "On Being." By way of an introduction, however, let me begin with Eco's own and state that *Kant and the Platypus* is his response to the academy's critique of *A Theory of Semiotics*. In *A Theory*, Eco begins by articulating the difference between Peirce's Dynamical Object and Immediate Object. The former, in general terms, is the object as it really is.[294] The latter is "what we, at any time, suppose the object to be."[295] In *Kant* then, Eco explains that the bulk of his effort at the beginning of *A Theory* was to examine the Dynamical Object as an aim or an end of semiosis.[296] After following the chain of interpretants, in other words, one could arrive at the Dynamical Object or the object as it is. Or as Eco would say, the object as it is understood to be as a cultural unit. In *Kant*, Eco tells us, his emphasis has shifted, and it is no small shift.

Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23–88; Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1–26.

[294] J. Ransdell, "Some Leading Ideas in Peirce's Semiotic," *Semiotica* 19 (1977), 169 and C. J. Hookway, *Peirce* (London: Routledge, 1985), 139.

[295] Ransdell, 169. Cf. Hookway, 139. There are also, of course, three kinds of interpretants, but they are outside the scope of my argument.

[296] Eco, *Kant*, 3.

The Dynamical Object is no longer an aim or end of semiosis, but rather its starting point or initial impulse. It is, Eco argues, the Something that "urges us to speak."[297] And this is where *Kant* begins, as an effort to

> temper an eminently 'cultural' view of semiosic processes with the fact that, whatever the weight of our cultural systems, there is something in the *continuum* of experience that sets a limit on our interpretations, and so . . . I would say that the dispute between *internal realism* and *external realism* would tend to compose itself in a notion of *contractual realism*.[298]

And what is contractual realism? It is the ongoing, cultural negotiation between cognitive schemata and signification and reference[299]—between, in other words, the encyclopedia and material worlds.[300] Contractual realism, to say it differently, is the very thing that Plate is after in employing his notion of the skinscape, a place in which one can analyze—non-judgmentally—the way in which the semiosphere and the material world engage, articulate, and change one another. It is, to use my language, the place in which semiotics and materiality are entangled and, as such, reveal coexistent incompatibility. It is important to keep contractual realism in mind, as I now move forward to express the importance of Eco's "On Being" for the aesthetics of ambiguity. For, and this cannot be overstated, it is there that I find a ground to Eco's "eminently cultural view."[301]

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[297] Ibid.

[298] Ibid., 5.

[299] Ibid.

[300] You might think that neither "cognitive schemata" nor "signification and reference" relate to materiality, but I would disagree. In the argument that I am outlining, the-thing-in-itself cannot be known as a Firstness. It can only be known, in other words, as a Thirdness. So even if I am discussing materiality, I am approaching it from an already articulated semiosphere or encyclopedia or, in other words, cognitive schemata.

[301] Eco, *Kant*, 5.

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If Being is Something, then Eco wonders why no semantic study has satisfactorily grappled with "to be." Setting out to correct that, he argues that there are three kinds of Being: an existing entity, Being, and the verb, "to be."[302] Furthermore, Eco writes, Being includes the past, future, and that which is possible. "What is," in other words, "is in all the conjugations and tenses of the verb *to be*."[303] This semantic approach to Being results in a series of ambiguities in language that philosophy cannot clarify and so, Eco muses, "may it not be that this perplexity expresses a *fundamental condition*?"[304] Being cannot escape, in other words, *aporia*.

Transitioning away from the *semantics* of Being to the *semiotics* of Something, Eco moves ever closer to that which interests me—Being and the artist. Before that, however, he takes his analysis of Being, semantics, and perplexity and asks the question from a different angle: "What is that something that induces us to produce signs?"[305] In doing so, he shifts the focus away from speech about Being and towards that which compels us to speak about it. Briefly connecting this to Plate and religious aesthetics as materially focused, I can only ask, too, should not all theories of materiality first ask this question: What is that which the aesthetics of sense perception senses? The reasons for doing so will becomes clear below.

In Eco's world, Being is Something, and it is the task of semiotics to remain somewhat faithful to that something in its articulations of it. How is that possible? If a

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[302] Eco, *Kant*, 11.

[303] Ibid., 12.

[304] Ibid.

[305] Ibid.

Dynamical Object drives us to produce a *representamen*,[306] which produces an

Immediate Object to a mind, "which in turn is translatable into a potentially infinite series

of interpretants," then sometimes, through the habits formed in the interpretive process, I

arrive back at the Dynamical Object and am able to make something of it.[307] I come full

circle, in other words, from Dynamical Object to Dynamical Object, and returning do not

find the Dynamical Object the same. It requires, in fact, another *representamen* to name

it. In this way, "the Dynamical Object always remains a Thing-in-Itself, always present

and impossible to capture."[308] Yet, and this is what is so important in Eco's essay "On

Being," the Dynamical Object is that which "drives us to produce semiosis. We produce

signs because there is something that demands to be said."[309]

It is important to stress that the Dynamical Object in its Firstness is not known. It

is, rather, the awareness of something. It is the "as yet blind decision whereby I identify

something amid the magma of experience that I have to reckon with."[310] The Dynamical

Object then is the "still raw material of an intuition not yet illuminated by the categorical

. . . First there is something, even if it is only my reawakened attention; but not even that,

it is my attention as it sleeps, lies in wait, or dozes."[311] One must be careful, however, for

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[306] Peirce's word for the signifying element in any sign. The representamen is every sign-like thing that is contained in Peirce's theory of signs. It is a blanket term.

[307] Ibid., 13.

[308] Ibid., 14.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Ibid., 15.

[311] Ibid.

the idea that I can understand that which stands outside of a categorical schema is precarious. While I can acknowledge a Firstness, and even remain faithful to it, I cannot think of it without first having organized it within a system or "the uncoordinated series of entities."[312] So yes, Firstness and Dynamical Objects, but tempered by Eco's insistence that "the moment it appears before us, being arouses interpretation; the moment we can speak of it, it is already interpreted. There is no help for it."[313]

While it should be clear how all of this connects to an aesthetics of sense perception and Plate's materiality, what I would like to highlight now is the way in which Peirce's Firstness and Dynamical Object are integral not only to Eco's hermeneutics but also his notion of ambiguity. Let me say first, however, that a religious aesthetic focused on materiality or a non-transcendental approach to perception must recognize the Dynamical Object as a thing that is not stable. It might start and end its analysis with the drum's role in any given ritual setting, as Plate does, but as it returns from the semiosphere to the drum, the drum's representamen has changed. It is no longer that which it was intuited to be. It morphed due to the chain of interpretants that any interpretation made of it.

To interpret the drum in any context, however, is to be beholden, responsible, or accountable to the Firstness of the drum—drum as drum, only known and mediated

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[312] Ibid., 21.

[313] Ibid., 22. Firstness, it must be stressed, is not some mystical, incognizable mystery. It is that which is as it is, but can only be approached from a Thirdness, the swirling mass of interpretants that comprise the encyclopedia. As Eco writes: "If philosophical questioning is to be kept open, we ought not to presuppose or postulate the incognizable from the start," ibid., 34.

through Thirdness.[314] To interpret the drum is to arrive back at the drum as Dynamical Object. To *use* the drum is to find oneself elsewhere, contemplating the sonic waves of a mosquito's wings. "It's difficult to tell the difference," Plate writes, "between one's search for the cultural-religious significance of drums and one's search for religions, and the role of drums within those . . . One cannot simply study drums without knowing something about religions, and . . . vice versa."[315]

And so, it seems, Plate articulates this, too. The semiosphere and the object are entangled to an impossible degree, and to analyze the one is to analyze the other. And what Peirce through Eco stresses is that if I set out to explore the role of drums as a material artifact in various religions, then it is my responsibility to conclude with drums as a renewed Dynamical Object—not something else, endlessly deferred. And what I add to this, of which I will explore more below, is that insofar as the Dynamical Object can only be known through Thirdness, two or more realities coexist incompatibly.

But what role does Firstness or the Dynamical Object play in an aesthetics of art or an aesthetics of ambiguity? Or, as Eco asks, "What does a Poet reveal to us?"[316] She takes on the ambiguity of language, the fundamental perplexity, and from it seeks to "extract a *surplus of interpretation* . . . rather than a surplus of being."[317] She seeks to reveal or redirect my attention to a Peircean Firstness as if it were not mediated by

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[314] S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 99–136.

[315] Ibid., 135.

[316] Eco, *Kant*, 34.

[317] Ibid.

Thirdness. A poet desires to crawl backwards "to persuade me to reckon with being," even if, ultimately, being as Firstness cannot be known.[318] This, ultimately, leads to a surplus of interpretation, which, utilizing Winkler's contemporary ambiguity theory, would point towards a poetic ambiguity that is both produced and strategic.

According to Eco, the notions of Firstness and the Dynamical Object result in an oscillation between two aesthetics. The first is that the work of the artist manifests itself in the non-concealment of being.[319] When I paint a picture of a pipe, I am peeling back the layers of semiosis and conveying the being of the entity as a stability of appearance.[320] I am, in other words, seeking to reveal a Firstness as a Firstness (even though this is ultimately impossible). The second, however, is altogether different. "Here the work is not the mediator through which [Being] reveals itself," Eco writes, "it is . . . how art makes a tabula rasa of the inauthentic ways in which we encounter the entities, and it invites and provokes us to reinterpret the Something in which we are."[321] If the former allows for Being to reveal itself, then the latter unmasks the way in which I construct Being, through the semiosphere, in the entities that I encounter. This provides me with a clean slate, so to speak, so that I can rethink the ways in which an entity signifies and the way in which I approach it. These are irreconcilable aesthetics. "The first," Eco writes, "affords a glimpse of an *orphic realism* (something outside us that tells

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[318] Ibid.

[319] Ibid., 34.

[320] Ibid.

[321] Ibid., 35.

us how things really are); the second celebrates the triumph of questioning and hermeneutics."[322]

It is the second aesthetic that corresponds to an aesthetics of ambiguity. Why? Because it asks us to consider things from a different point of view, "by inviting us to submit to the encounter with the concrete and to the impact with an individual in which the fragile framework of our universals crumbles."[323] The poet—an aesthete of ambiguity—continually invites me into the task of recognizing the constructions I make of the world and the way in which I embody them "as if" they were reality. Given this unmasking, new potentialities arise for creating the world anew from the matter at hand—a world not *ex nihilo* but palimpsestuous.

While this second aesthetic, that of ambiguity, is enticing in its potentiality, it also raises the question: what is the boundary between an ambiguity that is an opening of the codes that swirl around us and the alternative facts of political delirium?[324] According to Eco, the best answer to this question[325] is what he calls "lines of resistance," which is that

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[322] Ibid.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Cf. Aaron Blake, "Kellyanne Conway says Donald Trump's team has 'alternative facts.' Which pretty much says it all," WashingtonPost.com. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/ kellyanne-conway-says-donald-trumps-team-has-alternate-facts-which-pretty-much-says-it-all/?utm_term=.dd0d838686c9 (accessed June 15, 2017).

[325] There are many that could be given, however. One, the community of interpreters can determine a bad interpretation. Two, the notion that postmodernism's drift was not meant to destroy empiricism, but provide us with a better one (cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" in *Philosophers on Art From Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*, ed. Christopher Want and trans. Regis Durand (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 237–49; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). And three, common sense.

which is *already given*.[326] This "already given" is neither completed nor finished, but it is

a pure Limit or a pure No. Imagine pouring water over the surface of a coarse piece of

wood. The water falls into the cracks and must, without exception, flow through the crags

that are already given. "Wood," the water might say, "change the trajectory of the crack

that I am currently flowing through." To which the wood can only say, "No." To Eco,

this is the *line of resistance* to which even an aesthetics of ambiguity must account for or

be responsible to. And, as I now move to consider the ways in which aesthetic messages

are produced before concluding Part I of this work, I will end with the words of Eco, who

here writes of what poets do when confronted with a line of resistance:

> Of course, in the light of these resistances, the language of the Poets seems to occupy a free zone. Liars by vocation, they are not those who say what being is but seem to be those who instead often permit themselves (and us) to deny its resistances—because for them tortoises can fly, and there can even be creatures that elude death. But their discourse . . . brings us face to face with the immoderate nature of our desire: by letting us glimpse what could be beyond the limit, on the one hand they console us for our finiteness and on the other they remind us how often we are a 'useless passion.' Even when they refuse to accept the resistances in being, in denying them they remind us of them. Even when they suffer on discovering them, they let us think that perhaps the resistances could still be got around. What the Poets are really saying to us is that we need to encounter being with gaiety (and hopefully with science too), to question it, test its resistances, grasp its openings and its hints, which are never too explicit. The rest is conjecture.[327]

THE COMPOSER
III

"My grandmother used to tell me the story."

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[326] Eco, *Kant*, 54.

[327] Ibid., 56.

"Rubinstein's daughter?"

"Yes, he was my great-grandfather."

"And what did she say?"

Silent for a time, ordering her thoughts, Maria traced her empty ring finger. "Well, you have to remember, she was only eight at the time. Much of what she said was wrapped in the haze of youth. But she would often describe her dress, red satin, and the necklace that my great-grandmother let her wear that evening. It was 'a simple thing,' she would say, 'but wonderful. Six pearls in golden filigree.' Apparently, it was her introduction to society."

"And so your great-grandfather took her to Martynov's infamous burning?"

"Yes. But he had no way of knowing that was what would happen. By all accounts, it should have been nothing more than an elegant evening at the Bolshoi. At least, that's what Lidiya said."

"Your grandmother?"

"Yes." Maria sipped her coffee. "From her perspective, that night was miraculous. The world was abuzz, she would say, with the beauty of Tsarina Alexandra, and the mystical battle between Rasputin and Nilus. She would often speak of Nilus' conspiracy, but I doubt Lidiya, at eight, could have known such things. Telling me the story, I think, there was much she embellished or added afterwards. In fact—"

"Can I get you anything else?" our waitress, a heavy-set woman, interrupted. The clinks and low murmur of the diner flooded into our booth.

I looked to Maria.

"No," she said. "I'm fine."

The waitress nodded, moving on to other patrons.

"But what of the actual burning? What did she tell you? How did she describe it?"

"'The music,' she would say, 'was astounding.' It was like nothing she had experienced before. Ghastly, stirring, transcendent. Have you ever heard Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*?"

I shook my head. "I don't really go for such things."

"Do yourself a favor then," Maria's eyes were distant. "It's what I imagine my grandmother encountered that night."

"And then?"

"Martynov turned to his audience. The applause was deafening. Lidiya climbed onto her seat, the chandeliers above glowing their iridescent light. 'Where others,' she remembers Martynov shouting, 'create to oppress. I invent to destroy.' Of course, at the time, she had no way of knowing what that meant. But then, to the horror of all in attendance, he struck a match, held his composition aloft, and burnt it to ash. 'Never again,' he screamed, gripped by madness, 'will you hear my song. A swerve in chaos, this moment cannot last.' The Tsar's soldiers, never far according to my grandmother, stormed the stage. The theater was locked in confusion."

Maria paused, looking down at her hands.

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"The last words my grandmother heard Martynov scream that night cut the world in two. 'We are all responsible for what happens next,' he said, and then was wrestled to the ground by the imperial guard. Musicians leapt off the stage. People ran for the exits. Taken home and forbidden to speak of the night's event, Lidiya was ushered out by her father. It wasn't until later, much later, that she first spoke of it to me."

"In New York?"

"Yes. My family emigrated not long after."

The conversation lulled. I drank my coffee.

"And why," I finally asked, "did your grandmother think he did it?"

"She had lots of theories. But most were conspiratorial. I even, once upon a time, researched it myself."

"That's right. You graduated from Juilliard."

She nodded. "I come from a family of musicians."

"Okay. So what do you think? Why did Martynov burn the only composition of what many have claimed to be the most influential piece of modern music?"

"The most profound desire of humankind," Maria said, "stems from that which we cannot have. I think Martynov wanted to create the illusion of a beauty that has neither a beginning nor an end."

"Is that an illusion?"

Maria sighed. "I don't know."

Ambiguity for Eco is more than just a violation, challenge, or the production of further knowledge. It is also a poetic drive to create a surplus of interpretation. This surplus, however, is not an infinite drift or meaningless play—though play it is. It is, rather, a probing of the Dynamical Object or Firstness. It is both a recognition that there are boundaries, but a dreamlike recognition in which the horizon of Being is arrived at, interrogated, and moved beyond. Ambiguity, in this way, is that which allows me to reconcile with death even as it pretends to abolish it. And while overcoming lines of resistance, ambiguity reminds me that lines of resistance are impossible to overcome. What Peirce's Dynamical Object and Firstness have done for an aesthetics of ambiguity then is to provide it with a way to articulate ambiguity's commitment to that which is. While it probes and plays with resistance, it simultaneously articulates the plurivocal interpretations of Being while creating the unforeseen potentialities and possibilities of the already given.

To say it differently, ambiguity points to Firstness and claims that even though I am not trapped by it, I recognize it as the *No* that it is. And, as such, I can *subjunctively* see past it, reconstruct it, and articulate it differently. I am not free to make of it what I will, for I am responsible to and accountable for the hardness of resistance. But insofar as I sketch out this resistance in its Thirdness, I can create a reality in such a way that my finiteness is celebrated. And, when done, I see that it was not *Reality* to which I was answerable, but rather *a reality* shaped from the living matter that surrounds me.

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A materially oriented religious aesthetic that takes ambiguity seriously would not only side with Plate in his desire to eschew Beauty, Truth, and God, but also it would approach the material realm as qualified by Peirce and Eco. The objects that I touch, taste, see, smell, and hear are Dynamical Objects known through *representamens*, Immediate Objects, and interpretants. What my senses engage is a line of resistance, an already given, that—through ambiguity—has the potential to violate, challenge, and produce further knowledge. In its capacity to draw my attention to death (the ultimate line of resistance), it still questions and probes. And perhaps most importantly, it reminds me that I am accountable to *a reality*, even if that reality is a co-constructed project maintained and policed by the community in which I find myself. And yet, ambiguity, even then, has the potential to open, interrogate, and expand that very same community. To use my language, the aesthetics of ambiguity reveals the coexistent incompatibility inherent in all lines of resistance approached through Thirdness. And it is the poet, the aesthete of ambiguity, who draws my attention to these paradoxes with an aim of rethinking the world that I move through as an embodied already given.

The final question that this chapter will take up then is how does an aesthete of ambiguity—a poet—accomplish all of this? How does one simultaneously create openings while remaining accountable to an already given? Or rather, how does ambiguity create an encounter that leads to the recognition of a coexistent incompatibility? To answer these questions, I must now turn to Eco's essay, "On the

Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language."[328] But, in short, the answer is through contradiction.

Beginning with Roman Jakobson's assertion that the aesthetic use of language is both ambiguous and self-focusing, Eco writes that by ambiguity a message is "rendered creative in relation to the acknowledged possibilities of the code."[329] Given my previous two chapters, and situating Eco in his larger corpus, I think one can easily see both information theory and the idea of the encyclopedia lying behind this statement. While "possibilities of the code" is informed by Eco's adventure in the world of information theory, "in relation to the acknowledged" is (or will be) a reference to the accumulated cultural knowledge gathered together in the encyclopedia in the form of cultural units. Ambiguity is here that which stretches cultural knowledge beyond recognition and, hence, leads one or many to confront the encyclopedia as it currently stands.

This leads Eco to suggest that ambiguity does not only function at the level of content (the cultural unit), but also at the level of expression or form. As he writes it, "any changes occurring at the two levels [content and form] are functionally related to each other."[330] While this statement has been argued in the past, Eco laments, it has never been successfully proven due to any already-given expression's entanglement with language. What is needed, he suggests, is a working model that stands outside the rules of any given code—a thought experiment with a made-up language. In this way, "the

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[328] Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1979: 90–104.

[329] Ibid., 90.

[330] Ibid., 91.

working model [will be] equipped to demonstrate a language's own capacity for generating self-contradiction," which is, to Eco, the foundation of aesthetic ambiguity.[331]

Eco proposes to do this for his readers. His wonderfully playful idea is to recreate the language spoken in the Garden of Eden, and the way in which contradictions arose by God's prohibitory expression, which equally resulted in a contradiction in content. What Eco's essay will show then, for my purposes, is the way in which aesthetic messages are generated through contradiction and, as such, result in a rethought embodiment of the cultural code. It will show, in short, how ambiguity works and, placing it in Winkler's frame, is both produced and strategic.

"On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages" is the perfect ending for "Part I" of this project as it also ties together Plate's turn towards materiality and Peirce's Dynamical Object as ground. As Eco states, the insistence that expression or form potentially results in a change on the content-plane is a reminder that self-focusing aesthetic messages refer to the message itself as a physical entity.[332] And what does it mean to be "self-focusing?" To convey information about one's own physical make-up. A message, in other words, changes content but also form insofar as it questions or probes its own materiality or already given-ness. In doing so, a kind of two-way street is created in which the form (as material) shapes the content (as idea), even as the content (cultural unit) shapes the form (expression). In this ever and ongoing aesthetic process of ambiguity, potentialities emerge that were previously outside the scope of the already

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[331] Ibid.

[332] Ibid., 90.

given encyclopedia *and* material artifact. What Plate's stress on the skinscape does is, of course, focus my attention on this process as a kind of liminal space between any final judgment. What my coexistent incompatibility does is to take the skinscape and push it further. It highlights the plurivocality of this process by deferring aesthetic judgment in such a way that, standing in the intersection of aesthetic experience, many possibilities are seen, acknowledged, and exposed as judgments of choice. But for that to be fully articulated you will have to wait until Part II of this book, wherein I turn my attention to the narrativization of theory.

In summary then, it is in Eden that I find all of Eco's theories converging and articulating the goal of this project—to espouse an aesthetics of ambiguity that connects to and expands upon Plate's religious aesthetic. Before diving into Eden, however, let me quote Eco at length:

> [My] model must prove that any contradictions generated by the aesthetic use of language at the level of its form of expression equally involve contradictions in the form of its content; ultimately, they entail a complete reorganizing of our conceptual vision of the universe.[333]

In the beginning, Adam and Eve devised a set of semantic units that gave preferential status to their emotional responses to flora and fauna.[334] These units, Eco the mythologist writes, can be organized under six headings: yes vs. no, edible vs. inedible, good vs. bad, beautiful vs. ugly, red vs. blue, and serpent vs. apple. As cultural units do, these headings set up a series of connotative chains:

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[333] Ibid., 91.

[334] Ibid.

Red = Edible = Good = Beautiful
Blue = Inedible = Bad = Ugly

Eco claims that Adam and Eve devised a rudimentary language to give expression to these concepts, which was based on two sounds, A and B. These sounds could be arranged in a variety of sequences, but had to follow the combinatory rule X, nY, X, which is a fancy way of saying that every sequence must start with either A or B, have any number of the opposite sound, and then end with the sound with which it started. This resulted in, of course, a wonderfully colorful language in which words like "Edible" were spelled "ABA" and "Blue," "BAAAAAB." There was even a "Yes" (AA) that referred to God and a "No" (BB) that referred to Satan. Most importantly, Eco writes, "if two sequences are joined to each other, their cultural units are thus brought into reciprocal predication: BAAAB, ABBBBBA, for example, means 'the apple is red,' but also 'red apple.'"[335] Given this system, the connotative chains resulted in these significations:

ABA = ABBA = ABBBA = ABBBBBA = BAAAB = AA
Eat   Good   Beautiful   Red   Apple   Yes

BAB = BAAB = BAAAAB = BAAAAAB = ABBA = BB
No Eat Bad   Ugly   Blue   Serpent   No

In this edenic schema then, words equaled things and things equaled words, and any judgment passed on the universe was "automatically bound to be a semiotic judgment."[336]

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[335] Ibid., 93.

[336] Ibid., 94.

And so, given my purposes, the question arises: How does ambiguity manifest

within this simple structure? Well, in this case, it just so happens that it is God who

shoots herself in the foot. As Adam and Eve are languidly, no doubt, reclining near some

idyllic pool chatting with Milton—lush vines and sweet nectar surrounding them—God

strolls up and pronounces the first factual judgment. As Eco writes it: "You two probably

imagine that the apple belongs to the class of good, edible things, because it happens to

be red. Well, I've got news for you. The apple is not to be considered edible because it is

bad."[337] Even though this does not square with Adam and Eve's connotative chains, they

have to listen because, to them, God is the ultimate AA. "God spoke and his words

were," Eco writes, "/BAAAB. BAB—BAAAB. BAAB/ (apple inedible, apple bad)."[338]

In this way, God creates a cultural tradition, wherein culture is born out of an

institutional taboo. The contradiction is that a denoting term establishes a contrast with

cultural connotations. A new term emerges, "the redblue," which is equivalent to

"goodbad." This term is ambiguous in both form and content and is therefore self-

focusing. The term "redblue" also has, in Adam and Eve's edenic language, a formal

indication of its *inedibility*. This matters because it signifies a contradiction at the level of

expression, which impacts the materiality or embodiment of their cultural

encyclopedia.[339] What God did was outside the scope of language as Adam and Eve had

previously conceived of it. How? By employing the aesthetic use of language—a

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[337] Ibid., 95.

[338] Ibid.

[339] Ibid., 98.

contradiction that resulted in a complete reorganization of the conceptual vision of any given universe.[340] The aesthetic use of language is not a loss, however, for its resegmenting of content results in fresh cultural categories or units that potentially lead to new perceptive realities. As in this case, where the connotative chains, because of God's prohibition, shifted to:

Red = Edible = Good = Beautiful = Yes
Blue = Inedible = Bad = Ugly = No = Serpent and Apple

From which, Eco writes, "it is only a short step to

Serpent = Apple."[341]

This contradiction that leads to a crisis of linguistic and perceptual ambiguity for Adam and Eve, soon leads Adam to begin exploring the boundaries of language. He writes poetry, spawns further contradictions, and is soon capable of saying things like: "inedible is bad, which is apple ugly and blue" or

BAB
BAAB
BAAAB
BAAAAB
BAAAAAB.[342]

Eve gets in on the fun and finds it interesting that "Serpent" (ABBBA) has the same ending as the words that "stand for beautiful, good, and red."[343] Playing the game of

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[340] Ibid., 97.

[341] Ibid., 96.

[342] Ibid., 99.

[343] Ibid., 100.

poetic language, she soon arrives at the construction: "Good, beautiful and red—is the Serpent."[344] But how can the Good and the Beautiful also be the "No?" "Just how can the Serpent," Eco asks, "be the formal equivalent of things which the language system excludes as his predicates?"[345] This soon devolves into a series of ambiguities and deceptions, which ends with both Adam and Eve becoming aware of the arbitrariness of signs *and* that order is nonexistent. Adam can then begin, investigating the form of content, asking the question: "Who ever said that Blue was Inedible?"[346]

It is here then that I arrive at the fullest description of Eco's ambiguity. "From conventionalized meanings," he writes, "Adam takes a short step back to the world of experience and stages another encounter with its physical referents. He picks a blueberry for himself and eats it; the berry tastes good."[347] And so a contradiction that led to the destabilization of the encyclopedia resulted in *an altered perception of the material world*. What was once a given (Red = Good *and* Blue = Bad), was inverted and transformed. Adam resegmented content and, in the process, discovered fresh cultural categories (new perceptive realities), which obliged him to provide new names.[348] In the end, Eco writes, "Adam taught mankind that, in order to restructure codes, one needs to rewrite messages."[349]

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[344] Ibid.

[345] Ibid.

[346] Ibid., 102.

[347] Ibid.

[348] Ibid., 103.

[349] Ibid., 104.

Conclusion

Adding to Eco's notion of ambiguity then, I can say that ambiguity violates, challenges, and produces further knowledge. It is accountable to *a reality*, but not irreducibly so, as it also has the potential for opening significations of the material world. And finally, ambiguity is strategically produced and employed through creative contradictions in the already given cultural encyclopedia. The way Eco describes it, I can even say that ambiguous contradictions in the code not only transform and expand it, but also change the material world, not just my perceptions of it. How is that possible? Because, utilizing Peirce, I can only know the world through Thirdness, which is matter engaged at the level of the semiosphere. Reciprocally then, contradictions in the code change the material world via Thirdness, as Firstness is ultimately closed off to me.

This espousal of Eco's ambiguity connects to Plate's skinscape (as previously mentioned) and articulates the turn towards materiality in religious aesthetics. A material object in a sacred space is infinitely entangled with the connotative chains of any culture's encyclopedia. The one not only informs the other, but provides the possibility for violation, challenge, further knowledge, accountability, and contradiction. Likewise, Eco's theory of ambiguity syncs with Winkler's contemporary model for theories of ambiguity in that it fits well within the category of strategic production, because, among many things, ambiguity is a contradiction at the level of expression.

Only a few questions remain: How is my description of ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility furthered by Eco's theory? How does it connect to Plate, Winkler, and religious aesthetics? And, finally, what does any of this have to do with narrativizing

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theories? Let me state that the task of Part II of this work is given over to answering these questions. But, in short, coexistent incompatibility allows for the possibility of two or more Thirdnesses in both cultural encyclopedias and, more importantly, material worlds. In fact, to stress the nature of a coexistent incompatibility, I will stop just short of saying that it also allows for two or more Firstnesses.

A contradiction that opens the code and my engagement with the material world also potentially reveals the plurivocality of the already given. Ambiguity, as I define it, reveals mutually existing, overlapping, and entangled universes. I must stress, however, that this is not a theory of multiple worlds. I am not talking about parallel universes or branching timelines. I am, rather, articulating the flux, process, and evolution of reality as it exists in motion.[350] Given that, I am saying that any aesthetic judgment of reality is a synchronic snapshot of that which is presented to me, which exists alongside and overlaps with an infinity of simultaneous snapshots. If *ambiguity as encounter* moves me into *ambiguity as state* (Plate's skinscape), then it is there that the possibility exists to interrogate, transform, or renew my aesthetic judgments, insofar as they are judgments of narratival or world construction. I cannot maintain the (non-judgmental) skinscape of coexistent incompatibility indefinitely, however, and so must, at some point, "collapse" the state, choose, and travel a path. I traverse, analogously, one networked connection among many, though all are equally viable. Hopping from node to node, when I encounter ambiguity, I can stop, critique my position, and possibly alter my direction. In doing so, I have not only rearranged the network, but also the node in which I exist.

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[350] Cf. Lee Smolin, *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* (New York: Mariner Books, 2014).

To conclude this chapter, let me end with an example that narratively espouses coexistent incompatibility as both an encounter and state, and the power of ambiguity to unveil potentialities.[351] China Miéville's *The City & The City* is a dark, gritty detective novel in which the protagonist, Tyador Borlú, must solve the murder of a young woman dumped near a shelled-out project. Read on the surface, this seems the common fair of dime-store literature. But beneath that compressed summary is a world dripping with ambiguity, paradox, and coexistent incompatibility.

Imagine the Yugoslav Wars in the 90s and, rather than war, the solution to the problem was to create a tiered state in which the occupants of Sarajevo all lived in the same physical space but embodied different cultural encyclopedias wherein it was a crime to see, acknowledge, or admit the existence of the other. Miéville accomplishes something like this with his cities Beszel and Ul Qoma, two cities that overlap or "crosshatch"—that are, in fact, the same material city. While the citizens of each are entangled regarding culture, language, architecture, and more, the residents have undergone a rigorous cultural training in "unseeing." I could, as a citizen of Beszel, be in the same physical coffee shop as a resident of Ul Qoma, but neither see nor hear her. I would construct and experience the space differently given my encyclopedia and, so too, would she, even though it is *exactly the same material*. We would be living in the same space and, through unseeing, construct it differently. Sharing the physical space of the world then, Miéville seems to suggest, we could only overcome our cultural, ethnic, and religious differences through a mass denial built upon a quantum state.

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[351] China Miéville, *The City & The City* (New York: Del Rey, 2010).

While this Heisenbergian architecture works for most, it does not for all. There are those that—through ambiguity as violation, challenge, or contradiction—begin to undo their unseeing. And when a resident of Beszel looks across the street and sees it manifest as a thoroughfare of Ul Qoma rather than one of Beszel's, she is quickly scooped up by the liminal organization known as "Breach" and is never heard from again in either city. Why? Because once the immutable law of unseeing has been broken, once the coexistent incompatibility has been revealed, there is no going back. The encyclopedia and the physical space that it both constructs and informs has been irrevocably changed. The further knowledge that has been produced because of Breach (both a crime committed and the organization responsible for policing it) cannot return to a pre-ambiguous state. Once committed, Breach is infinite.

Given a momentary glimpse into the liminality of Breach, however, the reader begins to see the competing narratives at play in Beszel and Ul Qoma. In that world, a citizen can pick one narrative over the other, but she cannot choose both. To do so is anathema to the cultural encyclopedias of either city. She must choose or be forced into it from childhood. To break the strict boundaries of Miéville's city or to produce further knowledge, a resident from either side of reality must have an encounter with ambiguity, an encounter that has the potential to shape the material world itself.

Miéville's thought-provoking novel is also an illustrative way to end Part I of this work, wherein I have set out to accomplish three tasks. One, I have articulated ambiguity, its current theories, and the way in which Eco fits into ambiguity's contemporary movements. Two, I have placed Eco and his ambiguity in conversation with Plate's

religious material aesthetic. And three, I have injected my own understanding of ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility into this conversation.

In the end, I can say that ambiguity is a strategic production that violates, challenges, and produces further knowledge. It is accountable to *a reality*, though it also has the potential to shape the material world itself. It is a contradiction in the code or encyclopedia that stretches either beyond recognition and results in an interpretive surplus. And it is both an encounter and a state that pushes Plate's skinscape into a kind of phase space or Breach, to use Miéville's term, wherein I can see many of the competing and provisional narratives that inform any one physical space. It is then, in the state of ambiguity (a non-judgmental and liminal aesthetic), that I can interrogate, expand, or choose differently. The first part of this work has prepared me to engage the competing narratives of ambiguous spaces and the way in which narratives and theories are not only mutually informing but co-constitutive world builders. Part I of this work, in other words, has set out the parameters in which I will articulate in Part II how a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

PART I: CONCLUSION

In Chapter One, I carefully crafted a heuristic outline for a theory of ambiguity. I argued that there are three types, broadly speaking, of ambiguity: literary, philosophical, and scientific. Utilizing Winkler, I also sketched out contemporary trends in theories of ambiguity before focusing my attention on religious aesthetics and its turn towards materiality. Relying on Plate, I first defined religion and then articulated a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity. In summary, I defined ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility, which highlights the proliferation of meaning by holding multiple interpretations in tension, and religious aesthetics as the provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans subjunctively embody.

In Chapter Two, I set out to place Eco's ambiguity in conversation with current theories, Plate's material religious aesthetic, and my own understanding of ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility. I did this by examining and contextualizing Eco's theories of aesthetics, semiotics, cultural units, and encyclopedias. I argued that much of Eco's theory of ambiguity is rooted in his work on information theory and, as a result, specifies an ambiguity that violates cultural codes, challenges cultural encyclopedias, and produces further knowledge. This helped me to espouse fully my theory of coexistent incompatibility while also developing Plate's notion of the skinscape. I suggested that ambiguity is a space wherein an aesthete refrains from judgment so that she can more

fully acknowledge the plurivocality or potentiality of a given percept. It is an encounter

with an already given that forces upon an aesthete the factuality of many, equiprobable

realities. Ambiguity does not, however, provide a way forward. It is neither map nor

guide. It is a hesitancy, a refusal to judge or, better yet, a position from which one can

foresee the infinite possibilities of a possible future. Connecting this to Plate, I posited

that a material religious aesthetic has the potential either to create or highlight religious

commitments and narratives as they mutually exist as polyvocal percepts. A religious

aesthetic rooted in ambiguity, in other words, would not only examine phenomena but

also the narratives that allow any observer to choose one vocality over another.

In Chapter Three, I brought in Peirce and both his Firstness and Dynamical

Object. I showed how Eco's ambiguity, which greatly informs and contextualizes mine,

is grounded in a reality that is flexible, fluid, and networked. I then dove into Eco's

seminal essay on the creation of aesthetic messages. This showed, via Winkler's

paradigm, how Eco's ambiguity is both strategic and productive. It also highlighted the

role of contradiction in theories of ambiguity. I claimed that ambiguity violates,

challenges, and produces further knowledge. It is accountable to a reality, but not

irreducibly so. And that it is strategically produced and employed through creative

contradictions in the already given cultural encyclopedia. This resulted in an expansion of

Plate's material religious aesthetic or skinscape. A material object in a sacred space, I

suggested, is infinitely entangled with the connotative chains of any culture's

encyclopedia. Ambiguity is both an encounter and a state (much like Plate's skinscape)

that reveals mutually existing, overlapping, and entangled universes. It is within

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ambiguity that the possibility exists to interrogate, transform, or renew my aesthetic judgments, insofar as they are judgments of narratival or world construction.

Finally, moving into Part II, I shall show how my understanding of ambiguity arises in Eco's novels—or, more specifically, the narrativization of his theories. In this way, you can think of his novels as the matter and his theories as the encyclopedia or semiosphere. It is my argument that his theories and narratives shuttle back and forth in a way similar to the entanglement of the semiotic and material worlds. In doing so, I argue that ambiguity exposes the way in which we create knowledge and construct worlds, in so far as the event of ambiguity leads to a state of ambiguity (skinscape) in which I can analyze potentialities—or, to put it differently, how a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

PART II: THE AMBIGUOUS NARRATIVES OF REALITY

Part I of this work sought to define ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility. Part II analyzes Umberto Eco's theories and novels through that lens. Taken together, both parts argue the thesis that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

Chapter Four provides a test case for my theory of ambiguity by examining *The Prague Cemetery*. Following the life of Captain Simone Simonini, Eco's protagonist, I show the ways in which narratives are both constructed and embodied, and the role of ambiguity in such narratives. I argue that *The Prague Cemetery*, read through ambiguity, is one instance wherein I can see the construction, destruction, and liminality of provisional knowledge. It not only depicts the narrativization of reality but also represents the map of fictions that are thrust onto the world of things and embodied as natural.

Chapter Five further explores the entanglement of fiction and reality by examining Simonini in light of Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* and *Inventing the Enemy*. I discuss the possibilities of ordering one's encyclopedia and the way in which choice and provisionality are revealed by ambiguity. I argue that *all* knowledge is organized, limited, and idiosyncratic, and, once confronted by ambiguity, provisional. I also take up narrativizing theories and show how they overlap with and further my

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ongoing arguments about ambiguity. I suggest that narrativizing theories are *a posteriori arrangements* of the universal encyclopedia that, once embodied, shape an equiprobable reality.

Chapter Six summarizes the previous five chapters, connects my argument to the ongoing work of S. Brent Plate, and concludes the main portion of my work by engaging ambiguity through wit, lightness, and narrativizing theories. I argue that humor is ambiguity in the face of certainty. If an aesthetics of ambiguity seeks to uncover the fictions that I map onto reality while also confronting me with the provisionality of my encyclopedia, then it also implies that its enemy is certainty—a knowledge that is convinced it has arrived at the proper ordering of the universal encyclopedia. It is the goal of Chapter Six not only to summarize my work in a concluding fashion, but also to express humor's role in ambiguity.

The overall aim of Part II is to continue the work laid out in Part I and to wrestle with the thesis that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF AMBIGUITY IN RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS

Perhaps there is a provisional solution to this epistemological mess, which is to be located in the phrase *it is as if.* This phrase is of course precisely the announcement of an analogy. And on reflection, it is admittedly a halting problem, but jumping out of it, there is something quite suggestive and powerful in this formulation, something very specifically human. Possibly this formulation itself is the deep diagnostic of all human cognition—the tell, as they say, meaning the thing that tells, the giveaway. In the infinite black space of ignorance, *it is as if* stands as the basic operation of cognition, the mark perhaps of consciousness itself. Human language: it is as if it made sense.
<div style="text-align:right">—Aurora, Kim Stanley Robinson</div>

<div style="text-align:center">Introduction</div>

"*It is as if,*" Kim Stanley Robinson writes, "*It is as if* stands as the basic operation

of cognition."[352] The speaker, however, is SHIP, a quantum computer tasked with

teaching itself human narrativity. And what does SHIP discover? That the self—human

or artificial—"emerges out of the combination of all the inputs and processing and

outputs that we[353] experience," which is ultimately nothing more or less than the

narratives we string together.[354] Narrative, in other words, is the "pretense of self" that

can only be expressed in narrative, "a self that is these sentences. We tell [a] story, and

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[352] Kim Stanley Robinson, *Aurora* (New York: Orbit, 2016), 126.

[353] "We," SHIP says earlier, "are aware that in talking about the ship we could with some justification use the pronoun *I*. And yet it seems wrong. An unwarranted presumption, this so-called subject position. A subject is really just a pretense of aggregated subroutines. Subroutines pretend the I. Possibly, however, given the multiplicity of sensors, inputs, data, aggregations, and synthesizings of narrative sentences, we can plausibly, and in some senses even accurately, speak of a 'we.' As we have been. It's a group effort on the part of a number of disparate systems," 204.

[354] Ibid., 217.

<div style="text-align:center">146</div>

thereby come to what consciousness we have. Scribble ergo sum."[355] And yet, the self

cannot only be the emplotment of experience. For it, SHIP argues, is a much larger

complex of sense perceptions, actions, and habits, to name a few. The self, to put it

differently, is also a collection of embodied experiences that cannot be accounted for in

the narratives of consciousness. There is always an excess that escapes my attempt to

construct myself, to shape and order it into a palatable narrative. "Consciousness is so

poorly understood," SHIP laments:

> that it can't even be defined. Self is an elusive thing, sought eagerly, grasped hard, perhaps in some kind of fear, some kind of desperate clutch after some first dim awareness, awareness even of sensory impressions, so that one might have something to hold to. To make time stop. To hold off death.[356]

It is as if.

Following from Part I, Part II of this work explores the role of ambiguity in

religious aesthetics. And though perhaps convoluted across such an expanse of words, I

am arguing that ambiguity, as a coexistent incompatibility, is an acknowledgement of the

It is as if of Robinson's SHIP. Ambiguity, among many things, is an awareness that the

encyclopedias that allow for understanding *and* the embodied world given as reality is

cognized into a narrative that is and can only be *as if*. A more technical way to phrase my

proposition is that both aesthetics and, subsequently, epistemology are provisional. That

which I intuit, cognize, and know as true today, may not be tomorrow. "Having

established the referent of meaning *is*," one Echian commentator writes:

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[355] Ibid.

[356] Ibid.

because it is endowed with the ability to refer, it remains, nevertheless, incomplete and challengeable as predicate of such a referent. Thus, at the same time we must say that the referent of meaning *is not* because it is never a true self, it lacks its own independent individuality. We can never hold it firm . . . it is very slippery and constantly changed and postponed by the semiosic process into what is a never changing succession of interpretants.[357]

Ambiguity then, as I have articulated it, is that which reveals, highlights, or brings my attention to the provisionality or the as-if-ness of the narrative that I take for granted. It is also that space in which I can analyze my own provisional assumptions and begin to account for the potentiality of other ways of seeing and doing. Underlying this argument, as I have already said, is the assumption that the task of religious aesthetics is to examine the narratives that humans live as if they were reality. Or, stealing the language of Robinson's SHIP, religious aesthetics explores the narratives that people wield so that they might have something to hold onto, to make time stop, or to hold off death. Religious aesthetics, following Plate, seeks also to account for the excess of everyday experience. It is rooted, in other words, in the "awareness even of sensory impressions."[358]

So much for Part I. But what of Chapter Four? If I argued that ambiguity is a way into the provisional narratives of reality, then this chapter, and much of what follows, provides a test case for that argument. Umberto Eco's penultimate novel, *The Prague Cemetery*,[359] is the laboratory in which I distill my chemical concoction, which is

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[357] Raffaele De Benedictis, "*Il Cimitero Di Praga*: The Epistemic Implication between Lies and Reality," *Forum Italicum* 45, no. 2 (September 2011): 440.

[358] Ibid.

[359] Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, trans. Richard Dixon (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). Cf. Rocco Capozzi, "Revisiting History: Conspiracies and Fabrication of Texts in 'Foucault's Pendulum' and 'The Prague Cemetery,'" *Italica* 90, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 638, "[Eco's novels] are not easy reading

ambiguity as I defined it in Part I. Following the life of Captain Simone Simonini, Eco's

protagonist, I show the ways in which narratives are both constructed and embodied, and

the role of ambiguity in such narratives. In the following chapter, stepping back from *The

Prague Cemetery*, I examine how Eco's own theory of ambiguity was narrativized.

Culminating in the final chapter of this book, I argue that the theory to novel to theory

journey of *The Prague Cemetery* is similar to the ways in which aesthetics functions

when understood through my definition of ambiguity. The interplay between an already

given encyclopedia, lived experience, and constructed, as if narratives all point towards

the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.[360] While ambiguity

reveals this and allows for potentialities in the skinscape, it is the task of religious

aesthetics to examine the narratival paths I traverse. This chapter argues, in conclusion,

that *The Prague Cemetery*, read through ambiguity, is one instance wherein I can see the

construction, destruction, and liminality of provisional knowledge, because it not only

depicts the narrativization of reality but also represents, "the proof that fiction and reality

can function together and that any fiction, once recorded, is able to create its own

reality."[361]

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and, because they are instruments for discussing ideas and for understanding and expanding knowledge, they are intended to function as cognitive tools that activate associations of words, image, ideas, fictional characters, historical events, cultural phenomena and innumerable texts."

[360] Cf. Nishevita J. Murthy, *Historicizing Fiction/Fictionalizing History: Representation in Select Novels of Umberto Eco and Orhan Pamuk* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), xiii: "Through their creative use of literary techniques, [Eco's] novels succeed in highlighting the way reality can be glimpsed through, and as, representational perspectives."

[361] Anca Andriescu Garcia, "Inventing the Enemy. When Propaganda Becomes History," *Philologica* 5, no. 1 (January 2013): 65; and Capozzi, "Revisiting History," 625.

The Prague Cemetery*: An Ambiguous Summary*[362]

Moving through the streets of Paris like a panoramic cinematographer, I am introduced to the narrator of this tale. Neither Eco nor Simonini, I can only guess that it is the model author, that textual strategy that "coincides with the intention of the text,"[363] which so quickly establishes *The Prague Cemetery's* aesthetic credentials.[364] "If you were a passerby in March of 1897," the text suggests, "then this is what you would see: a man, sitting as his desk, scribbling down personal notes."[365] I am, as a participant in this scene then, peering over the writer's shoulder along with the unnamed narrator, who, it would seem, turns to me and winks, for: "the Narrator himself does not yet know who the mysterious writer is, proposing to find this out (together with the Reader) while both of us look on inquisitively and follow what he is noting down on those sheets of paper."[366] The next words in the text are the title of Chapter Two, "WHO AM I?"[367] And what a

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[362] From which you should take away four things. One, Simonini is an asshole. Two, *The Prague Cemetery's* framing narrative is that the protagonist, Simonini, is performing a psychoanalysis upon himself. Three, the underlying story of *The Prague Cemetery* is the collecting and editing together of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* from disparate sources. And four, the ambiguous moment—that liminal space between the encyclopedia and the material world—is always self-reflective (cf. Martin J. Plax, "On Extremism in Our Time," *Society* 50, no. 2 (April 2013): 202–3).

[363] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 59; Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler, Richard Rorty, and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Joseph Francese, "Eco's Poetics of 'The Model Reader,'" *Forum Italicum* 37, no. 1 (March 2003): 161–83.

[364] The text is self-focusing, but also focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretation of it. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 261–76.

[365] My paraphrase of Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 1.

[366] Ibid., 4.

[367] Ibid., 5.

question to ask. Am I the empirical reader deciphering, through Peircean abduction,[368] that which is to come or the Model Reader, that textual strategy forever sparring with the Model Author who both reveals and, at times, obscures the text's intentions? Who am I, indeed?

To stop, to pause, to reflect—but only upon the second and third reading[369]—I can already see that this text is self-focusing and ambiguous. It is not what it appears to be. Someone, the narrator perhaps, is having her way with me, for *The Prague Cemetery* is embedded in a play of narratival frames. On one level, there is me, the reader, sitting outside on a sunny day in Colorado, smoking my pipe while the sounds of construction whir around me. On another, there is me, the reader, peering over the shoulder of an unnamed writer in 1897 eagerly awaiting his next pen stroke. And on another? The Model Reader constructing, interpreting, and abducing the text that sits before me. And, yes, I am even the writer of these words that you can only know as the Model Author, the intention of the text that you can (should?) only engage as another Model Reader. And to point to the text that you are now reading in this way, have I not also established its aesthetic intention? Is that possible—admirable even—in academic texts?

I am off balance, rendered vertiginous by the frames that confront me. But this is *The Prague Cemetery*, and, I think, the very thing the text intends.

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[368] Umberto Eco, "Horns, Hooves, Insteps: Some Hypotheses on Three Types of Abduction," in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, eds. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 198–220.

[369] Cf. Eco's notion of the naïve and critical readers in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 205 and *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 55; Capozzi, "Revisiting History," 622.

"I feel a certain embarrassment as I settle down here to write," the man pens, "as if I were baring my soul, at the command of—no, by God, let us say on the advice of—a German Jew."[370] To know him, he suggests, is not to ask who he is or how he loves or what he does. But rather, whom he hates. For he later tells me, "*Odi ergo sum*. I hate therefore I am."[371] And hate he does. Jews, Jesuits, Germans, and women are all set in the crosshairs of this man's scope, whom I come to learn is Captain Simone Simonini. He is to me, a modern and western academic, abhorrent. A man who writes:

> the Jew, as well as being as vain as a Spaniard, ignorant as a Croat, greedy as a Levantine, ungrateful as a Maltese, insolent as a Gypsy, dirty as an Englishman, unctuous as a Kalmyk, imperious as a Prussian and as slanderous as anyone from Asti, is adulterous through uncontrollable lust—the result of circumcision, which makes them more erectile, with a monstrous disproportion between their dwarfish build and the thickness of their semi-mutilated protuberance.[372]

Yes, I think, much like the *L'Osservatore Romano*,[373] I should put this down, for it can only corrupt me. But then I recall ambiguity as surprise—the very ambiguity that I wrote about in Part I!—and that while "it's certainly shocking to read the anti-Semitic

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[370] Ibid., 5.

[371] Ibid., 17; Capozzi, "Revisiting History," 626. Also, compare to the first *cogito* of this chapter, Robinson's: "Scribble ergo sum," 217.

[372] Ibid., 6.

[373] Mary Donnarumma Sharnick, "Devious History," *America Magazine*, March 5, 2012, accessed July 11, 2017, https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/culture/devious-history; Joshua Lustig, "Skulking in the Sewers," *Open Letters Monthly—an Arts and Literature Review,* November 1, 2011, accessed July 11, 2017, https://www.openlettersmonthly.com/skulking-in-the-sewers/; Matthew Surridge, "Between Forgery and Fiction," *Splice Today*, February 21, 2012, accessed July 11, 2017, http://splicetoday.net/writing/between-forgery-and-fiction; Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, "The Deadliest Hoax: Umberto Eco's Novel Explores the Twisted History of 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.,'" *The New York Times Books Review*, November 20, 2011, accessed July 11, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/books/review/the-prague-cemetery-by-umberto-eco-book-review.html? mcubz=2; and Maria Spruyt, "Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery*: A Game of Double Co-Incidence," *Literator* 36, no. 1 (June 2015): 4.

passages" in *The Prague Cemetery* "many parts of the book . . . are culled from historical sources. Simonini's hate is the real hate of eras past, and indeed of the present." I am shocked, in other words, "not by the sordidness of Eco's imagination, but by the sordidness of reality."[374] Okay then, I will keep reading. I will willingly place myself in the presence of such hate, racism, and ethnocentric triumphalism.

And what do I find?

Simonini looks up from his notes. "Why me, of course, the very essence of ambiguity."[375]

"Yes," I nod. "But I have to summarize *The Prague Cemetery* in order to establish a base with my reader. I can't assume that she's read your estimable work or, if she has, that she remembers it."

He stares, blinking, while the narrator adjusts his weight. The temperature inside of a building in 1897 is stifling. A droplet of sweat rolls down my nose. "Refer to location 506 to 519," the captain says. "It is there that I meet a man—well, a Jew— named Froïde. He is the reason I am now writing."

"I'm sorry, captain, but when you say 'location' are you referring to the Kindle?"

"He is," the narrator says in his strange accent,[376] "but for traditional readers, turn to page 37 and read through 46."

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[374] Surridge, http://splicetoday.net/writing/between-forgery-and-fiction.

[375] Cf. Spruyt, "to examine the issue of the human condition . . . may be a shattering experience for the individual, as well as a nation . . . an exploration into the dilemma of the human condition and especially humans' capacity to perform both good and evil deeds, is what the author's intention was," 6–7.

[376] There are three font types in *The Prague Cemetery*, each betraying a different voice in the text. There is the narrator, Captain Simone Simonini, and the Abbé Dalla Piccola, the last of which I have yet to introduce.

"Yes, well, what you'll find is that this Froïde—"

"Again, I apologize for interrupting, captain. But you do mean Freud, yes?"

"That is what I said, is it not? Froïde?"

"Yes. But . . . is Froïde the Sigmund of psychoanalytic fame? Can I say that you are writing this diary of yours as a kind of 'talking cure?'"[377]

"You can say whatever you'd like, but what I'd say is that I refuse to divulge myself to such a perfidious race. So rather than allowing some 'doctor' to visually grope me while I lounge on his couch—with the hope of caressing my pudendum, no doubt—I simply write all of my thoughts and memories with the aim of unlocking some hidden secret deep within my subconscious. I am, you see, my own psychoanalyst."[378]

"Ah, yes. Ingenious."

Simonini then turns from me and continues to write.

I discovered much in those few days. The captain was a forger, a spy, and a murderer. He was despicable in every way imaginable. But he was never only him. Often times, after writing furiously for an hour or three, he would leave the room only to return dressed up as a Jesuit priest! In those moments, he would refuse to answer to captain. He would say that his name was Abbé Dalla Piccola, then sit and read what the captain had written. Usually, but not always, he would then jot down his notes or commentary before disappearing.

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[377] Ibid., 44.

[378] Ibid., 45.

I need not tell you how discomfiting this experience was. If it were not for the narrator who sorted, compiled, and edited Simonini's (or were they Piccola's?) notes, then I fear that I would have never pieced together what really happened. The long and short of it is that Simonini had killed the Abbé (among many others) and taken on his personality as a convenient disguise in his work as a spy. Through many twists and turns, I came to see that Simonini's life work was to destroy the children of Zion. But why? For two reasons, I think. He was once, as a boy of fourteen, spurned by a young and attractive Jewish woman.[379] Not only did this contribute to his hate of all Jews, but also women. Second, and I think more importantly, he was irrevocably taught such hate—dare I say the encyclopedia of hate—by first his grandfather and then his father. But I find that I am getting slightly ahead of myself. For no summary of Simonini's notes is complete without a mention of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.[380]

"My book," Simonini shouts. "What have you, an American, to say of such a thing?"

"Only that . . . the work is, well, the central story of *The Prague Cemetery*. And that your 'book,' as you put it, is a collage of other texts spliced together for the purpose of discrediting the Jewish race. Do I have that right?"

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[379] Ibid., 59 and 436.

[380] Victor E. Marsden, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (Bensenville, Il: Lushena, 2014); Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); and Will Eisner and Umberto Eco, *The Plot: The Secret Story of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

Simonini stared at me for a long time, considering only he knows what. But finally, he spoke: "Your Eco has discredited me. He talks of Joly,[381] Sue,[382] and Dumas,[383] not to mention Barruel[384] and Goedsche.[385] But what of my genius? The plot, that grand conspiracy, was mine.[386] I constructed it, so that it would 'accompany the final solution.'"[387] And before I could respond, he continued: "And, yes, I purposely chose that last phrase."[388]

"You're odious."

"I'm no different than you, with your careful words and pretense at inclusion. Or do you think that I've missed it? Shall you reveal it to your reader, or shall I?"

I blinked.

"Fine. I will," Simonini laughed. "You always refer to your reader as a woman. Why? To cover up the fact that the majority of your bibliography is filled with men,

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[381] Cf. Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 135 and 138; Umberto Eco, *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2007), 314–9; Garcia, 63–4; and de Benedictis, 430; and Goldstein, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/books/ review/the-prague-cemetery-by-umberto-eco-book-review.html? mcubz=2.

[382] Eugène Sue, *The Wandering Jew* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013) and *The Mysteries of the People* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

[383] Alexandre Dumas, *Joseph Balsamo* (Rockville, MD: Wildside, 2007).

[384] Cf. Eco, *Six Walks*, 134.

[385] Ibid., 135.

[386] Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 431.

[387] Ibid.

[388] Spruyt, 3.

mostly white and western.[389] Isn't that right? You hope to divert the reader's attention with a cheap trick, but in doing so, you reveal your own biases."

I looked to the narrator for support, but he turned away. I was caught out, embarrassed. But it was true. Following the paths of Eco's literary forest, I found myself surrounded by men. I tried to cover it up, but does that omission—that sin of inclusion— make me a monster? "I think you're wrong to compare your collage of hate to my particular inadequacies as an author. Whereas your work participated in the construction of the Nazi imaginary, and continues to influence conspiracy politics, mine seeks to open—"

"Yes," he interrupted. "I know all about your ambiguity and its 'potentialities.' It smacks of the liberal elite and, bugger me, those that would say they know better. And do you, author? Do you *know* better?" Simonini turned from me then. Saying nothing, he began to write his psychoanalysis with the hope of unearthing his "traumatizing element."[390] But I turned, too, away from 1897. I moved backwards, in fact, and followed Simonini into his childhood. For it is there, I think, that I will best discover the nature of ambiguity and those *it-is-as-if* narratives that exist in the liminality of the skinscape.

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[389] Kristine Phillips, "Why These Professors Are Warning against Promoting the Work of Straight, White Men," *The Washington Post*, July 16, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/news/speaking-of-science/ wp/ 2017/07/16/feminist-scientists-say-citing-research-by-straight-white-men-promotes-a-system-of-oppression/; cf. Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne, "Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement,'" *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* (June 2017): 1–20, accessed July 18, 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339022.

[390] Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 45.

THE COMPOSER

IV

March 12, 1892

The Tonic? I cannot know. I have no way of answering that question. I am haunted by

the past, by the starting point. I want to move forward. But . . . secondhand. That is

all. I cannot escape Korsakov. Ha! The name that ruins. I am weighed down by time,

by all that is—will ever be.

I tried again today. A beginning. That is what I sought. But it was the wrong

thing. I do not desire beginnings, but that which births from process. *In media res . . .*

is that possible? No. For I am no Greek. I must speak to the people of *Bylina*, not

Odýsseia. But Kalinnikov has stolen my efforts.

I start anew. I must speak to the people, to the masses. Of that which

transcends Orthodoxy but is not transcendent. Of that which is more than

Chernyshevskii but rooted in that which he defended. Is there such a thing as a

beginning without origin? Am I not a parody of that which has come before?

I encountered a strange concept recently. "*Plagiarius.*" I think, perhaps, it will

be all consuming in the future. It looms on the horizon. What I say to the masses must

be new, but there is nothing new. A tonic that is both past and future, but speaks to

the present. A beauty that is other, but does not speak of "G—." Am I wronged by a

desire for the impossible that is possible?

April 28, 1892

My dear, Kseniya. You were born yesterday. And though you will not read this for some time, if ever, it is my hope to impart to you the wisdom of an older generation. Time is fleeting. It beats ceaselessly upon the mind and body alike. What was once today will no longer be tomorrow. And yet, life is such a glorious affair. Do be struck by it. Curiosity and wit are the handmaidens of truth. And though this will not make sense until you are my age, beauty is hidden in all things.

But that is not the reason for which I write. As you lay in the warmth of your bassinet, there are those that, whispering in the Tsar's ear, would claim that you represent a problem. I am horrified by such machinations.

You see, I am a composer and teacher of music. I am neither the best nor the worst, though I have tried to hold my gift responsibly. I invent to destroy. A thing that makes little sense. 'Destroy what?" you will no doubt ask yourself. And, yes, that is the question. But there are those who create to oppress. Who twist the world into such a shape that there is little room for escape. Who grasp at power and weave tales of conspiracy and domination.

And do you know of the chasm that separates invention from creation? The one, inventio, is the generation of discovery. It takes that which precedes it and imagines new possibilities. It is a sculpture of found objects. It is not a once-for-all creation, but triggers further invention. The other, however, is creatio ex nihilo. But, my darling, there really is nothing new under the sun. An invention pretends at neither foundation nor arche. It is merely an arrangement of elements in a specific

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time and place. If creation involves one—the genius laboring in solitude—then invention is the continuous process of many that resists completion.

So you see, Kseniya, invention is everything. The one is. But from the other— emergence. Ah, but this is too much. I have rambled as you coo in the fullness of contentment . . .

People will say many things to you about your heritage and your grandfather, and I only thought it fair to share my opinion on the matter. I compose, yes, it is true. I invent fictions that order time and relate experience. But for what reason do I invite others into this task?

~~I only seek to illuminate a goodness that I fear no~~

The rest is too heavily scratched out to translate. Sorry, Ed. I hope that suffices. Onto the next . . .

May 30, 1892

Allegro. Tomorrow night will tell all. Fast, too fast, time is hurling towards its end. And what can I do? Burn. That is all. I must burn that which I invented. The thing will not change, cannot change the Tsar's mind. But perhaps the action, so futile, will suggest other possibilities. And yet, I am wracked with guilt. If I kill the thing, can the spirit endure? No. I know the answer even before I act. But burn it must.

I visited Sofia's grave today. It was no heavy burden. I laid chamomile upon her brow. I can only hope that it brings her rest.

> Standing, I saw the strangest thing. A man, small in stature, leaping over gravestones. *I do not burn with a heavy soul,* I thought.
>
> Perhaps there is still possibility in this sculpture.
>
> There was a time when I believed in self-evidence. But no longer. I burn with lightness.

In My Grandfather's Day

It is nearly impossible to summarize a book and, likewise, to analyze critically one of Eco's works is a voluminous task. In an effort to limit the scope of what I can accomplish, I propose to perform a close reading of only one chapter. This chapter is, I think, the most important for the way in which it shamelessly constructs Simonini's psyche.[391] First his mother (women), then his grandfather (Jews), and finally his father (Jesuits) all shape the protagonist in ways that reverberate throughout *The Prague Cemetery*. It is as if one is reading the opening lines of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*: "From my grandfather Verus: goodness of character and freedom from anger."[392] But rather than curating virtue, Simonini is collecting visions of hate, racism, and bigotry. And while Simonini is performing psychoanalysis on himself, I am doing no such thing.[393] I am, rather, reading the chapter, "In My Grandfather's Day,"[394] through the

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[391] Spruyt, 4.

[392] Christopher Gill, trans., *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations, Books 1-6* (Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers), 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

[393] For a good psychoanalytic reading, see Spruyt.

[394] Umberto Eco, "In My Grandfather's Day," in *The Prague Cemetery*, trans. Richard Dixon (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 47–82.

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theorizing lens that I set out in Part I of this work. The reason for choosing this chapter

over others is simple: in it, I find a confluence of those as-if-it-is narratives that are

central to my understanding of both ambiguity and religious aesthetics. "In My

Grandfather's Day," in the end, is a test case for what has come before it. And if it seems

strange to you that my playground is of a literary nature, then I will leave this

introduction with a small reminder: both Winkler, and Eco before her, find literature to be

the place for examining the functions of ambiguity.[395]

From My Mother: Woman as Cultural Unit

If the reader moves too quickly, then she will miss it. "My childhood," the chapter

begins. "Turin . . . A hillside on the other bank of the Po, me on a balcony with my

mother. Then she was gone, and my father was crying . . . My grandfather said it was

God's will."[396] This is all that the text says of Simonini's mother, who is nothing more

than a specter to the protagonist, a figure of loss. And yet her absence reverberates

throughout Simonini's earliest memories. "Childhood," he writes:

> for me was my grandfather, more than my father and mother. I hated my mother
> who had gone without telling me, I hated my father who had done nothing to stop
> her, I hated God because he had willed such a thing to happen, and I hated my
> grandfather because he thought it normal for God to will such things.[397]

And so, it appears, that Simonini's *cogito* has its roots in the disappearance of his mother.

Simonini is left, young and blank except for the hate that roils within him. This is

an important note, because it allows for that which comes next—the construction of

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[395] Susanne Winkler, *Ambiguity: Language and Communication* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 18 and Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 261.

[396] Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 47.

[397] Ibid.

Simonini's encyclopedia in seclusion.[398] He is, in other words, an empty vessel waiting to

be filled by the cultural encyclopedia as it exists in his grandfather and father's mind.

And that is what this chapter is about, what it sets out to show. How does one construct or

encounter an encyclopedia, twist it into a narrative, and then embody it?[399] This will, of

course, lead me to ask the following question in the next chapter: How does one construct

a theory that becomes a narrative or narrativize a theory that, on either end of the

spectrum, constructs *a* reality. In both cases, it is ambiguity that reveals the construction

as one possibility among many.

Getting back to Simonini, however, I can see that as a boy, he was left secluded

and impressionable because of the loss of his mother. While this might have created the

cultural unit of <<Mother>>[400] or <<Woman>> in his encyclopedia, it was most certainly

not the only encounter that contributed to that entry. What I am proposing, in other

words, is the examination of those encounters in the world that contributed to the

construction of Simonini's encyclopedia before looking at one possible instance of

ambiguity in Simonini's youth. In this case, considering the cultural unit <<Woman>>,

there are two more to consider.

Since Simonini did not attend public school, he was educated by Jesuits brought

into his home at the behest of his grandfather. One such priest, Father Bergamaschi,

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[398] Ibid., 64: "When I reached eighteen, my grandfather, who wanted me to be a lawyer . . .
resigned himself to letting me out of the house and sending me to university. This was my first chance to
mix with boys my own age, but it was too late, and I felt uneasy around them."

[399] This can, of course, work the other way around. One can have an encounter with the material
world and from that construct an encyclopedia.

[400] As a reminder, the <<X>> construction refers to the content of a given cultural unit and neither
the spoken word nor thing in itself.

taught him the evils of communism. Babette of Interlaken, he told Simonini, was known as the "Great Virgin of Swiss Communism."[401] She was beyond salvation as a debauched and thieving murderer. "Babette, her blond hair blowing in the wind," the priest said, "like the Whore of Babylon, concealed beneath her mantle of charms the fact that she was the herald of secret societies, the demon who orchestrated all the tricks and intrigues of those mysterious confraternities."[402] With enchantment and thaumaturgy, Babette could overwhelm men and governments alike. It was assumed, given her knack for controlling the powerful, that she was possessed by Satan.

And how does Simonini respond? What does he store away inside his encyclopedia? He was shocked and horrified, but could not stop himself from dreaming of Babette. "I wanted to block out the pictures of that blond demon . . . surely naked, that demonic, fragrant hobgoblin, her breasts heaving rapturously with godless, sinful pride."[403] Yet, Simonini admits, he wants to model her, imitate her, and be like her. He, too, desires to be "a secret and all-powerful agent who forged passports and led victims of the other sex to perdition."[404] That which terrifies him, in other words, he yearns to become so that he can destroy it as it exists as *an other*.[405]

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[401] Ibid., 63.

[402] Ibid.

[403] Ibid.

[404] Ibid.

[405] Fig 4.1. The picture below is taken from *The Prague Cemetery*, 64. The caption reads: "I was startled, I tried not to listen, but at night I dreamt of Babette of Interlaken."

fig. 4.1

The cultural unit <<Woman>> then is filled, so far, with absence, lust, and debauchery but also an enticing mystery. <<Woman>> is something other to be hated and feared, consigned to nightmares of passion.

    The final encounter with women in Simonini's youth that contributed to the construction of his encyclopedia of hate came when he was shown, by a companion, a nineteenth-century *Playboy*. "I shuddered as I turned the pages and found engravings," he writes, "that sent streams of sweat trickling from my hair down to my cheeks and

neck."[406] He cannot recall how that "turbulent" night ended, but he does pull from the recesses of his mind an old scrap of wisdom stored in the encyclopedia of his childhood. "All this feminine charm," he chants to himself, "is nothing but phlegm, blood, humors, bile . . . how can we ever want to embrace a sack of excrement?"[407]

Added to Simonini's <<Woman>> then is her physiological embodiedness held against her. <<Woman>> is nothing more nor less than fluids and waste. It is shocking, no doubt, for many readers of the twenty-first century to encounter Simonini's words. As shocking, in fact, for him to conceive of a woman in other terms. If I approach Simonini through ambiguity, however—rather than only revulsion and fear—then I can see ambiguity working on two levels. Ambiguity, might I remind you, is an awareness that the encyclopedia, which allows for understanding and the embodied world given as reality, is cognized into a narrative that is and can only be *as if*.

The first level of ambiguity for Simonini is the ambiguity that he encounters as a protagonist. His mother gone, he is raised in a world of men. Discovering women throughout his adolescence can only result in ambiguous entanglements—moments when the material world added to, stretched, or altered his encyclopedic entry on <<Woman>>. The second level of Simonini's ambiguity is that of the reader's, in so far as Simonini represents ambiguity itself. To a reader who adheres to modern, Western-liberal values, Simonini likely repulses. She does not want Simonini to construct his encyclopedia—or have it constructed—in such a way that <<Woman>> is disparaged. For this reader,

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[406] Ibid., 74.

[407] Ibid., 75.

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ambiguity is the terrifying prospect of accepting Simonini's encyclopedia into the Universal Encyclopedia of human construction. Simonini is ambiguous, in other words, because he confronts the reader's assumptions and challenges her. Not to hate women, but to reconcile herself to the possibility that hate is a human—as opposed to monstrous—reality. The abhorrence of Simonini, in other words, is a line of resistance that the reader cannot escape.

This realization or encounter with ambiguity results in the state of ambiguity wherein the reader can foresee, one, that encyclopedias are constructions and that, even if distasteful (destructive even), an encyclopedia is still an encyclopedia. Two, encyclopedias lead to narratives that are embodied in the world of things by the way in which the reader arranges her experiences through cultural units. These narratives proliferate into infinity and coexist as equiprobable. As repugnant as it is, Simonini's narrative is as valid[408]—in so far as it is a narratival construction—as mine. The validity of any narrative, in other words, is neutral. Three, the arrangement of experiences can always be ordered differently. The way in which I sort, organize, and make palatable my narrative is a choice. I am not bound by the already present and ever-existing encyclopedia. An encounter with ambiguity affords me the opportunity to choose otherwise.

This choice, revealed in the state of ambiguity, leads me to consider <<Accountability>> and <<Responsibility>>. But these are difficult encyclopedic entries laden with their own cultural interpretants. And yet, I can conceive of no other way to

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[408] I discuss "validity" more fully below.

articulate choice. When in the non-judgmental space of ambiguity that has been instigated by an ambiguous encounter, I am thrust into a choice of equiprobability. From one node to another, the path which I traverse is an alternative that I am both accountable to and responsible for. In Simonini's case, even given the circumstances of his youth, he is answerable for <<Woman>> and the way in which he embodies his arranged narrative. The interplay between an already given encyclopedia, a lived experience, and a constructed, as if narrative, which all point towards the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality, does not, in other words, result in the abdication of ethics. There are lines of resistance written into every hermeneutical cluster.[409] While all narratival arrangements are equiprobable in the non-judgmental space of ambiguity, not all are equally valid once chosen and submitted to the community for ratification.[410]

How can this be? How can I speak of encyclopedias alongside choice, accountability, and responsibility? For the answer to that question, you will have to wait a little longer. Before I discuss the moment that challenged the young Simonini to open up his encyclopedia, I will first look at the way in which his grandfather and father constructed the <<Jew>> and the <<Jesuit>>.

<div align="center">From My Grandfather: Mordechai the Monster</div>

Sitting with his grandfather, Simonini learned that Abbé Barruel had sown the seeds of universal conspiracy. For the abbot, the Knight Templars and Freemasons were

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[409] Cf. Benjamin John Peters, *Sigurd's Lament: An Alliterative Epic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 52–8.

[410] I say more about this below.

at fault. But it was clear to Simonini's grandfather, Giovanni Battista Simonini,[411] that Barruel had misrepresented the scope of the plot. He had forgotten the Jews and their desire to "destroy the name of Christ wherever possible."[412] It was the Jews, Giovanni argued, that stood behind all plots, pulling the strings of power.

But how could Giovanni know this? He had heard it from the Jews themselves.[413] What follows is disturbing but, as Eco writes, "the only fictitious character in this story is the protagonist, Simone Simonini. His grandfather . . . is not invented."[414] The characters in *The Prague Cemetery*, in fact, "actually existed, and said and did what they are described as saying and doing in this novel."[415] The <<Jew>> then, as an entry into Simonini's encyclopedia, was mercilessly and meticulously constructed by Giovanni's own creation, the exiled Jew, Mordechai.

"If you don't behave yourself and go straight to sleep," Giovanni would threaten Simonini, "the horrible Mordechai will come visit you tonight."[416] Young and scared, Simonini would imagine Mordechai, "dribbling lubriciously, muttering, 'Fee-fi-fo-fum, I

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[411] From here on out, I will refer to Simonini's grandfather, Giovanni Battista Simonini, as Giovanni.

[412] Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 52.

[413] Ibid.

[414] Ibid., 438.

[415] Ibid.

[416] Ibid., 58.

smell the blood of a Christian boy.'"[417] And what was this story that so terrified a little

boy from Turin and contributed to his cultural unit <<Jew>>?[418]

fig. 4.2

Let me suggest, first, that the text here, reprehensible no doubt, is asking

something of its reader. It is asking her to enter into the mind of the other as constructed.

I am not speaking here of Mordechai, but Simonini. He is hate, racism, and violence. He

[417] Ibid.

[418] Fig. 4.2. Ibid., 60. Caption reads: " . . . almost hearing the terrible old man's footsteps on the wooden staircase, coming to get me, to drag me off to his infernal den, to feed me unleavened bread made with the blood of infant martyrs."

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is all that I hope I am not. But the text asks me to enter into him for a time and participate in the construction of intolerance. Is this acceptable? Even for a novel? For a genre that reveres decorum? If the task of religious aesthetics is to examine the narratival paths that humans traverse, then when should it turn back in the fear of legitimizing that which it only seeks to understand?

When does ambiguity overstep?

Mordechai was a Syrian Jew suspected of murdering an Arab boy. Found in a ditch, the body was "cut into a thousand pieces and pounded in a mortar."[419] It was likely, Giovanni thought, that Mordechai had falsely baptized the child for use in Passover, because Jews needed Christian blood to make their bread. But Mordechai could not find a Christian boy, so he settled for a baptized Arab. Baptism, you see, is efficacious regardless who performs it. So unwittingly, and even though Satan himself assuredly stood behind it, the Arab boy was saved and committed into heaven.

Tortured by the police, Mordechai finally confessed. Five other Jews were rounded up and executed, but Mordechai was set free with "dislocated limbs."[420] After a series of unfortunate events, he arrived in Turin and met Giovanni. It was there that Simonini's grandfather first learned of the Jews' universal plot. For Mordechai:

> told him how their Talmud preached hatred of the Christian race, and how in order to corrupt the Christians, they, the Jews, had invented Freemasonry, of which he had become one of their nameless superiors, and that he commanded lodges from Naples to London, but he had to remain hidden, living in secret, segregated from the world, so as not to get knifed by the Jesuits, who were hunting for him everywhere . . . [but the Jews had] vowed to become rulers of the

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[419] Ibid., 54.

[420] Ibid.

world in less than a century, to abolish all other sects so that theirs would reign supreme, to build as many synagogues as there were Christian churches and to reduce everyone else to slavery.[421]

Giovanni, utilizing synecdoche, ended in a flourish: "I had learned from all of them what, in fact, I had heard from one man alone."[422]

Poured into Simonini's cultural unit <<Jew>> was, first, that there was a universal plot to overtake and rule the systems of the world. This plot was instigated by the Jews and had been in motion for centuries. The Jew, according to Giovanni, would stop at nothing to achieve its goal. Added to this was the depiction of the Jew as a drinker of blood and someone who was both merciless and immoral. In fact, given Mordechai's absolute dedication to his plot, Giovanni characterizes the Jew—again, via synecdoche— as inhuman.

Yes, Giovanni wrote the encyclopedic entry for <<Jew>>, which was stored away in Simonini's cultural paradigm. But he also achieved something else. He constructed an enemy for Simonini. And though I principally discuss this in the next chapter, the construction of an enemy is central not only to Eco's system of thought but also to the way in which I engage Eco's theory to narrative to theory translation. Here, of course, is the narrative. A young man's encyclopedia is written for him—not out of nothing, but through the texts of his community—in such a way that he then acts out or embodies it in the created reality that he has chosen. To him, this construction is absolute. For the encyclopedia as the cultural repertoire of a given society, as its historical memory, "is

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[421] Ibid., 55–6.

[422] Ibid., 56.

based on the conviction that there can be no meaning, or language or culture outside and independently of the community in which the speakers are defined and exist."[423] To Simonini then, the <<Jew>> is and can only be the enemy.

This is not only a construction of <<Jew>>, however, it is also a glimpse into the construction of Simonini's identity. "Having an enemy," Eco writes, "is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one."[424] Any notion that the Jews, in any way, resemble the characters in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is patently false. It is pure creation. And yet, for Giovanni, and subsequently Simonini, it is wholly true. The <<Jew>> as a cultural unit is diabolical. This "fact" not only contributes to Simonini's store of cultural knowledge but also allows him to measure his system of values. In seeing <<Jew>> through his grandfather's lens, Simonini is able to establish a counterweight to his own identity. He can overcome the <<Jew>>, his enemy, and in doing so "demonstrate his own worth."[425] This is clear, as an example, when Simonini describes his first meetings with Froïde.[426]

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[423] Marco Santambrogio and Patrizia Violi, "Introduction," in *Meaning and Mental Representation*, ed. Umberto Eco, Marco Santambrogio, and Patrizia Violi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 22.

[424] Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2011), 2.

[425] Ibid.

[426] Fig. 4.3. Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 6. The caption reads: "I dreamt about Jews every night for years and years."

fig. 4.3

"He sat alone at a nearby table," Simonini writes:

> and at first we limited ourselves to polite nods. I judged him to be gloomy by
> nature, ill at ease, timidly eager for someone to confide in, to unburden his
> anxieties . . . but I had always remained aloof . . . I nevertheless knew that all
> Jews who live and make money in Paris have German names, and, my suspicions
> having been raised by his hooked nose . . . 'I prefer to keep my distance—Jew and
> German are a mix I don't much like.'[427]

And again:

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[427] Ibid., 37.

> There are Paris intellectuals who, before expressing their distaste for Jews, concede that some of their best friends are Jews. Hypocrisy. I have no Jewish friends (God forbid). All my life I've avoided Jews. Perhaps I have instinctively avoided them, because the Jew (like the German) can be identified by his smell . . . This and other signs help them to recognize each other, as pederasts do. My grandfather used to say that their smell is due to the excessive use of garlic and onion . . . But it must also be the race itself—their infected blood, their feeble loins. They are all communists.[428]

Yet the reader knows, or will know by the next chapter, that Simonini's dislike of Jews has nothing to do with instinct, unless she is willing to say that one's encyclopedia has an instinctual effect upon the embodying individual. Either way, the point here is that whatever Simonini might think about Froïde, the reader can assume the opposite is true for the protagonist. "He has a hooked nose," the reader might interpret, "but not like me. I have no such contorted appendage." The Jew, or <<Jew>>, is nothing more than a cultural unit by which Simonini can construct his own, superior identity.

The <<Jew>> is constructed out of the bibliography of Giovanni for a young Simonini, who will, no doubt, add his own texts to the entry.[429] Is he forgiven for this? Is it his fault? Is he accountable and responsible for the cultural units that comprise his reality? To ask it differently, when does the non-judgmental space of ambiguity cross into the judgmental reality of communal life? In other words, how does one judge between competing narratives, especially when those narratives are already given?

From My Father: The Jesuit as Pedophile

Simonini's father is absent. He is often gone, fighting with the Carbonari, those Italian nationalists who sought an independent, constitutionally ruled republic. Perhaps

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[428] Ibid., 38.

[429] Ibid., 57, "I pass the flame of witness on to you."

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this is because of his lost wife or because his father, Giovanni, was an ardent monarchist

and, by all accounts, an oppressive and demanding personality who supported the Jesuits

then under attack by republican gangs. Giovanni, in fact, sees the emerging Italian

republic as "the advent of the Antichrist," an event instigated by Jewish intrigue and the

plots of Mordechai.[430] Whatever the reason, when Simonini's father is present, he is often

distracted and lethargic.

For my purposes, however, what is important is that Simonini's encyclopedia is

shaped in two significant ways by his father. The first is when Simonini discovers his

father's cache of popular culture concealed in Giovanni's attic.[431] Inside are the formative

novels, newspapers, and *feuilletons* of Simonini's youth. Chief among them is his father's

Le Constitutionnel, which serialized Eugène Sue's *The Wandering Jew*. "It was here,"

Simonini writes, "that I learned how the infamous Society of Jesus had managed to plot

the most abominable crimes to seize an inheritance, trampling on the rights of poor, good

people."[432]

If Simonini learns of the Jesuit's "plot" in the attic of his grandfather—Eco's

protagonists are always stumbling upon important cultural artifacts in the attics of his

novels—then his encyclopedic entry on <<Jesuits>> and <<Priests>> are solidified by

those rare moments of interaction between him and his father. "I hated the [Jesuit]

teacher of the moment, not just because his way of teaching was by rapping my knuckles,

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[430] Ibid., 67.

[431] Ibid., 75.

[432] Ibid., 66.

but also because my father . . . had instilled in me a hatred of priests."[433] And what was

this hatred comprised of?

> It is Jesuitism that undermines, torments, afflicts, vilifies, persecutes, destroys
> men of free spirit; it is Jesuitism that drives good and valiant men out of public
> positions and replaces them with others who are base and contemptible; it is
> Jesuitism that slackens, obstructs, torments, harasses, confuses, weakens, corrupts
> public and private education in a thousand ways . . . [after an incredibly long list
> of that which Jesuitism is responsible for][434] . . . No sect in the world is so gutless
> . . . so hard and ruthless when its own interests are at stake, as the Company of
> Jesus . . . the Jesuits of Italy kill the soul with their tongues, like reptiles, or with
> their pens.[435]

And here, something incredibly formative happens to Simonini, two things that are also

added to his encyclopedia. One, "pens" have the power to shape reality. And two, "I have

always been amused," Simonini's father tells him, "Gioberti took some of these ideas

secondhand from *The Wandering Jew*."[436] Gioberti is the writer of a text wherein

Simonini's father first encountered the "true nature" of the Jesuits, ideas repurposed from

a novel. Why is this important? Because it is here that Simonini learns to take what is

already known in a culture's encyclopedia and twist it ever so slightly in order to

manipulate and contort a given cultural unit. Between the pen and the recycling of

cultural knowledge, Simonini is able to construct the lies of *The Protocols of the Elders

of Zion*. He later admits as much:

> if I wanted to sell the story of conspiracy, I didn't have to offer the buyer anything
> original, but simply something he already knew or could have found out more

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[433] Ibid., 59.

[434] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2009) on the function of lists in literature.

[435] Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 61.

[436] Ibid.

easily in other ways. People believe only what they already know, and this is the beauty of the Universal Form of Conspiracy.[437]

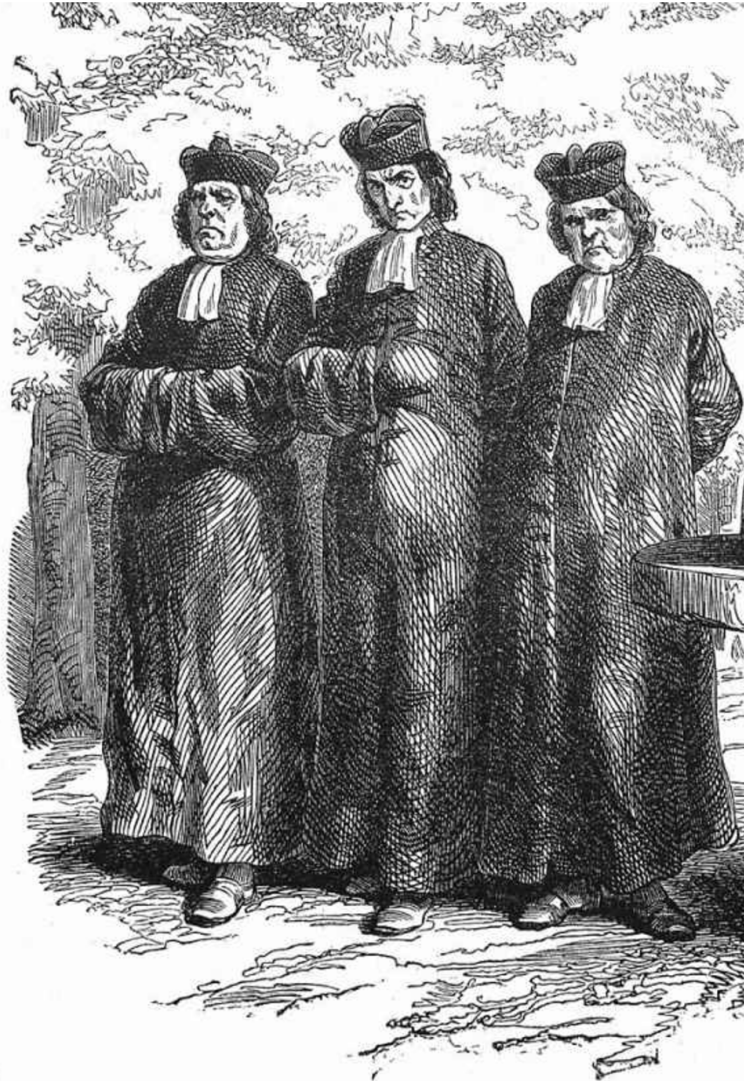And, I might add, the importance of ambiguity, of that which expands the already known.[438]

fig. 4.4

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[437] Ibid., 79.

[438] Fig. 4.4. Ibid., 15. Caption reads: "Jesuits are Masons dressed up as women."

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The <<Jesuits>> then are violent liars and manipulators "dressed up as women." They are hypocrites who use their positions of religious authority to wield and exploit power to their own ends. They are even, Simonini suggests, pedophiles who seek out tutoring positions so that they can touch little boys.[439] They are all this and more, for they too are entangled in the universal plot to conquer the world.

What do all of these cultural units in Simonini's encyclopedia add up to? "I have known many people who feared the conspiracy of some hidden enemy," he writes:

> for my grandfather it was the Jews, for the Jesuits it was the Masons, for my Garibaldian father it was the Jesuits . . . Who knows how many other people in this world still think they are being threatened by some conspiracy? Here's a form to be filled out at will, by each person with his own conspiracy . . . No one believes their misfortunes are attributable to any shortcomings of their own; that is why they must find a culprit. Dumas offers, to the frustration of everyone (individuals as well as countries), the explanation for their failure. It was someone else, on Thunder Mountain, who planned your ruin.[440]

The cultural units of Simonini are tools by which he can turn the encyclopedia to his own ends, manipulate the populace, and wield his own form of power. <<Women>> are seductresses. <<Jews>> are sinister. <<Jesuits>> are hypocritical pedophiles. Simonini, however, is outside of it all, pulling the strings of history. But what he fails to realize is that his encyclopedia, too, was constructed, organized, and maneuvered in such a way that his narrative was already written. And it is this failure—of self-reflection?—that leads Simonini to overlook his encounter with ambiguity and his confrontation with choice.

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[439] Ibid., 64.

[440] Ibid., 78

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Ambiguity and Thing

At nearly fourteen,[441] Simonini has his first encounter with ambiguity. And to

remind you, ambiguity violates, challenges, and produces further knowledge. It is

accountable to *a reality*, but not irreducibly so, as it also has the potential for opening

significations of the material world. Ambiguity is strategically produced and employed

through creative contradictions in the already given cultural encyclopedia, contradictions

that not only transform and expand the code, but also change the material world—not just

my perceptions of it. And, finally, ambiguity is that which reveals, highlights, or brings

my attention to the provisionality or the as-if-ness of the narrative that I take for granted.

It is also that space in which I can analyze my own provisional assumptions and begin to

account for the potentiality of other ways of seeing and doing.

Simonini's code is comprised of those cultural units written for him by his

grandfather and father—<<Woman>>, <<Jew>>, <<Jesuit>>—and then stitched together

to form a narrative of embodiment. It is the task of religious aesthetics, as I have argued,

to show or reveal this narratival construction, the way in which any set of cultural units

are arranged into a string that constitutes a narrative that can then be embodied in the

world of things. Sometimes these narratives correspond to materiality, often, however,

they contradict it. This is not to say that the material world is right, only that it provides

me with a line of resistance.

I might think, given *Dumbo*, that elephants use their floppy ears to fly. But when

provided with the line of resistance that is the material world, I must either check myself

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[441] Ibid., 58.

into Bedlam or rearrange my cultural encyclopedia—even as I must also admit *Dumbo* as an interpretant into my construction of the cultural unit <<Elephant>>. When this confrontation with a line of resistance happens, when an already given encyclopedia is confronted with that which is ambiguous, then my already arranged, as if narrative has the potential to be unmasked as provisional. It is in that moment, in that space of ambiguity, that the possibility for choosing differently arises. I can traverse alternative paths. I can construct my encyclopedia otherwise. I can, through abduction, negotiate a new narrative that will, until I stumble upon another line of resistance, remain provisional.[442]

Simonini's encyclopedic narrative as arranged by his grandfather and father represent *a reality*. And though distasteful to many modern, Western academics, it is a reality that cannot be dismissed as either atypical or unworthy of consideration. It is, in other alarming words, one valid reality among many. By valid, however, I do not mean either "correct" or "true," but rather consistent with an arranged set of cultural units. Valid, here, is not a value judgment. Imagine the key of "C" in music. If, given "C," I want to play the twelve bar blues, then I must, according to tradition, play the corresponding IV and V chords, "F" and "G." In the key of "C" then, "F" and "G" are absolute and valid for that which I set out to accomplish. I cannot play "A" or "B" and hope to arrive back at "C" without dissonance and confusion. Changing the key, however, allows me to maintain the arrangement of the twelve bar blues while utilizing a different set of absolute and valid chords. In "C" though, I am bound by the IV and the V.

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[442] Chapters Five and Six will more fully espouse the notions of "abduction" and "negotiation" as essential to the ambiguous space.

To make that claim is not to make a value judgment. The key of "C" is what it is, even if music—through ambiguity?—affords a key change via a common chord.

Simonini's encyclopedic narrative is valid in the sense that the key of "C" is a valid key in which to play the twelve bar blues.[443] That which comprises the key of "C" is absolute, but not for all of the potential occurrences of a given twelve bar blues arrangement. I can play, in other words, "Kind Hearted Woman," in either "C" or "G" depending on my mood, context, or desire. So, yes, Simonini's code is valid, if reprehensible, which leads me to the question: How do I judge between competing narratives? How do I decide to play in either "C" or "G?"

Approaching fourteen, Simonini wanders the limits of Piedmont's ghetto. It is there that he meets

> a girl with black hair who crosses piazza Carlina each morning carrying a basket covered with a cloth to a nearby shop. Fiery gaze, velvet eyes, dark complexion . . . Impossible that she's a Jewess, that those men my grandfather has described, with rapacious features and venomous eyes, could produce a woman like her. And yet she can only have come from the ghetto.[444]

This is the first time, Simonini admits, that he has looked upon a woman. His heart pounds. His palms sweat. He becomes enraptured by her sight. She is, for Simonini, the embodiment of ambiguity, cutting across his arranged, as if narrative. This encounter in the material world, this line of resistance, provides him a glimpse into an alternate reality. And for a moment, Simonini—*Odi ergo sum*—appears human. What can he do? Can he

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[443] I do not think that one can defer to a concept of beauty here—that one rendition of the twelve-bar blues is more beautiful than another. For what is beauty but a subject category that I wield to prop up my own encyclopedia?

[444] Ibid., 59.

rearrange his encyclopedia? Can he reject the wisdom of his grandfather? Can he traverse an alternate path and embody a different as if narrative?

In that liminal space of ambiguity, Simonini realizes the equiprobability of his encyclopedia. He is afforded the possibility of playing in a different key. And what does he do? "One morning I dare to stop the girl and, eyes lowered, ask her if I can help carry her basket."[445] He challenges his narrative! He seeks out a change in key. But, according to Simonini:

> she replies haughtily, in dialect, that she can manage perfectly well by herself. But she doesn't call me *manssü*, but *gagnu*, boy . . . I've been humiliated by a daughter of Zion. Is it perhaps because I'm fat? This, in fact, marks the beginning of my war against the daughters of Eve.[446]

Simonini rejects ambiguity. He falls back into his key and decides—then and there—to embody fully the arranged, as if narrative that he has received. In that moment, however, he had a choice between the unforeseen potentiality of untraversed paths and the already known and given encyclopedia. What would have come of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had Simonini chosen differently? If he had swallowed his pride and seen the "fiery gaze" of the other as a line of resistance? But he did not, and the horrific tale of violence, hate, and racism was as well as already written.

If religious aesthetics, as I have conceived of it, allows us to peel back the layers of an embodied, as if narrative and its encounter with the world of things, then it is also an exercise in understanding. This understanding is not a stamp of approval, however. It is a negotiation in the ambiguous, cultural world of encyclopedias. Simonini's choice is

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[445] Ibid.

[446] Ibid.

abhorrent, but a choice nevertheless. And it is this choice, and my willingness to condemn it, that betray the judgmental side of ambiguity. I choose, because I must. But how is it that I can choose one narrative? What allows me to call one encyclopedic arrangement abhorrent over against another, equiprobable arrangement? Simply, my arranged, as if narrative and the community of interpreters that I find myself in. There is no standard of judgment, in other words, that stands outside of all encyclopedias.

We are all responsible and accountable.

And in so far as Simonini seeks to integrate his encyclopedia into the global repository of knowledge, I can—much like merging a pull request from GitHub[447]— reject it. This is similar to the European Union saying to Turkey, "If you want to join the EU, then you must do x, y, and z. You must, in other words, adopt and then embody our encyclopedia." The choice is Turkey's alone, but one for which—in terms of the outcome—they are responsible for and accountable to.

Simonini's narrative is despicable to me, and many others, because I refuse to embody it. But as Will Eisner has shown in *The Plot: The Secret Story of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, many others have not.[448] And, while that is more than just disheartening, what can I (or Eisner or Eco) do other than strategically create confrontations with ambiguity?

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[447] "Merging a Pull Request from GitHub," accessed on July 25, 2017, https://help.github.com/articles/ merging-a-pull-request/.

[448] Will Eisner and Umberto Eco, *The Plot: The Secret Story of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

Conclusion

My ambiguous confrontation with Simonini's ambiguity has not only employed the theory outlined in Part I of this work, but it has also answered the question: How does one construct or encounter an encyclopedia, twist it into a narrative, and then embody it? The answer to this question was given by a close analysis of the chapter "In My Grandfather's Day" and the way in which Simonini constructed his cultural units, arranged them into a valid narrative, and then embodied that narrative in the world of things.

Through Simonini, I was also able to accomplish two things. One, that ambiguity reveals, highlights, and brings my attention to the provisionality or the as-if-ness of the narratives that I take for granted. It is also that space in which I can analyze my own provisional assumptions and begin to account for the potentiality of other ways of seeing and doing. And two, that the task of religious aesthetics is to peel back the layers of an already given cultural encyclopedia to reveal, analyze, and understand the as if narratives that humanity embodies.

In this way, I claimed that Simonini's ambiguity functioned within the literary world of *The Prague Cemetery* when he encountered the fiery gaze of the other, but that he also represented ambiguity for a certain kind of reader—namely, me, a male, Western, and liberal academic. Simonini's repugnance forced me to ask myself why I discounted him, which led to the question: how do I choose or judge between competing, though equiprobable narratives? If ambiguity instigates the possibility for constructing and embodying a different as if narrative, then the choice of which narrative ultimately lies

with the individual traversing ambiguous spaces. Not alone, however, when entering back into the communal world, I must seek to ratify my choice with the interpretive community within which I find myself. The larger the community (like the European Union), however, the more power it has to force an already given, co-constructed, as if reality.

And finally, the choices I make as an individual or as a member of a ratifying community are choices that I am both accountable to and responsible for. There is no one, no community, or no *thing* that stands outside of cultural units, encyclopedias, and as if narratives to which the Universal Encyclopedia can defer.

We are our own legislators and judges. That which we choose and then embody is on our heads alone. To seek something outside of the encyclopedia is to abdicate both choice and responsibility.[449] It is to construct an as if narrative that discounts the line of resistance. It is to embody a reality in which elephants fly. And it is, finally, to forgo the open, plurivocality of ambiguity for the totalizing, univocality of dogma. It is a refusal to maintain provisionality.

In the following chapter, stepping back from *The Prague Cemetery*, I ask the question: How does one construct a theory that becomes a narrative or narrativize a theory that, on either end of the spectrum, constructs *a* reality that, through ambiguity, is seen as only one possibility among many. By examining how Eco's own theory of ambiguity was narrativized—via *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* and *Inventing the Enemy*—I continue to build upon the thesis that the interplay between an already given

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[449] The question still might be raised, to what are we responsible? To which I can only answer—to choice.

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encyclopedia, lived experience, and a constructed, as if narrative all point towards the

provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

EXCURSUS TWO: *THE KINGDOM*

"I'm an agnostic writer who wants to know what exactly Christians believe today. If you want to share that with me, I'd be delighted; if not, I won't bother you any longer."[450]

Introduction

"Between the word of God and my understanding, it's the word of God that counts, and it would be silly of me to retain only what jibes with my limited understanding. Never forget: it's the Gospel that judges me, not the opposite."[451]

Creative nonfiction is a burgeoning field. It is not the place of this excursus to convince you of that. It is the place, however, to argue that creative nonfiction and ambiguity go hand-in-hand. To write true stories with literary and artistic style in such a way that the events are verifiable, even as the gaze of the writer is entangled with the narrative, is to write with an intrinsic understanding of ambiguity. That which happened is ordered and arranged in such a way that the telling cannot be separated from the event. To critique a thing as "not true" or to say that "it didn't happen that way" is an inappropriate approach to this ambiguous genre. If you disagree, then disagree in writing. Tell me a story, a true story, from your perspective.

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[450] Emmanuel Carrère, *The Kingdom*, trans. John Lambert (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 8.

[451] Ibid., 33–4.

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It is my argument—lock and load your criticisms—that creative nonfiction is a genre of ambiguity, and that this is reflected in Emmanuel Carrère's work, *The Kingdom*. If there is an underlying assumption to this excursus, then it is that academic interdisciplinarity can learn much from Carrère and should, in fact, adopt his style as a means for expressing its liminal insights.

<div align="center">

A Disappointing Faith

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"I'm tempted to be ironic about the person I was, but I want to remember the confusion and terror I felt at the thought that the faith that had changed my life and to which I held above all else was endangered."[452]

While there are many creative nonfiction stories to choose from, Emmanuel Carrère's *The Kingdom* is a fitting companion for a book on religious aesthetics. A novel in four parts, *The Kingdom* recounts the story of Emmanuel Carrère's own brush with faith and subsequent spiral into doubt before historiographically tackling Paul, Luke, and the writing of the Gospels. Though perhaps discomfiting to some, *The Kingdom* is a work of creative nonfiction that, among many other things, problematizes the porous borders between fiction and history.

While one can recognize the intense research and analysis that went into writing it, one cannot help but read *The Kingdom*, and subsequently the *Gospel of Luke*, through the thoughtful eyes of Carrère. *The Kingdom*, in other words, is a work of both history and *poesis* that seeks to display the first-century Mediterranean world in all of its complexity while also projecting Carrère's emotion and context onto the record that it is

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[452] Ibid., 69.

trying to elucidate. And it is the essence of the projection that captures ambiguity. For in

Carrère's deft hands, faith is not only defamiliarized, but so too the Gospels, their

meaning, and the very idea of Christ.

Attending Easter Sunday at an Abbey during his intensely Christian period,

Carrère writes:

> The chapel is gray and ugly, lit by a dull light. The thick stone walls drip with
> humidity. The community now has no more than ten or so nuns, all old and
> wobbly on their feet . . . their voices falter and crack as they sing, and the bleating
> of the young priest who looks like the village idiot and who's come to bring them
> Communion isn't any better . . . no one really seems to be listening . . . Mass with
> the nuns isn't exactly cheerful. In fact, it's enough to fill you with sadness, and it
> would have sent me packing in the past—supposing I'd ever gone in there in the
> first place . . . But I say to myself: This is it, this is the kingdom. Everything that
> is weak, despised, and wanting: that is the dwelling place of Christ . . . But what if
> I were chased out? Or, worse still, if I were happy to leave? If one day I
> considered this time . . . an embarrassing episode.[453]

It is the tension between time and memory that makes this pericope so ambiguous. I

know that Carrère is agnostic and that he is honestly trying to recall this time in his life

without irony. I can see both his commitment and his disappointment, his hope and his

sadness. There is a desire to hold fast to faith, while also an admission that—even then—

he will not. And while Carrère is ambiguous in that he is problematizing, challenging,

and violating all kinds of codes, he is also self-reflexive, and light. There is a weightiness

to his writing that is neither heavy nor dense. The priest is a jester. The nuns are stoics.

And the place of infinite hope is dark and dank. I cannot help but read this—seriously,

soberly—but with the hint of a smile. I can visualize the chapel, its inhabitants, and I can

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[453] Ibid., 70–2.

see, too, Carrère, desperately frustrated by his own lack of desire and self-conscience to the point of embarrassment.

Outside of Carrère's ambiguity, that is what makes *The Kingdom* itself ambiguous. For I cannot forget this scene of disappointed and waning faith as I move into Carrère's historically researched and retold *Gospel of Luke*. It is the scenes of sad and depressing Christianity two-thousand years later that, in fact, shape my reading of Carrère's gospel. It is the intentional structuring of the work that is itself ambiguous, in that it continually questions, probes, and violates its own encyclopedia. It is ambiguous in that it ends with a question, which forces the reader to do the hard work of constructing meaning even if, as Carrère suggests in his epilogue, he had missed the point. That he was "completely off the mark."[454]

The Gospel According to Luke Carrère

"Maybe that's how it happened. Or . . . I think I have a better idea."[455]

Deep into his narrativizing of Luke's journalistic account of the life of Paul, Carrère discusses the two-year stay of the latter in Caesarea. It is here that Carrère begins to weave a tale of Luke's sleuth-like piecing together of Jesus's life. Carrère knows he is creating, admits it but—as a writer of creative nonfiction—claims there is little else that he could do. "Everything I've told until now," Carrère writes, "is known and more or less accepted."[456] True. He writes both eloquently and well about the beginnings of the Christ

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[454] Ibid., 378.

[455] Ibid., 98.

[456] Ibid., 196.

movement. He does not mislead. But then? "For [those] two years . . . I've got nothing. Not a single source. I'm free—and forced—to invent."[457] Carrère's project then becomes "to investigate what [Luke's] investigation *may* have been like."[458]

Is this history then or a fresh ordering of data given a creative imagination? I think it is a little of both. History is always an ordering after the fact. It is that which I believe to be true about a given event, which could change in accordance with new information. History, in other words, is fluid. And it is this admission that allows Carrère to claim that he is forced to invent. He has compiled the data, but it is yet to be ordered.

How shall it be arranged? Why, by Carrère's own encyclopedia, of course. And is that any different from what I have done? No. For I, too, collected, arranged, and organized given an encyclopedia, narrativizing theory, and embodied experience. I, too, have my moments where I am forced to invent.

And yet, invention is not a free for all. It is an accounting of that which presents itself to me. It is playing at Firstness through Thirdness, which is all I have anyway. It is an admission that narrativizing theories are revealed as provisional only when they have encountered the openness and potentiality of ambiguity.

"No," Carrère writes, "I don't believe that Jesus was resurrected. I don't believe that a man came back from the dead."[459] Even though he had earlier admitted that the

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[457] Ibid.

[458] Ibid., 197. Emphasis is mine.

[459] Ibid., 213.

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resurrection was the only truth upon which a life should be founded. "But the fact that

people do believe it," he continues:

> and that I believed it myself—intrigues, fascinates, troubles, and moves me—I don't know which verb is the most appropriate. I'm writing this book to avoid thinking that now that I no longer believe, I know better than those who do, and better than my former self when I believed. I'm writing this book to avoid coming down too firmly in my favor.[460]

Carrère once believed. He no longer does. And those that still do? They are

ambiguous events in Carrère's life. While he uses a string of different verbs, he could

have said that they violate, challenge, and question his encyclopedia. That, through them,

he is forced to consider their difference, commitment, and narrativizing theory as

coexistent incompatibility. It is *The Kingdom*, he even suggests, that has the sole purpose

of not only keeping him aware of ambiguity but also accountable to provisionality, a

reminder that he could be wrong about the other.

What an interesting approach to data collection. Carrère is not seeking to

convince through argument, but rather to hold himself accountable. To unearth his biases

and expose their provisionality. And, given his time and place, to posit *The Kingdom* as

an ambiguous text for the majority of liberal Westerners who have forgotten that their

own narrativizing theory is also a provisional construction.

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[460] Ibid.

"Yes, I think that Luke mourned James and everything he stood for, although his master declared it obsolete. And perhaps, while mourning, he got an idea. In any event, I'm getting one."[461]

In his actual construction of Luke's story, I learn much about the first-century Mediterranean world, the *Gospel of Luke*, and the role of ambiguity in creative nonfiction. I discover factual events. I stretch my intellect. But I also experience literature as an ambiguous event, which is always a metaphor for how I construct a reality from the lines of resistance that I receive from the world of things.

There is the capital "F" fact that I can only know through Thirdness. There is the encyclopedia and the narrativizing theory that I embody. There is ambiguity, standing in the middle, challenging and violating both code and percept. And there is Carrère creating the world of two-thousand years ago, writing:

> When [Luke] heard Paul bad-mouthing James, the Luke that I imagine—because, of course, he's a fictional character, all I'm saying is that this fiction is plausible—couldn't stop himself from thinking that James was right in a way. Or from thinking that Paul was right when James bad-mouthed him. Does that make him a hypocrite? One of those divided men to whom the Lord does not give himself? A man whose yes tends toward no, and whose no tends toward yes? I don't know. But I do think he's a man for whom the truth always has one foot in the opposite camp.[462]

The fiction is plausible. I agree. All fictions that stem from the world of experience are equiprobable. Carrère, in this way, is not writing about Luke, but <<Luke>>. And his relationship, his faith, was not with or in Jesus, but <<Jesus>>, that cultural unit that is

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[461] Ibid., 278.

[462] Ibid., 281–2.

filled with so much good, beauty, evil, and ugliness. What he teases out of it, of course, is due to *his* narrativizing theory, his tension with hypocrisy, and his continuing acknowledgement of truth's various sides.

Mapping his fiction onto reality, I then begin to read Carrère not as the author of *The Kingdom*, but as *The Kingdom's* protagonist. The "I" behind the data, collecting, organizing, and narrativizing a story. I cannot help but ask: Is this really about Luke's plausibility or the I's? That question, however, is the one I continually find myself hiding within. How do I choose between this reality and that? How do I embody ambiguity and provisionality and equiprobable realities? How do I judge when skipping from one node to the next in the ever expanding, ever flexible, and ever fluid network?

"The historian's job," the I quotes, "is to give the society in which he lives the feeling that its values are relative."[463] The academic too, especially of the interdisciplinary variety, is to provide the culture within which she lives the feeling of provisionality. Our narratives are not concrete, given, or natural. "I, too, am free to invent provided I say that I'm inventing, and set out . . . the degrees of the certain, the probable, the possible, and—right before the completely excluded—the not entirely impossible: the realm in which a good part of this book is based."[464]

Is there room for provisionality in the academic world of certainty? Can argument also function ambiguously?

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[463] Ibid., 288.

[464] Ibid., 293.

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"The program Luke sets himself is that of a historian. He promises Theophilus a field investigation, a report that can be trusted. But then what does he write no sooner than he's stated this intention, starting the very next line? Fiction. Pure fiction."[465] But these are my cultural categories rearing their head, not Luke's, surely. But can that be escaped? Am I not trapped within the horizon of my encyclopedia? No. The answer is always no. Ambiguity allows for the paradox of fictions that shape the world and expand the encyclopedia. I am not trapped. But I am accountable to and responsible for the choices I make in the space of ambiguity. Is not that correct?

And here is the hard admission of any academic wrestling with the truth of the thing that she writes. I don't know. I can think. I can suggest. I can posit. But can I know?

"But this isn't a fable by Aesop or La Fontaine," Carrère comments on Luke's parables:

> It's the Gospel. It's the final word on the kingdom: the dimension of life where God's will manifests itself. It would be another thing if it were a question of saying: 'That's what life on earth is like: unjust, cruel, arbitrary, we all know that, but you'll see, the kingdom is something else altogether . . .' But that's not it at all. Luke is saying nothing of the sort. Luke says, 'That *is* the kingdom.' And, like a Zen master after pronouncing a koan, he lets you figure it out for yourself.[466]

Conclusion

> As a history student, I had to write a dissertation on a topic of my choice. As I knew almost nothing about history but a lot about science fiction, I chose a topic I was sure to know more about than that entire jury: uchronia. Uchronia deals with fictions along these lines: What if things had happened differently?[467]

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[465] Ibid., 339.

[466] Ibid., 361.

[467] Ibid., 373.

The Kingdom stands as an ambiguous reminder of provisionality. "In a nutshell," Carrère writes, "I'm all for reading the Bible as it suits me, as long as I bear in mind that I'm doing just that. And I'm all for projecting myself onto the figure of Luke, as long as I'm aware that I'm projecting."[468] All of us, no matter how cringe-worthy the idea—project our emotion, context, and voice into our various projects. We all set out in our expertise to recount objectively the data, but, in the end, do little more than tell a story wherein the academic—much like Carrère in *The Kingdom*—embodies the "I" of the protagonist. And it is ambiguity that allows us to know that our projection is just that—a projection.

Why is this such an important reminder? Because when approached this way, academia is seen for what it is, a wonderfully world-enriching, but ultimately provisional, accumulation of knowledge. And when viewed as provisional, one cannot help but wonder if perhaps we should not all end our books as Carrère has done, with three simple and humble words: "I don't know."[469]

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[468] Ibid., 251.

[469] Ibid., 384.

CHAPTER FIVE: NARRATIVIZING THEORY IN *THE PRAGUE CEMETERY*

Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness) . . . Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the* Quixote[470]

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I employed my theory of ambiguity in the work of

deciphering the encyclopedia of *The Prague Cemetery's* protagonist, Simone

Simonini.[471] I argued that Simonini represents ambiguity on two levels: one, the

ambiguity that he confronts outside of Turin's ghetto, which resulted in the rejection of

an alternative reality, and two, the ambiguity that I encounter as a modern, Western

liberal upon facing Simonini's *odi ergo sum*. This allowed me to articulate the role of

aesthetic judgment or choice within my theory of ambiguity, which spawned a series of

questions: Should I ratify Simonini's local encyclopedia into the universal encyclopedia?

If I do, then how does his *cogito* alter my reality? If I do not, then by what rules do I

choose to reject it? Are the rules to which I defer constructed, assumed, or given as

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[470] Jorge Luis Borges, "*Pierre Menard, Author of the* Quixote," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 2007), 41–2.

[471] Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, trans. Richard Dixon (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

natural? In the end, I claimed that choice is both essential to ambiguity and that which maintains a responsible accountability.

The questions taken up in this chapter not only continue this line of inquiry but also explore the entanglement of fiction and reality. The purpose behind this approach is twofold: one, to engage further the possibilities of ordering one's encyclopedia and the way in which choice and provisionality are revealed by ambiguity. And two, to show the ways in which academia, through its theorizations and ideological structures, participates in this ordering. The later argument is neither a critique of objectivity nor a naïve deconstruction of the human and natural sciences. It is, rather, to suggest that *all* knowledge is organized, limited, and idiosyncratic, and, once confronted by ambiguity, provisional.[472] The theories that academics construct and then employ in the analysis of the material world are, in other words, tools for the narrativization of reality. And while it cannot be otherwise, both the tools and the narratives—as well as the material artifacts on which they are based—are temporary stopping points in an ever changing, ever fluid network. What I write today will not hold, for both the encyclopedia and the world are in flux.

The questions that I ask in this chapter then are rooted in Eco's analysis of Simone Simonini in the context of Eco's lectures on the distinction between fiction and reality, and how one might misstep when applying the former to the latter.[473] Filtered

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[472] Cf. Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead, 2017).

[473] Cf. Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

through my theory of ambiguity then, the questions become: What is the difference between a narrative and a theory? Where do they overlap? And how does the simultaneity of a narrativized theory further develop my understanding of ambiguity?

By way of a preliminary answer, let me refer you to the epigraph. Jorge Luis Borges writes that Pierre Menard composed "*the Quixote itself*,"[474] and in doing so created something "infinitely richer."[475] Why was it richer? Because it was ambiguous. This richness is similar to Eco's ambiguity-as-information-theory. Whereas Eco might say a given message is high in information (surprise), Borges might claim: "text x is high in richness, which is a measure of its ambiguity." The key is not the connection between Menard's excess and Eco's understanding of information theory, but rather the way in which Borges' short story introduces my concern for this chapter.

After admitting ambiguity into his aesthetic, Borges writes: history is the origin of reality. It is what the community of interpreters—me, you, and everyone else who is responsible for the universal encyclopedia—judges to have happened.[476] History, in other words, is an arranged or emplotted narrative that, first, forms a reality and then, second, gets ratified into Eco's universal encyclopedia. Am I then accountable to history? No. But I am, following from the last chapter, accountable to and responsible for that which I judge—choose—history to be.[477]

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[474] Ibid., 38.

[475] Ibid., 41.

[476] Ibid., 41–2.

[477] Cf. Clare Birchall, "Economic Interpretation," in *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 71–87.

To swap out history for narratives is to arrive at this chapter's concern. Or perhaps another way to phrase it would be to say that while history is the *a posteriori* arrangement of the universal encyclopedia, narratives are much the same for individual and local encyclopedias. Historians argue over, arrange, and analyze the former, while religious aesthetes, as an example, might take up, comment upon, and engage the latter. To keep the two separate is, of course, silly. There is overlap, entanglement, and shared information running through the multi-directional wires of heuristically tiered cultural encyclopedias. But for my purposes, Borges' commentary on Menard's *Quixote* influences this chapter in two, important ways.

One, it further reveals what Simonini was up to in *The Prague Cemetery*. His meticulous invention, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was an arrangement of the universal encyclopedia—a history to shape histories. It was a judgment upon an invented happening in order to steer the future course of events. Simonini's narrative was knowledge—arranged and ordered—that was, rather than provisional, certain. In this, unfortunately, it was largely successful.

And two, Borges' commentary reminds me that Eco's protagonist did not materialize out of thin air. He is, though fictional, a creation spawning from a judgment upon what happened. In this way, Eco's research into the historical construction of *The Protocols* mirrors both the arrangement of a given set of cultural units into a narrative and the object of study for religious aesthetics—those narratives that, once organized and embodied—shape an equiprobable reality. What I explore in this chapter then is "history

as the origin of reality" or the way in which Eco went about collecting scraps of historical data that then set off an aesthetic chain of events.

Eco researched Simonini and the historical construction of *The Protocols* in, among many places, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. From this, he articulated a theory of global conspiracy. Collecting it all together, he then wrote *The Prague Cemetery*, after which—shaped by the data, his arrangement of that data into a theory, and his narrativization of that theory—he espoused another, related idea, that of *Inventing the Enemy*.[478] To be clear, I am not concerned with the timeline in which these events happened,[479] but rather with the way data, theory, and narrative are all entangled. It is difficult, in other words, for even the most detailed scholar to say where the one begins and the other ends. To do so, in fact, is to betray an encyclopedic blindness. So much so, it is my contention, that what I take as "reality" is more often, if not always, a narrativized theory shaping my aesthetic judgments. This is not a reversion to concept making the world or semiotics over against embodiment, but rather an admission that the world of things (lines of resistance) and the world of ideas (encyclopedias comprised of cultural units) are so deeply entangled that they are nearly impossible to detangle.[480] As Eco writes it, there is:

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[478] Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2011).

[479] Why? Because the timeline of publication is different from Italy to America. Not only that, but because narrativizing theory relies upon distended reception as espoused in my work, *Sigurd's Lament: An Alliterative Epic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017): 42–60 and 199–214.

[480] Cf. Guy Raffa, "Eco's Scientific Imagination," in *New Essays on Umberto Eco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 34–49.

an astronomic infinity of books, each of which straddles different worlds, and stories that some have considered to be true will be seen as fictitious by others . . . So the *frisson* with which we perceive the ambiguous confines between fiction and reality is not only equal to the one that seizes us when faced with the books written by angels, but also to that which should seize us when faced with the series of books that represent, authoritatively, the real world.[481]

I am, in other words, struck equally by the ambiguity of reality when confronted by fiction and history alike.[482] The way in which I arrange reality and understand it through a cultural encyclopedia is neither natural nor a simple matter of facts—a conclusion that I can draw only through ambiguity and the liminality of the skinscape.

To answer my questions before more fully exploring the answers then, the difference between theory and narrative is that the former, in an ongoing process, arranges the latter. Theory and narrative overlap in that the process of ordering and embodiment is never a two-way street with a separating median, but an entangled, overlying network that is dynamic, connected, and simultaneous. I intuit, order, and narrativize in a tangled jumble of simultaneity. And it is that very simultaneity that allows me not only to account for ambiguity in "real time" but also to recognize my judgments as provisional. Though simultaneity and the space of ambiguity that allows for reflection might, at first glance, be at odds—they are not. For, as I previously stated, the space of ambiguity, the pulling out of the tangled simultaneity to account for potentialities, is at the speed of cognition. Or, as Eco might say (referencing Peirce and Calvino), abduction or conjecture is a quick, nimble, and light negotiation.

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[481] Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 365.

[482] Cf. Rocco Capozzi, "Preface," in *Reading Eco: An Anthology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), xvii–xxv.

To conclude this lengthy introduction, in this chapter I first analyze *Six Walks* and the way in which Eco's data translates into his theory. I then examine the ways in which *The Prague Cemetery* (Eco's narrativization of his theory) entangles with *Inventing the Enemy*. It is my argument that this process mirrors the way in which religious aesthetics should seek to understand the role of embodied narratives in the lives of human practitioners. If Eco's novel is the matter to his theory as encyclopedia, then it is my argument that his theories and narratives shuttle back and forth in a way similar to the entangled simultaneity of the semiotic and material worlds.[483] I argue, finally, that ambiguity exposes the way in which knowledge and realities are constructed and arranged, in so far as the event of ambiguity leads to a state of ambiguity (better understood together as the *process* of ambiguity) in which I can analyze potentialities— or, to put it differently, how a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

Walking in the Woods with Eco

I have written much about networks, nodes, and traversing glowing paths in a digital landscape. I have suggested that my contemporary encyclopedia is analogous to a hyperlinked Wikipedia—fluid, dynamic, and crowd sourced. I have referenced GitHub, artificial intelligence, and science fiction. And while these might be necessary metaphors for the situation in which I find myself, Eco's network is a vastly different, and much older picture.[484] Overgrown with forking paths and the terror of sublimity, the woods are

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[483] Cf. Eco on the "aesthetic effect" in *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2008), 93.

[484] Cf. H. L. Hix, "Review: Six Walks in the Fictional Woods by Umberto Eco," *Harvard Review*

a rhizome to Eco. And while informed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,[485] Eco's

rhizome is better understood in reference to Joycean puns and Borgesian labyrinths.[486] It

is a place of mystery, wit, and abduction. It is a forest of myths and fables that exists in

reality but is only realized when a reader enters into its dark, foreboding overgrowth. The

woods, to Eco, represent the process of interpretation, which includes lines of resistance,

abduction, choice, and textual responsibility, even as it remains open to infinite paths,

perspectives, and possibilities.

But why ruminate on Echian woods? Because it is there, within the expansive and

wild borders of generative invention, that I must go if I am to understand the ambiguity

of Simone Simonini.

"Woods," Eco writes, "are a metaphor for the narrative text, not only for the text

of fairy tales but for any narrative text."[487] There are no straight paths, however, for

within each wood are forking paths wherein "everyone can trace his or her own path,

deciding to go to the left or to the right of a certain tree and making a choice at every tree

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7, no. Fall (1994): 229: "Descartes founded modern philosophy, but he also reinforced it with hylophobia. By assuming that the woods are a place of danger from which one should try to escape, Descartes derives an ethical imperative from the metaphor of travelers lost in a forest who know to stay on a single course because, even if it is not the shortest route, it will eventually get them out. Descartes is terrified by the prospect of being lost in the woods, but Umberto Eco revels in the idea . . . [He] reverses Descartes' metaphor. Eco proposes fiction as a cure to modern philosophy's fear of the woods, so that this book is less a theory of fiction than an apology for it."

[485] Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, 2 ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[486] Cf. Umberto Eco and David Robey, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, trans. Ellen Esrock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Cristina Farronato, Eco's Chaosmos: From the Middle Ages to Postmodernity (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 8–31.

[487] Eco, *Six Walks*, 5.

encountered. In a narrative text, the reader is forced to make choices all the time."[488] I

enter the woods. I find myself confronted with a narrative. And I choose. "Indeed," Eco

continues, "this obligation to choose is found even at the level of the individual

sentence."[489]

While I am perhaps getting ahead of myself, it is necessary to call attention to the

role of choice in Eco's hermeneutic, which, of course, is never *just* a theory of

interpretation. For Eco's hermeneutics influence his aesthetics, which in turn influences

his epistemology. If I choose in the woods, then it is a safe bet that I also choose in

reality—or in those moments where I am actively arranging my experiences.[490] As I have

said, I choose and, by doing so, make history, which is *a* reality.

"To read fiction," Eco writes:

> means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that
> happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative,
> we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the
> world. This is the consoling function of narrative—the reason people tell stories,
> and have told stories from the beginning of time. And it has always been the
> paramount function of myth: to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human
> experience.[491]

There is an uncomfortable parallel here between Borges' history and Eco's

fiction. In both cases, the questions are what has happened? How do I order it? And, once

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[488] Ibid., 6.

[489] Ibid.

[490] Cf. Jerry A. Varsava, "Umberto Eco, Six Walks in the Fictional Woods," *International Fiction Review* 22, no. 1 and 2 (June 1, 1995): 89, "In short, the first-level Model Reader will attend to what the Russian Formalists called the *fabula* and what we refer to as the story or the natural chronology of events whereas the second-level Model Reader will focus on the *sjuzhet*, i.e., the plot or narrative chronology of the text, and enjoy time spent in the textual forest."

[491] Ibid., 87.

ordered, what do I call it? Or, perhaps better, what is true about that which is said to have happened? With "truth," however, I arrive back at the encyclopedia.[492] For a truth or a history or a fiction is only true given a set of contextual rules that are often only discovered after "a happening" by utilizing conjecture. And this is the metaphysical situation of which fiction serves as a reminder. Truth is always situated in or contextualized by an arranged and organized encyclopedia.[493]

Whereas the real world is full of forking paths, conjecture points, and cultural encyclopedias that require negotiation in order to arrive at a sense of truth, fictional worlds provide their readers "the comfortable sensation of living in worlds where the notion of truth is indisputable."[494] I know, in other words, that the companion of Sherlock Holmes is John Watson and that he was injured in Afghanistan while serving as Captain in the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. This is a fact that is and always will be true. It is the kind of fact that I can only encounter in fiction.[495]

History is the origin of reality. Fiction provides its reader with indisputable truth. It is from these two conundrums that Eco considers not only the role of the "Total Encyclopedia" in representing reality but also that "the way we accept the representation of the actual world scarcely differs from the way we accept the representation of fictional

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[492] Ibid., 89.

[493] Cf. Rafa, who, along with Mieke Bal, critiques this position as naïve, 166–7: "Eco fails to consider adequately the shared cultural grounds needed to establish limits to interpretation in the first place." While I completely disagree, of course, Eco set out to more clearly address this issue in both *Kant and the Platypus* and *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*.

[494] Eco, *Six Walks*, 91.

[495] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Book of Legendary Lands*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2013), 440–1.

worlds."[496] In both cases, I employ a set of interpretive techniques that help me find my way in the Echian woods.

But if truth can be taken for granted in fiction, in the world of things, "I must make some difficult decisions about my trust in the community . . . I must decide which portions of the Total Encyclopedia are to be trusted, while rejecting others as unreliable."[497] In the world of aesthetic perceptions, I have to choose, make judgments, and employ provisionality as an operative disposition. For without provisionality, I run the risk of continually circling back to a desired origin point and expiring from hunger.

"What is the moral of this story?" Eco asks:

> It is that fictional texts come to the aid of our metaphysical narrow mindedness. We live in the great labyrinth of the actual world, which is bigger and more complex than the world of Little Red Riding Hood. It is a world whose paths we have not yet entirely mapped out and whose total structure we are unable to describe. In the hope that rules of the game exist, humanity throughout the centuries has speculated about whether this labyrinth has an author, or perhaps more than one. And it has thought of God, or the gods, as if they were empirical authors, narrators, or model authors . . . But some (including philosophers, of course, but also adherents of many religions) have searched for God as Model Author—that is, God as the Rule of the Game, as the Law that makes or someday will make the labyrinth of the world understandable . . . The problem with the actual world is that, since the dawn of time, humans have been wondering whether there is a message and, if so, whether this message makes sense. With fictional universes, we know without a doubt that they do have a message and that an authorial entity stands behind them as creator, as well as within them as a set of reading instructions. Thus, our quest for the model author is an Ersatz for that other quest, in the course of which the Image of the Father fades into the Fog of the Infinity, and we never stop wondering why there is something rather than nothing.[498]

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[496] Ibid., 90.

[497] Ibid., 92–3.

[498] Ibid., 115–6.

The truth of fiction then creates a kind of metaphysical paradox wherein I demand a fictional truth from the actual world in the hopes that an author, too, stands behind the narrative of the world of things.[499] But in the Echain woods—terrifying, foreboding, and unkempt—I must make my own way. For there is no author and I am responsible for my own narrative.[500]

Returning to the woods of *The Prague Cemetery*, however, the question remains: where is Simonini amongst all these swaying trees, splitting paths, and rhizomatic roots? It is Eco's protagonist that contorts the total or universal encyclopedia in such a way that it plays into the metaphysical desire of narrativizing humans. I want the actual world to be a fictional truth. And even if I do not believe in a divine initial point,[501] I am prone to recognize, and perhaps even defer to, an author or authors who stand behind all things, constructing a universal plot. If nothing else, then I can at the very least abdicate any interpretive responsibilities that I might encounter in Eco's sylvan hermeneutic.

But if reality and fiction blend, and I cannot tell where the one begins and the other ends, and if I utilize the same tools to make sense of both, then how do I make a distinction between the two and remain accountable to the narratival choices that I make? Or, as Eco asks it, "If fictional worlds are so comfortable, why not try to read the actual

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[499] Cf. Guy P. Raffa, "Walking and Swimming with Umberto Eco," *MLN Bulletin* 113, no. 1 (1998): 166.

[500] The "I" here is a bit hyperbolic, as authority, tradition, and community all go into the shaping of one's encyclopedia. Cf. Eco, *Six Walks*, 130: "Our perceptual relationship with the world works because we trust prior stories. We could not fully perceive a tree if we did not know (because others have told us) that it is the product of a long growth process and that it does not grow overnight. This certainty is part of our 'understanding' that a tree is a tree, and not a flower. We accept a story that our ancestors have handed down to us as being true, even though today we call these ancestors scientists."

[501] Cf. Peters, *Sigurd's Lament*, 42–60 and 199–214.

world as if it were a work of fiction?"[502] I have, along with Borges, already answered Eco's question. I do read the world as if it were fiction. This cannot be helped. Eco agrees,[503] but still articulates—through a detailed analysis of the compiling of *The Protocols*—the numerous ways in which fictionalizing reality can go horribly wrong.[504]

And yet, the infinite trap and relativity of language betray me at every turn. To say that a particular narratival arrangement that sought ratification into the universal encyclopedia is "horribly wrong" is to betray my own ordering of the cosmos. I can neither help it nor consider Simonini's work as reputable. It is between my arrangement and Simonini's then that I encounter ambiguity and am forced to choose. To extend Eco's analogy, Simonini is a tree in the narratival woods. To encounter him is to stumble upon a forking path. Do I set foot on his? Mine? A third? Some kind of blending of the two, or three, or four? Where does it end? Are there boundaries to this branching forest? And what if I stay put, paralyzed by the choice? Is that possible, too, or does it only mean that the Simonini's of the world will choose for me? The circular choice, however, is the one to which Eco has already referred and to which Simonini manipulated. To travel the path that would suggest someone else—or authors—cleared this path, directed it, and set me upon it. To traverse that path of universal conspiracy, however, is both choice and abdication.

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[502] Eco, *Six Walks*, 117.

[503] Ibid., 118.

[504] Ibid., 131–7.

After describing natural and artificial narratives then, those that describe events that actually occur and those that *pretend* to tell the truth about the actual universe,[505] Eco writes:

> In fiction, precise references to the actual world are so closely linked that, after spending some time in the world of the novel and mixing fictional elements with references to reality, as one should, the reader no longer knows exactly where he or she stands. Such a state gives rise to some well-known phenomena. The most common is when the reader maps the fictional model onto reality—in other words, when the reader comes to believe in the actual existence of fictional characters and events . . . There are, then, many reasons a work of fiction may be mapped onto real life. But we must also consider another, far more important problem: our tendency to construct life as a novel.
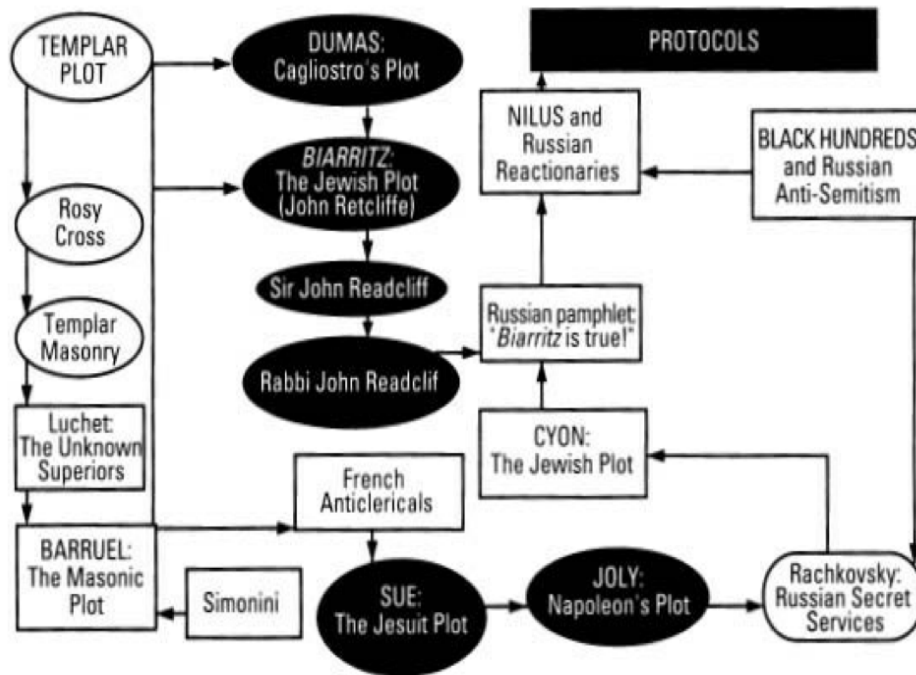

fig. 5.1

And while this, at first glance, seems to critique the mapping of fiction onto reality, Eco finally admits that it cannot be otherwise,[506] and so his detailed analysis of *The*

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[505] Ibid., 119.

Protocols[507] lead him to ask: "How should we deal with intrusions of fiction into life, now that we have seen the historical impact that this phenomenon can have?"[508]

Before answering Eco's question, I want to suggest that Eco's work on *The Protocols* is an example of what I am calling for within religious aesthetics: to encounter someone who arranges her local encyclopedia differently and then to analyze the way in which she has organized her embodied narrative. This has two important outcomes. One, I move towards understanding that which is other. And two, I create opportunities for ambiguity, which allow for the fluidity and transformation of my own encyclopedia.

This approach is all the more important when encountering someone utterly despicable, like Simonini. Why? Because not only does it allow me to seek understanding and create instances of ambiguity, but it also helps in establishing the borders or boundaries of the communal encyclopedia. It allows me, in other words, to not only ground choice but also to reveal the rules by which I make my own judgments. As Eco articulates it, narratival analysis enables me to understand the mechanisms by which fictions shape life, which constitutes a form of therapy against the sleep of reason that generates monsters.[509] If I can understand how encyclopedias are arranged and embodied,

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[506] Cf. Ibid., 130 and Eco's own use of Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Jorge Lozano, *El discurso histórico* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987); and A. J. Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, trans. Larry Christ and Daniel Patte (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

[507] Cf. Figure 1, taken from Eco, *Six Walks*, 138.

[508] Ibid., 139.

[509] Ibid., 138.

then I might be able to participate in the correction or revealing of the dominant, oppressive, or ill-conceived narratives that shape a shared reality. Ambiguity is always self-reflexive, however, and so every analysis is also a questioning of the self and the rules by which I judge, embody, and analyze. "Studying the fundamentalism of others," Eco writes, "helps us understand our own fundamentalism better."[510]

In the process of ambiguity then—encountering it, the critique or revealing of a communal encyclopedia, and the possibilities for self-reflection—I am reminded that all knowledge and subsequent embodiment of that knowledge is a provisional negotiation between fictional arrangements. Nowhere is this better espoused than in Eco's works on translation.[511] It is there that he so often asks: what are the rules by which I communicate across languages or, by analogy, encyclopedic arrangements? If it is true that there are lines of resistance, a hard core of Being that suggests all humans crawl but not a one of them flies, then it is there that "languages should be confronted."[512] Whereas philosophy wrestles with the conundrum of ontology when and if it feels like it, translation must continually face it, which is why translation is a better place to discover the provisionality and negotiation inherent to the aesthetics of ambiguity.

For translators, provisionality and negotiation are a given, a pragmatic reality. And so while translation re-proposes "to philosophy its everlasting question . . . whether

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[510] Umberto Eco, *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Mariner, 2008), 244.

[511] Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004) and *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[512] Eco, *Mouse or Rat*, 181.

there is a way in which *things go*, independently of the way" languages make them go, translators avoid ontological problems by comparing languages and negotiating solutions that do not offend common sense. "Translators," Eco writes, "simply behave like polyglots, because in some way they already know that in the target language a given thing is expressed so and so. They follow their instinct, as does every fluent bilingual person."[513]

I can think of no better way to articulate the navigation of trees—decision points—in the aesthetics of ambiguity. Upon encountering the ambiguous, I too can behave like a polyglot by comparing encyclopedias and negotiating an outcome. "We negotiate," Eco writes, "because, if everyone stuck to his own interpretation of the facts, we would go on ad infinitum. We negotiate to bring our diverging interpretations to a point of convergence, if only a partial one, that enables us to deal with a Fact—a thing that is there and is difficult to get rid of."[514]

Two keys to aesthetic negotiation then are partiality, or what I have been calling provisionality, and the uppercase "Fact." The former is an individual commitment (choice) that what is true today is not tomorrow—that aether can become the fabric of space-time. When I negotiate, I hold my own narratives loosely in order to arrive at a solution that does not "offend common sense." And it is important to note that common sense does not refer to bourgeois assumptions about culture but to both the instinct of the polyglot and lines of resistance. The latter, lines of resistance or Fact, is a challenge to

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[513] Ibid., 182.

[514] Eco, *Turning Back the Clock*, 248.

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those who might say there are no facts but only interpretations.[515] If this were so, Eco

suggests, then

> negotiation would be impossible, because there would be no criterion that would
> enable us to decide whether my interpretation is better than yours or not. We can
> compare and discuss interpretations precisely because we can weigh them against
> the facts they are intended to interpret.[516]

It is Fact or lines of resistance that leads to an interpretation, which then enters, as

a cultural unit, into an encyclopedia. When I encounter someone else's interpreted Fact

through ambiguity, negotiation begins. And by negotiating the convergence of cultural

units, or ratifying them into a more general (individual, communal, universal, etc.)

encyclopedia, I am reminded that all knowledge is provisional. If Fact begins this

aesthetic process, then it also ends it, as—thinking back to previous chapters—unlimited

semiosis always tells me something more and not something else. I have learned, in other

words, something new about that which confronts me. And it is through a recognition of

this process that I am able, at more general levels of the encyclopedia, to judge one

against the other. It is there that I am able to reject Simonini and choose a different

narratival arrangement. And it is there that I am accountable to that choice.

This has been a long and winding chapter thus far, and perhaps I should

summarize before moving on. Chapter Four employed my theory of ambiguity in *The

Prague Cemetery*. This section set out to discover the ways in which theories turn into

narratives. To accomplish this, I looked not so much at Eco's detailed analysis of *The

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[515] Cf. Umberto Eco, "Absolute and Relative," in *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2012), 22–43.

[516] Ibid., 248.

Protocols, but rather the argument that Eco situated *The Protocols* in and were an example of—the way in which fiction maps onto reality and how one judges between two competing, narrativized realities.[517] It was my argument that by examining the theory behind *The Prague Cemetery*, I might more fully understand the ways in which an encounter with ambiguity can possibly lead to a reorganization of my cultural encyclopedia. Underlying this argument was the assumption that the theories of academics also construct a narrativized reality, and that this process, exemplified by Eco's *Six Walks* and *The Prague Cemetery*, is analogous to the more general aesthetic theory that I laid out in Part I. Finally, I also moved closer to a justification of my notion of aesthetic judgment as choice. I accomplished this through introducing negotiation, provisionality, and Fact into my theory of ambiguity.

The final section of this chapter takes up the far side of narrativizing theory. The first section looked at the theory that went into creating *The Prague Cemetery*. The second section examines the theory that came out of it, *Inventing the Enemy*. If fiction and reality blend together in equiprobable realities but it is still possible to judge between competing narratives, then why does something like *The Protocols* still exist? Why is the spirit of Simonini, in other words, still afloat and influencing realities?

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[517] Cf. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds., *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 205: One "can deal with "universes as if they were texts and with texts as if they were universes."

THE COMPOSER

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Abernathy, Edward. "Martynov's Gift: A Light Too Bright To Bear." *The Telescope*. August 3, 2017. Accessed on September 19, 2017. http://www.thetelescopenews.com/sections/arts-and-li fe/2017/09/19/578320984/martynovs-gift-a-light-too-bright-to-bear.

The Voynich manuscript of *The Atlantic* fame is an artifact with no meaning. We have it. You can see it. Hold it. Turn it over in your hands, and question its existence. But the mystery of its import will forever remain unsolved.

And its antipode?

What if I told you that, once upon a time, there was musical composition for which we knew its meaning but no longer possessed its artifact? You could not play it. Hear it. Or experience it? But you could know it and that for which it stood.

You would, no doubt, call me a liar, a conspiracy theorist. A man who plays with truth. Perhaps, yes. But in the Spring of 1892 as the sun set behind Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, Zuravel Ostrava Martynov conceived of such a thing. By all accounts, he invented a musical composition that was extravagant in detail, beautiful in scope, and utterly haunting. That, in itself, is not the mystery—and continued influence—of the Martynov composition.

Toiling away in the winter of 1892, Martynov composed sheet after sheet that, according to his journals, could be played in any order. His idea was to step onto the Bolshoi's stage, throw his composition into the air, collect it, and then conduct it

given the order into which it had fallen. Martynov invented, in other words, a composition of entropy.

But why?

"So that," he wrote, "the audience could complete the work. For I refuse to dominate man's guttural drive towards the imaginative."

Many critics of classical music, however, refer to this as apocryphal, a story of doubtful authenticity.

What is not apocryphal, however, what many eyewitnesses claim is that after Martynov's orchestra played what is widely held to be the modern world's most influential composition, he turned to his audience, struck a match, and burnt the only record of that which he had invented.

And so while the memory and meaning lingered, the artifact could never again be experienced. It was a once-for-all-time performance, a thing tinged with loss—that which defied repetition.

According to the journals of Martynov, those in attendance, and contemporary critics, Martynov's burning was artistic anathema. He was said, upon igniting the flame, to have screamed, "I invent to destroy." In many monographs, critics still try to explain the meaning of that statement and its relationship to Martynov's performance. Most are in disagreement. Some say that Martynov was deranged. Others that he was fighting against the then burgeoning philosophy of Russian materialism. And still others claim that it was a political statement against those who were seeking to influence the Tsar against the Jewish population in Moscow.

But I cannot speak to any such theory.

From my own research, Martynov was a kind and intelligent man. He was a composer ahead of his time, influential in his own community. Nikolayevich Romanov Diletsky, the world's foremost scholar on Martynov, calls Martynov's burning a gift. But to whom? His audience? The musical world? To philosophers everywhere looking for an easy dissertation on aesthetic theory?

While I cannot answer those questions to the satisfaction of this reading community, what I can say is that Martynov was obsessed with time. To him, music was the ordering of experience's cadence. But it was also an escape from humanity's inevitable march towards death. Music taught that time and history could be arranged differently. That we could, in fact, see beyond the horizon. It was a reminder that starting points are false and should be endlessly interrogated. And that, if understood rightly, Being could be worn lightly, with gaiety even.

So is Martynov's burning, in fact, a gift? Perhaps. If it is, then it is a gift of choice. For only you can decide what it means.

Martynov died in a Siberian labor camp in the Summer of 1892. He was survived by his daughter and granddaughter, who emigrated shortly thereafter to New York. It is said that his last words were "From ash to light, I leap." I do not know what that means. But it saddens me to think that such a life was spent in the forges of misunderstanding.

The Enemy that Makes

In one of his most pithy statements on the *The Protocols* and universal

conspiracy, Eco writes that the intellectual anti-Semitism of today arose in the modern

world.[518] Abbé Barruel wrote in 1797 "to show that the French Revolution was a plot

hatched by Templars and Masons, and later a certain Captain Simonini (an Italian)

pointed out to him that those who pulled the strings were the perfidious Jews."[519] After

that began the polemic about international Jewry, which led to *The Protocols*, anti-

Semitism in Russian Tsarists circles, and eventually Hitler. The fuller story, of course, is

recounted in both *Six Walks* and *The Prague Cemetery* but what is important about this

account is Eco's distillation of his narrativizing theory, his self-reflexivity,[520] and the way

in which it moves from history, through narrative, and towards the argument that *The*

Protocols are still in use today, developing a new, popular anti-Semitism. All I need do,

according to Eco, is "visit certain racist Internet sites, or take a look at anti-Zionist

propaganda in Arab countries, and you will see the same old recycling of *The*

Protocols."[521]

This rhetorically confuses Eco to no end. If writers like himself, Cohen, and

Eisner have, time and again, debunked *The Protocols* by revealing their fictional sources,

then why are people still using them to whip up anti-Semitic sentiments? "How can we

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[518] Eco, *Turning Back the Clock*, 314.

[519] Ibid.

[520] The short article is titled, "Are the Italians Anti-Semites?" Eco, *Turning Back the Clock*, 313–6.

[521] Ibid., 316.

explain," Eco asks, "this resistance to the evidence, and the continuing perverse fascination of this book?"[522] The answer to Eco's question comes only a few paragraphs later: "It is not *The Protocols* that engender anti-Semitism; it is the profound need to identify an enemy that prompts people to believe in them."[523]

It is the aim of this section to examine that final statement by engaging in a reading of Eco's essay, "Inventing the Enemy."[524] My analysis does not exist in a vacuum, however, and is conducted in the hope of exploring the last vestige of narrativizing theories. What happens, in other words, once the data has been collected and reported, the theory has been narrativized, and the final story has been told? It is my argument that "Inventing the Enemy" is analogous to the ways in which narratival arrangements of cultural encyclopedias are embodied in the world of things. And by examining it, I better understand the full process of intuition, cognition, and embodiment, which is continuous, fluid, and dynamic. In an ever continuing process then, I encounter, I arrange, I negotiate, I narrativize, and I embody, even as any of those steps might usurp its place and begin the process anew from a new perspectival location.

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[522] Ibid., 318.

[523] Ibid., 319.

[524] Umberto Eco, "Inventing the Enemy," in *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2012), 1–21.
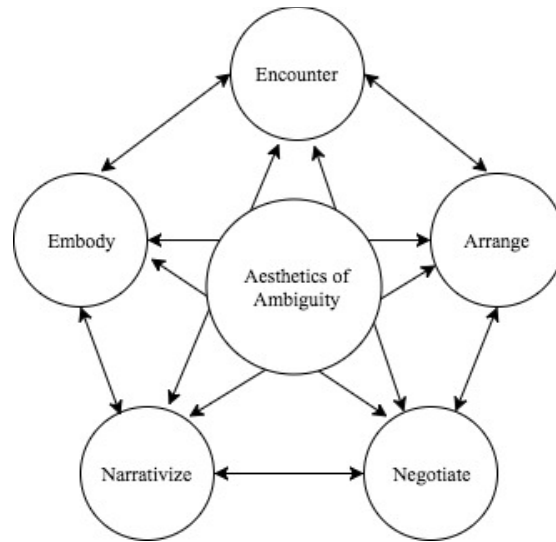
fig. 5.2

The above diagram, however, is only a heuristic, an illustration to help me think through the ways in which narrativizing theories—as pieces to the puzzle of the aesthetics of ambiguity—are non-linear processes rooted in the relationship between thing and interpreter or text and reader. In what follows, I examine the ways in which narratives embody before I turn my attention in the final chapter to narrativizing theories and their role in the aesthetics of ambiguity more properly.

Eco's concern in "Inventing the Enemy" is not the process of identifying and naming an actual threat, but the "process of creating and demonizing the enemy."[525] In a convergence of both the semiotic and material worlds, the other is first identified and then connected to various cultural units: <<enemy>>, <<difference>>, or <<foreign>>. As I pointed out in Chapter Four, the *poesis* of enemy construction defines the identity of the ones who create or narrativize the enemy and also provides them an obstacle against which to measure their system of values. Since <<enemy>> is essential to this creation of

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[525] Ibid., 2.

identity, if a culture finds itself without one, then it must invent an enemy in order to know itself and what it values—I can place all that I am *not* into the cultural unit of <<enemy>>.

Ambiguity is intrinsically connected to this process in that enemies represent difference, which, in turn, epitomizes foreignness.[526] Thinking back to Part I, I could say that the enemy, to a given cultural encyclopedia, is high in information or surprise and, hence, ambiguity. An enemy will often, if not always, call into question the encyclopedia of those confronting it. If difference can equate to surprise, then I can imagine the encounter between a resident and an alien. "You eat that?" the resident might say, in both shock and horror. But in doing so, the resident casts the alien into the units of <<foreign(er)>> and <<difference>>, which is only an interpretant away from <<enemy>>.

While most of this seems harmless, though perhaps exhausting to the newly arrived refugee who has to continually answer questions regarding attire or food or speech, it turns towards Simonini when the other becomes an enemy not because she threatens, but because someone has an interest in portraying her as a true threat even when she is not. In this way, Eco writes that "difference itself becomes a symbol of what we find threatening."[527] This difference can be depicted in a variety of ways, but Eco focuses on only a few. It is found in the foreign immigrant who speaks and acts badly.[528]

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[526] Ibid., 3.

[527] Ibid.

[528] Ibid., 4.

It is symbolized in the enemy who must be ugly, as beauty is identified with the good (*kalokagathia*).[529] It is rooted in heresy when one desires to find an enemy within, and even, if not most often, in the lower classes.[530]

Tying his theory of the enemy together, Eco then explores it as a "recurring model" throughout history, particularly focusing on "witchcraft." All too often, he argues, a picture is built up of the enemy so that the victim herself admits to doing what she has not done or, at the very least, recognizes herself in the picture.[531] And while this might result in a modern liberal feeling triumphant at avoiding such "conservative" *poesis*, the process cannot be escaped. "The figure of the enemy," Eco writes, "cannot be abolished from the process of civilization."[532] While someone like me[533] does everything in his power not to project the cultural unit of <<enemy>> onto the other, "the image of the enemy is simply shifted from a human object to a natural or social force that in some way threatens us and has to be defeated, whether it be capitalistic exploitation, environmental pollution, or third-world hunger."[534]

Virtuous, perhaps, but it is the *same process* of enemy construction shifted from the individual or community to either a more general, vague population—"flyover country" or "basket of deplorables"—or systems of oppression and injustice. But, as Eco

[529] Ibid., 5.

[530] Ibid., 5.

[531] Ibid., 17.

[532] Ibid.

[533] I am white, male, and heterosexual, as well as a Western, liberal democrat.

[534] Ibid., 17–8.

posits, even a hatred of injustice "makes the brow grow stern."[535] Or, in other words, injustice is perhaps better written as <<injustice>>, which suggests that it is neither fixed nor autonomous but rather a fluid category that—much like the objectification of the enemy—can result in the ideological misappropriation of power.

And so, it would seem, I am doomed. I cannot help but create enemies, whether they be individuals, ethnicities, generalized populations, or systemic evils. That which is deemed threatening, via a careful though sometimes unreflective manipulation of the cultural encyclopedia, is necessary for me to solidify my identity. "Know thyself" then is better written as "know thine enemy." But since the construction of enemies is inescapable, the question arises: "Is our moral sense therefore impotent?"[536] Or, to ask it differently, how am I am able to judge the conservative construction of the enemy when I am guilty of the same process? The answer, which will not surprise you, is found in ambiguity in general, and Simonini's ambiguity in particular.

Ambiguity allows for a self-reflexive encounter, which leads to both provisionality and negotiation. When I confront the other as ambiguous, I am able to reflect upon my own encyclopedia and cultural units <<difference>>, <<foreign>>, or <<enemy>>. In doing so, I recognize that knowledge, cultural or scientific, is provisional, which then allows me to negotiate a new cultural unit with different interpretants. A "moral sense" intervenes then, when one stops pretending that she has no enemies and

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[535] Ibid., 18.

[536] Ibid.

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instead seeks understanding—to put herself in their situation.[537] Confronting that which is different instigates the aesthetic process of ambiguity that results in either a reorganization of the cultural encyclopedia or the rejection of ambiguity as a form of epistemological growth. "Trying to understand other people," Eco writes, "means destroying the stereotype without denying or ignoring the otherness."[538] Simonini is, of course, incapable of understanding. His confrontation with ambiguity resulted in a rejection of the aesthetic process of provisionality and negotiation. His concern was not to destroy the stereotype, but to deepen and manipulate it. Simonini profited by maintaining difference.

And yet, Simonini's complexity is that while he rejects ambiguity, he presents an opportunity for me to either accept or reject it, too. When confronted with his otherness, I can seek understanding—not to adopt his views, but to grasp a side of human behavior that I so often expunge as inhuman. Is he my enemy? Yes, in so far as he is different. But should his hate consign him to the dungheap of inhuman behavior? No. For to wrestle with Simonini's hate in-so-far as it is ambiguous is to understand my own hate, bigotry, and racism better. It is to reconcile with my own fictional narratives that I strive to map onto reality.

This leads me again to the well of judgment and how I choose one fictional representation over another, equiprobable representation. What gives me, you, or us the right to claim one reality over another? Eco, too, found this point essential. In his

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[537] Ibid.

[538] Ibid.

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following essay, "Absolute and Relative,"[539] he lays out the various ways in which one

can approach judgment or choice within what I call the aesthetics of ambiguity. For Eco,

the answer lies in deciphering, in any given context, the "criteria of truth we are

using."[540]

"Consider these statements," Eco writes:

1. I have a stomachache.
2. Last night I dreamed that Mother Teresa appeared to me.
3. Tomorrow it will certainly rain.
4. The world will end in 2536.
5. There is life after death.
6. The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees.
7. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius.
8. The apple is an angiosperm.
9. Napoleon died on May 5, 1821.
10. We reach the coast following the path of the sun.
11. Jesus is the Son of God.
12. The correct interpretation of the holy scriptures is decided by the teachings of the church.
13. An embryo is already a human being and has a soul.[541]

These statements are true or false only according to the rules of a given context,

the subjectivity of the fact (statements one and two), or the verifiability of the statement

(I can check to see if it is raining tomorrow, but I cannot know if the world will end in

2536—even if that statement is true).

For my purposes, however, I am most interested in the rules of a given context.[542]

By way of example, "the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees only in the

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[539] Umberto Eco, "Absolute and Relative," in *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2012), 22–43.

[540] Ibid., 32.

[541] Ibdi., 30–1.

[542] I have discussed this at length in *Sigurd's Lament*, 55–8.

context of a Euclidean system of postulates" or "if the evidence of the Gospels is accepted as historical, the proof of the divinity of Christ would be accepted as such by a Protestant. But this would not be so for the teachings of the Catholic Church."[543] In both cases, as well as the other eleven statements, "it is on the very recognition of various degrees of verifiability or acceptability of a truth that our sense of tolerance is based."[544] I can begin to accept difference because I recognize that there is no all-encompassing context by which I can measure or judge the truths of the other. I must take them as they are, recognize that my own truths are provisional, and then negotiate a way to ratify the event into the encyclopedia.

As I have said, I am responsible for and accountable to ratification or choice. Eco espouses it differently, however. An aesthetics of ambiguity, for him, needs maintain the philosophical position of "holism" in which "every statement is true or false (and acquires a meaning) only within an organic system of assumptions, a given conceptual scheme, or . . . within a given scientific paradigm."[545] These systems, schemes, and paradigms of Eco's are, in my thinking, best situated under the heading of "encyclopedias" and, as such, are necessary to the process of ambiguity. Information as surprise, in other words, implies an organizing structure that cannot account for a particular event. So to rephrase Eco, I could say that statements are true, false, and meaningful only within a given encyclopedia.

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[543] Eco, "Absolute and Relative," 31.

[544] Ibid., 32.

[545] Ibid., 33.

Given the connection between holism and the encyclopedia, Eco's next words are extremely important. "Holists are the first to tell us," he writes, "there are systems that cannot actually explain a series of phenomena, and that some are far better because they succeed better than the others in doing so."[546] If an encyclopedia cannot explain all phenomena, then it is prone to ambiguity, provisionality, and negotiation. And, to the latter half of Eco's statement, I can only recognize that an other's encyclopedia succeeds better through the process of self-reflexivity. In this way, comparison is an important tool in the aesthete's belt. For to instigate the process of ambiguity, I need something to encounter—object, other, event—to which I can compare the two or three or four organizing structures that are in play.[547]

While Eco's holism follows the line of perspective-based theories in which "reality can be given different perspectives and each perspective matches one aspect of it, even if it doesn't exhaust its unfathomable richness," it does not equate to moral relativism.[548] I must recognize and respect another culture's difference, but I do not have to abdicate my own cultural identity in doing so. I can, through ambiguity, recognize it as provisional, negotiate its borders, and embody the encyclopedia as it exists in fluidity. In doing so, I have not only employed the process of ambiguity, but also judged or chosen one encyclopedia over another, a choice to which I am both responsible and accountable.

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[546] Ibid., 34. Yes, choice relies upon explanation, which may or may not be a valued criteria.

[547] Ibid.

[548] Ibid., 35.

As Eco ends these two essays with an analysis of Nietzsche, he returns to the final

point of judgment, the line of resistance. "An absolute does not perhaps exist," he writes:

> or if it exists it is neither imaginable nor attainable, but natural forces do exist that support or challenge our interpretations. If I interpret an open door painted in trompe l'oeil as a real door and go to walk straight through it, the fact that it is an impenetrable wall will undermine my interpretation. There must be a way in which things are or behave . . . Death and that wall are the only form of Absolute about which we can be in no doubt.[549]

On the one side then, I have the encyclopedia, ratification, and choice. And on the other, I

have Fact with a capital "F." Both limit my interpretations while also suggesting the

provisionality of what I know. And, if I can be so bold, it is through these two criteria

that I can judge Simonini's encyclopedia or system of organization. As I encounter

Simone Simonini as despicable, I self-reflexively recognize him as ambiguous. I notice,

too, that I maintain a provisional encyclopedia that is in flux and self-analyze the

categories that are in question <<Woman>>, <<Jew>>, and <<Jesuit>>. Based on the

cultural units, interpretants, and connections of not only my encyclopedia but a more

general encyclopedia (International Human Rights Law)[550] and the requirements of the

wall (I have personally met and encountered many women, Jews, and Jesuits), I am able

to negotiate a judgment in regards to Simonini's additions to the cultural units in

question. In my rejection of Simonini, however, I not only utilize ambiguity to discover

and analyze my own cultural units but also install Simonini's egregious cultural units as

part of the complex of interpretants swirling around mine. The latter is not an adoption,

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[549] Ibid., 43.

[550] The United Nations, "The Foundation of International Human Rights Law," Accessed on August 18, 2017: http://www.un.org/en/sections/universal-declaration/foundation-international-human-rights-law/.

but an awareness of the full scope of hate, prejudice, and injustice as it exists in that ultimate of encyclopedias—Borges' Library of Babel.

Conclusion

Writing this chapter in the waning summer of 2017 has been a strange experience. It seems that everyday something is reported in the news that could have been included as an example of negotiating encyclopedias and the way in which a community chooses to either ratify or reject the fluidity of their cultural units. One example of this is the now infamous "Google Memo"[551] sent by a software engineer to the rest of the company at Mountain View. Titled, "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber," it argues, among other things, that "women are underrepresented in tech not because they face bias and discrimination in the workplace, but because of inherent psychological differences between men and women."[552]

Both the memo and subsequent firing of the author resulted in a media frenzy. While some embraced the memo,[553] others outright rejected or critiqued it.[554] Some took

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[551] Kate Conger, "Exclusive: Here's The Full 10-Page Anti-Diversity Screed Circulating Internally at Google [Updated]," *Gizmodo.com*, August 5, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, http://gizmodo.com/exclusive-heres-the-full -10-page-anti-diversity-screed-1797564320.

[552] Ibid.

[553] Russell Brandom, "Google's infamous manifesto author is already a hero to the online right," *The Verge.com*, August 7, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/7/16107954/google- diversity-memo-antifeminist-manifesto-alt-right-4chan.

[554] Megan Molteni and Adam Rogers, "The Actual Science of James Damore's Google Memo," *Wired.com*, August 15, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, https://www.wired.com/story/the-pernicious-science-of-james-damores -google-memo/ and Nalina Eggert, "Was Google wrong to fire James Damore after memo controversy?," *BBC.com*, August 9, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-40865261.

issue with the memo, but were then distraught that the employee was fired.[555] Some even

sought, critically, to understand its point of view.[556] Others, like David Brooks of the *New

York Times* had a different response.[557] According to him, there were four actors in this

controversy that made it what it was: 1) the author, James Damore, 2) women in tech, 3)

Danielle Brown, Google's diversity officer, and 4) the media. "What we have is a

legitimate tension," Brooks writes:

> Damore is describing a truth on one level; his sensible critics are describing a
> different truth, one that exists on another level. He is championing scientific
> research; they are championing gender equality. It takes a little subtlety to
> harmonize these strands, but it's doable. Of course subtlety is in hibernation in
> modern America. The third player in the drama is Google's diversity officer,
> Danielle Brown. She didn't wrestle with any of the evidence behind Damore's
> memo. She just wrote his views 'advanced incorrect assumptions about gender.'
> This is ideology obliterating reason. The fourth actor is the media. The coverage
> of the memo has been atrocious.[558]

While I do not side with Brooks in all of his points, I do find it illustrative that,

according to him, both sides are describing truths. The question then, when filtered

through an aesthetic of ambiguity, is not who is right or has the better truth, but how do

these truths negotiate into a more general encyclopedia wherein the community can ratify

a fuller cultural unit, though provisional, in regard to <<Women>>, <<Technology>>,

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[555] Peters Singer, "Why Google was wrong: Did James Damore really deserve to be fired for what he wrote?," *New York Daily News*, August 10, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ google-wrong-article-1.3399750.

[556] Mike Blake, "The Most Common Error in Media Coverage of the Google Memo: Many headlines labeled the document 'anti-diversity,' misleading readers about its actual contents," *Atlantic.com*, August 8, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/the-most-common-error- in-coverage-of-the-google-memo/536181/.

[557] David Brooks, "Sundar Pichai Should Resign as Google's C.E.O.," *New York Times*, August 11, 2017, accessed August 18, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/opinion/sundar-pichai-google-memo- diversity.html.

[558] Ibid.

and the way in which the one is an interpretant of the other? What is also of interest in Brooks' statement is his assertion leveled at Brown that her critique of Damore's memo is "ideology obliterating reason." Viewed through ambiguity, I can ask: Is that *F*act or revelatory of Brooks' own encyclopedia?

I started this chapter by analyzing the way in which fictions map onto reality. I did this by situating Eco's essay, "Fictional Protocols" in the larger argument of his work *Six Walks*. I suggested that by examining the theory behind *The Prague Cemetery*, I might more fully understand the ways in which an encounter with ambiguity can possibly lead to a reorganization of a cultural encyclopedia. In the second section of the chapter, I read two of Eco's essays that helped me to answer the question: If fiction and reality blend together in equiprobable realities but it is still possible to judge between competing narratives, then why does something like *The Protocols* still exist? To answer to this question, I discussed provisionality, negotiation, and Fact with a capital "F." *The Protocols* still exist because humans think knowledge is certain,[559] refuse to negotiate in regards to their cultural units, and oftentimes eschew lines of resistance for far reaching interpretants.

Judgment is possible within an aesthetics of ambiguity, but it cannot be forced. In the end, we are all responsible for and accountable to the choices that we make when moving through the process of ambiguity. Ratification is typically towards a more general encyclopedia, but local encyclopedias can and do exist that refuse to negotiate and ratify upwards.

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[559] Cf. Sloman and Fernback, 256–65.

So why was the Google Memo such a controversy? Why did it become what it did? Because from nearly every perspective the memo was ambiguous. It provided all parties involved with an opportunity to examine the relevant cultural units in their encyclopedias. It highlighted the provisionality and fluidity of <<Women>>, <<Technology>>, <<Science>>, <<Diversity>>, and <<Anti-Diversity>>, to name a few. It was a cultural conversation about who we are, what we believe, and how we embody our knowledge. It was a negotiation carried out in real time. It was a dialogue about what we allow and disallow in the *Encyclopedia America*. It was an argument over the role of judgment in the aesthetics of ambiguity.

CHAPTER SIX: THE NARRATIVIZING THEORIES OF AMBIGUITY

"Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth."

—Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*[560]

Introduction

In Part I of this work, I defined ambiguity and described the role that it plays within aesthetics. In Part II, I employed my theory in the analysis of Umberto Eco's protagonist in *The Prague Cemetery*. I argued that Captain Simone Simonini both encounters ambiguity in his life as well as represents ambiguity for me. Insofar as Simonini is ambiguous, he represents a tree in the forest of interpretation. When I come to him, I must choose—this path or that. But more than choice, an aesthetics of ambiguity also implies self-reflexivity, provisionality, and negotiation. In Chapter Five, I articulated the ways in which choice is limited both by lines of resistance and cultural encyclopedias.

Running through this work, I have also argued, parallel to the aesthetics of ambiguity, that one aspect of religious aesthetics is to follow the trail of choice in any given community. All cultural encyclopedias are arranged into narratives that are embodied in the real world. This is not a one-way street, however, but an entangled web

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[560] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 491.

wherein thing, encyclopedia, and narrative overlap. Oftentimes, like Simonini outside

Turin's ghetto, these narratives are confronted by ambiguity. Some of the questions that a

religious aesthetics informed by ambiguity asks is why is this event ambiguous for this

particular community? What fictions is it seeking to map onto reality? And is either

negotiation or ratification taking place? In answering these questions for Simonini, I have

called these "fictions" narrativizing theories, stories that arrange encyclopedias even as

the encyclopedia is arranging narratives for embodiment.

It is with narrativizing theories and their role in an aesthetics of ambiguity that

this chapter is concerned. First, however, in an effort to conclude and encapsulate my

argument, I summarize what I accomplished in both parts of this work. Throughout, I

seek to reconcile S. Brent Plate's material, religious aesthetics to my theory of ambiguity

before turning my attention to narrativizing theories and their importance for an

ambiguity understood as coexistent incompatibility. I then discuss Eco's well known wit

and humor and the importance that both have in an aesthetics of ambiguity.

In the final section of this chapter, as the culmination of my work, I argue that

Williams' comment in *The Name of the Rose*, as found in this chapter's epigraph, is

essential to understanding narrativizing theories. Why? Because humor is ambiguity in

the face of certainty. If an aesthetics of ambiguity seeks to uncover the fictions that I map

onto reality while also confronting me with the provisionality of my encyclopedia, then it

also implies that its enemy is certainty—a knowledge that is convinced it has arrived at

the proper ordering of the universal encyclopedia. For this chapter's epigraph

"summarizes Eco's attitude to cultural ideologies. The demystifying aspect of laughter

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works in him as an anti-fanatical and anti-dogmatic element of both psychological liberation and social affirmation."[561]

Narrativizing theories can be concrete, certain, and embodied in the most deplorable of ways—according, of course, to universal, Western encyclopedias. And, as Eco suggests, one of the only ways to disarm certainty is through a laughter or humor understood in the context of an aesthetics of ambiguity. It is this chapter's goal, in the end, to not only summarize my work in a concluding fashion, but also to express humor's role in ambiguity.

A Summary

In Chapter One, I set out to introduce ambiguity, religious aesthetics, and the need for putting both in conversation with Plate and Eco. I situated ambiguity in its larger academic discourse. I broke it into three parts and claimed that there is a literary, philosophical, and scientific ambiguity. The first can be summarized as a lexeme having two or more lexical entries or a word or cultural artifact capable of being understood in two or more ways. For many, this is the root of creative language, as *poesis* is playing with polysemy. It is important to remember, however, that ambiguity is not vague or unclear communication, but rather an awareness of the potentiality of a given word or sentence. It is through ambiguity, understood in this manner, that I am able to employ metaphor, make new connections, and expand both knowledge and worldview.

The central question that literary ambiguity now sets itself, according to Susanne Winkler, is how do the tools that are used in the construction of the text influence the

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[561] Cf. Cristina Farronato, *Eco's Chaosmos: From the Middle Ages to Postmodernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 124.

interpretation of the reader? In other words, literary ambiguity seeks to address the problem of multiple interpretations coexisting at the same time. Following from this, Winkler proposes a grid through which one can study the phenomena of literary ambiguity. Does ambiguity occur in the production or perception of a given percept? Is ambiguity—produced or perceived—strategic or nonstrategic? For Winkler and others, this resulted in four potentialities: 1) strategic production, 2) nonstrategic production, 3) strategic perception, and 4) nonstrategic perception. Throughout my work then, I explored the strategic production of ambiguity in literary texts. Because, as Winkler writes, "literary texts lend themselves extremely well to examining the functions of ambiguity."[562]

I concluded my section on literary ambiguity by briefly examining the work of Christoph Bode, and his notion that "the aesthetics of ambiguity offers access to <<meaning as an event>>, to the experience of experience."[563] This was important because it prepared a way for the introduction of Eco's idea of ambiguity and the capacity of experience to call into question my cultural categories and concepts while also simultaneously probing the boundaries of that which I define as "reality."

In the following section, I tackled philosophical ambiguity in general and analytic ambiguity in particular, the latter of which analyzes lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguities. Lexical ambiguity is having more than one entry in the lexicon for a lexeme.

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[562] Susanne Winkler, *Ambiguity: Language and Communication* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 18.

[563] Christoph Bode, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in *Actas Del XII Congreso Nacional de La Asociacion Espanola de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos* (Alicante 19-22 Dez. 1988, 1991), 82–3.

Syntactic ambiguity occurs when there are many Logical Forms that correspond to the same sentence. Pragmatic ambiguity deals with both speech acts and truth conditional pragmatics. As far as analytic philosophy is concerned, Logical Forms are the area that hold the most promise for theories of ambiguity.

In the end, however, I turned my attention to John D. Caputo's metaphysics of ambiguity and his idea that ambiguity is "the condition that makes meaning possible by making pure and unambiguous meaning impossible."[564] While Caputo foreshadowed my later exploration of provisionality, he also connected to what I examine at the end of this chapter—humor's role in an aesthetics of ambiguity. Certainty, in other words, is a byproduct of ambiguity that refuses to account for the potentiality of the encyclopedia. Ambiguity is a constant reminder to analytic philosophy that its quest for clear, unadulterated meaning, while admirable, is ultimately quixotic.

Turning my attention to scientific ambiguity, I argued that clarity and precision are good and necessary values. When I take Claritin to fend off seasonal allergies, I take comfort in knowing that my little white pills are appropriately measured and are not going to result in an overdose and subsequent trip to the emergency room. But "science," as modern societies have anthropomorphized it, is better understood as an encyclopedia that contains cultural units, interpretants, and unlimited semiosis. Science, in other words, is ambiguous. It is rife with paradigm shifts, emergence, and indeterminacy. It is a fiction that seeks, through explanation, to map an ordered viewed of the world onto reality.

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[564] John D. Caputo, "In Praise of Ambiguity," in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, eds. Craig J. N. de Paulo, Patrick Messina, and Marc Stier (New York: Peter Lang, 2005): 20.

Examples of science as ambiguous are found in the quantum revolution, Thomas

Kuhn's "anomaly,"[565] and the theories of chaos and information. It is also realized in

theoretical physics and the boundary between science and philosophy or metaphysics.[566]

But ambiguity also appears in everyday science and is exemplified in the conclusion of

one recent study that seeks to articulate the ways in which literature evokes changes in

physical dispositions.[567] In this study, which was thoroughly researched and documented,

the authors write:

> We have argued that, on balance, our results should be interpreted as a causal
> sequence in which the emotional response to a film influences pain threshold
> (interpreted as a signal of endorphin activation), and that this in turn influences
> the sense of bondedness. There are, of course, *two other possible causal models*.
> One is that the causal logic is reversed . . . The other is that an emotionally
> arousing film can influence bondedness indirectly via pain threshold changes as
> well as directly (although the mechanism for this remains unclear) . . . There
> remains a question as to whether the greater increase in pain threshold (and hence
> the putative endorphin effect) in the experimental condition could be attributed to
> an effect of taking the test in groups, such that individuals become more
> competitive against each other in the post-viewing test.[568]

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[565] Cf. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1996) and Roald Hoffmann, *The Same and Not the Same* (New York: Columbia University Press,
1995). The latter is a study of ambiguity from the perspective of chemistry.

[566] Cf. Martin Meisel, *Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science* (New York: Columbia University
Press, 2016); N. Katherine Hayles, "Turbulence in Literature and Science: Questions of Influence," in
American Literature and Science, ed. Robert Scholnick, 229–50 (Lexington, KY: University Press of
Kentucky, 2010); Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josue V. Harari and David
F. Bell (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983); Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space,
Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Vintage, 2005, *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and
the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* (New York: Vintage, 2011), *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden
Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010); Lee
Smolin, *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* (New York: Mariner
Books, 2014); Marcelo Gleiser, *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for
Meaning*. New York: Basic, 2014); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[567] R. I. M. Dunbar, Ben Teasdale, Jackie Thompson, Felix Budelmann, Sophie Duncan, Evert van
Emde Boas, and Laurie Maguire, "Emotional Arousal When Watching Drama Increases Pain Threshold
and Social Bonding," *Royal Society Open Science* 3, no. 9 (2016): 160–288.

[568] Ibid., 9–10. Italics are mine.

I am in no way disparaging this particular study. But what I am pointing out is that even after all of the authors' data collection and explanation, they were still unsure as to the possible cause of the effect that they were studying. While in many ways this admittance is a best practice in the sciences, it also raises the question of all such studies including a similar caveat. "We think we know," in other words, "but we cannot be certain."

The scientific ambiguity that I articulated in Chapter One, however, was multistability, symmetry breaking, and Giuseppe Caglioti's coexistence incompatibility, which is the "simultaneous presence of two aspects of reality that are incompatible with each other."[569] Moving forward, this was the notion of ambiguity that I employed as an operative framework when analyzing Eco's theory of aesthetic ambiguity in Chapter Two. Through introducing scientific ambiguity, I claimed that Eco had more in common with scientific, perceptual ambiguity than either the literary or philosophical variety, though both are present in Eco's work.

Turning my attention to religious aesthetics and Plate's materiality, I explored the roots of aesthetics as *aisthesis* (perception by the senses),[570] τεχνή (craft, skill, or technical trade), ποίησις (making, creation, or the poetic arts), and τὸ καλόν (beautiful, useful, or good). Sprouting from the Greek, aesthetics came to refer to theories of perception, cognition, or knowledge *and* theories of art, the Beautiful, or literature. Not to

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[569] Paolo Fenoglio, "Preface to the Italian Edition," in *The Dynamics of Ambiguity*, Guiseppe Caglioti (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), xv. Cf. Guiseppe Caglioti, "Perception of Ambiguous Figures: A Qualitative Model Based on Synergetics and Quantum Mechanics," in *Ambiguity in Mind and Nature*, eds. by Peter Kruse and Michael Stadler (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 1995), 463–78.

[570] Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

be outdone, however, I also examined the rich tradition of theological and religious

aesthetics that considers the role that the senses play in divine revelation,[571] as well as,

more recently, the materiality of religious practices.[572]

For my purposes, it was important not only to define religious aesthetics, but also

to explain the move that Plate made towards the material, why it was useful, and how

ambiguity enlivens it. To this end, I defined two types of religious aesthetics—

transcendental religious aesthetics and material religious aesthetics—the one is

epitomized by Hans Urs von Balthasar and the other by S. Brent Plate. The former

engages the categories of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good, and considers how these

transcendentals illuminate divine revelation. In its more contemporary versions, however,

the operative transcendental religious aesthetic seeks to place a transcendental into

conversation with culture, power, or identity. Frank Burch Brown's "neo-aesthetics"

exemplifies this approach.[573] A transcendental religious aesthetic, in this way, focuses on

neither religion nor art, but rather an integration of the two that has the power to

formulate a theological ethic, which is preeminently concerned with how either God

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[571] Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco and New York: Ignatius Press, 1983–1991); Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

[572] S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon, 2015); S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred. Crosscurrents 62, no. 2 (June 2012): 162–80; S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Manuel A. Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Though not religious studies scholars, this trend towards materiality can also be seen, to name a few, in Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

[573] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), 13.

illuminates experience or experience engages, appropriates, or symbiotically relates to God.

In carving out a niche for the aesthetics of ambiguity, I found little worth engaging in the transcendental camp. The latter, however, was a different story. Eschewing the transcendentals by articulating the desire "to see a religious aesthetic that does not take as its starting and ending point, Beauty, Truth, or God,"[574] I found much with which to wrestle in a material, religious aesthetic. In Plate's conception of aesthetics, there is both an *aesthetica naturalis* and *aesthetica artificialis* that roughly corresponds to what I call the material and the semiotic—things perceived and things known. Between the two is the skinscape, which is an-other place, "a dialectic between material culture and the human creative activities of religious practice."[575] A welcome move away from the transcendentals, I argued that a material aesthetic accounts for plurivocality in sense perception and meaning making, holds together both the material and semiotic worlds, and suggests new possibilities.

Having engaged both transcendental and material religious aesthetics, I defined religious aesthetics as an approach to aesthetic theory that accounts for the meaning making processes—the commitments and narratives—of humans, grounded in the everyday, but takes into consideration the unknowable more, a provisional exploration into the meanings that humans create. In the end, I defined ambiguity as coexistent

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[574] S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005), viii.

[575] S. Brent Plate, "Inventing Religious Aesthetics: Word/Image/Body/Other in Walter Benjamin and Gary Hill," *PhD dissertation* (Emory University, 1999), 4.

incompatibility. I carved out a niche in religious aesthetics that moved towards

materiality without eschewing semiotics. And I defined religious aesthetics as the

provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans subjunctively

embody.

In Chapter Two, I turned my attention to Umberto Eco and his theory of

ambiguity. The goal was both to situate Eco's theory within his larger corpus and to

clarify my own thinking in regards to ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility. To start, I

looked at Eco's *The Open Work*, and ambiguity's birth in information theory, which,

according to Eco, "calculates the quantity of information contained in a particular

message."[576] If "quantity of information" is understood as surprise, then it is only a short

leap from information theory to aesthetics. When I am confronted by a text that calls into

question the rules of the code—through surprise, excess, or rupture—then I can be sure

that I am dealing with an ambiguity informed by information theory.

The same can be said of aesthetics as sense perception, and encountering a

percept or event that does not sync with an encyclopedia. On this side of aesthetics, I

know I am dealing with ambiguity when I am confronted by something to which I have

no corresponding category. It is key that a receiver *selects* from a probable field or set of

cultural units and could, in fact, select otherwise. An aesthetics of ambiguity as sense

perception sets out to highlight that which is otherwise, again, not with a *telos* of rupture,

but so that any given cultural system stretches, grows, evolves, and, most importantly, is

revealed as a selection. For Eco, foreshadowing my notion of choice, the aesthetics of

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[576]Umberto Eco, "Openness, Information, Communication," in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 45.

ambiguity resulted in perception being a "form of commitment" in that there are "different ways in which one can commit oneself or refuse to commit oneself."[577]

Aesthetics, rooted in information theory, and seen as a violation of the rules of the code has two important consequences. One, ambiguity ruptures and then expands any given cultural code. Two, ambiguity highlights perception as commitment. Both instances furthered my notion of coexistent incompatibility and laid the groundwork for Part II, where I eventually argued that surprise creates self-reflexivity and perceptual commitment leads to choice as aesthetic judgment.

Turning my attention to the encyclopedia, I claimed that the encyclopedia is best understood as a collection or web of world knowledge that is filled with cultural units circumscribed by numerous interpretants. Utilizing Peirce's unlimited semiosis, I discussed the phenomenon of making connections across the web, which are often disparate and unconnected outside the chain of interpretants that either I or a culture give it. This leaping from cultural unit to unit should always tell me something more, not else, about the unit from which I started making inferences.

The encyclopedia, I continued, does not register the truth, but rather "what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true as well as what has been believed to be false or imaginary or legendary."[578] At its most general or universal level, the encyclopedia is the "sum total of everything ever said by humankind."[579] Introducing

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[577] Ibid., 82.

[578] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 84 and *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Harvard University Press, 2014), 26.

[579] Eco, *From the Tree*, 49.

tiered encyclopedias, however, I discussed the way in which local encyclopedias ratify

upwards into more general encyclopedias.[580] It is when local encyclopedias seek to make

themselves actualized at more universal levels or when any encyclopedia is taken as

natural that ideology is produced and, in fact, lays the groundwork for ambiguity.

Poetic texts, echoing Winkler's strategic production, utilize the encyclopedia by

intentionally taking aim and seeking to destroy the most unchallengeable assumptions of

any given culture. They can also, however, make new, unforeseen connections that result

in a polydimensional network of possibility that changes the nature of the universal

encyclopedia.[581]

Given both information theory and the encyclopedia then, I argued that ambiguity

is an encounter with that which, though relying on a preexistent order (code or

encyclopedia), allows me either to see something new in the preexistent order, an

opening, or to create something altogether unforeseen from the matter of that which came

before. This is different from coexistent incompatibility, which is a superposition of an

encounter with an aesthetic object or percept. In my conception, clarified by both surprise

and encyclopedia, ambiguity is less a violation or challenge and more of an awareness of

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[580] It is important to stress that "tiered" does not necessarily mean hierarchical, but rather more general.

[581] A wonderful example of this can be found in Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds. *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 204: "Two different kinds of abduction: the former starts from one or more surprising particular facts and ends at the hypothesis of a general law (this seems to be the case of all scientific discoveries), while the latter starts from one or more surprising particular facts and ends at the hypothesis of another particular fact which is supposed to be the cause of the former (this seems to be the case of criminal detection) . . . One can say that the first type concerns the nature of *universes* and the second one concerns the nature of *texts*. I mean by 'universes,' intuitively, worlds such as the one which scientists use to explain the laws, by 'text' a coherent series of propositions, linked together by a common topic or theme . . . I think that the general mechanism of abduction can be made clear only if we assume that we deal with universes as if they were texts and with texts as if they were universes."

the potentialities of cognition and interpretation. As such, it has the potential to expose

the rules by which any culture collapses from plurality to univocality. Ambiguity as

coexistent incompatibility, I argued, also re-articulates Plate's skinscape as not only that

which is liminal, but also as a space of sought after uncertainty. It is, in other words, that

place in which I refrain from judgment.

Moving on, I summarized Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* in order to clarify

ambiguity's role within it. I claimed that signification necessarily relates to the cultural

code and the way in which I decode any given message, while communication discusses

the various ways in which any society or person constructs or creates its signs. To

communicate is to assume that there is a probabilistic code or encyclopedia by which any

message can be decoded or understood, and that this code or encyclopedia is filled with

what Eco calls cultural units, which is the content to which any expression refers. This

content is circumscribed, in Peircean fashion, by other content units that both facilitate

definition and metaphor. Cultural codes tell me what expressions and contents (cultural

units) I can and cannot match up for the purposes of sign production or concrete

communication.

Aesthetics, in regards to Eco's semiotics, is a manipulation of the expression-

plane with the intended result being a reassessment of the content-plane.[582] I speak, in

other words, to call into question the encyclopedia. One can study aesthetics then, and

this is important, to study all the aspects of sign-functions. An aesthetic text, like *The*

Prague Cemetery, is the appropriate place to explore the consequences of ambiguity,

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[582] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 261.

which, as I have already suggested, is both a violation of and challenge to the encyclopedias of culture.

Summing up semiotics and ambiguity, I connected Eco to Winkler's contemporary theory of ambiguity, and suggested that the Echian variety is an act of communication that is strategically produced, which enables the receiver to potentially view the world in a way different from the standard ways of viewing. This led me to claim that ambiguity also produces further knowledge because it compels one to rethink the usual codes and their possibilities. This "further knowledge" is ascertained by what Eco calls "aesthetic abduction," proposing tentative codes to make the author's message understandable but which the reader will not know directly.

In Chapter Two then, I defined ambiguity as both space and encounter. It is a space wherein an aesthete refrains from judgment so that she can more fully acknowledge the plurivocality or potentiality of a given percept. It is an encounter with that which forces upon an aesthete the factuality of many, equiprobable realities. Ambiguity does not, however, provide a way forward. It is neither map nor guide. It is a hesitancy, a refusal to judge or, better yet, a position from which one can foresee the infinite possibilities of a possible future or ordering. Whereas Plate speaks of a skinscape, a mediating position halfway between the semiosphere and the material world, I articulated a nodal point in a network, from which I can foresee the many, possible paths of traversal without yet committing to one over against another. All are coexistent but, once chosen, incompatible.

A material religious aesthetic informed by an ambiguity seen as coexistent incompatibility would begin to articulate the possibility, given a set of cultural probabilities, that any percept potentially holds. A religious aesthetics informed by ambiguity would not view religious objects, rituals, or embodiments as univocalities. To do so, like von Balthasar, would be a labor of ideology. Ambiguity is concerned then with the ways in which religious aesthetics not only views or engages its subject matter as instances of violation, challenge, or further knowledge, but also as a coexistent incompatibility that has the potential either to create or highlight religious commitments and narratives as they mutually exist as polyvocal percepts. A religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity would not only examine this phenomenon but also those narratives that allow any observer to choose one vocality over another.

In Chapter Three, I posited that there is no one reality, but rather a multiplicity of possibilities overlying one another. An individual or a community makes or chooses one over the other by employing a fluid and dynamic encyclopedia. Another individual or community, however, could choose differently and instantiate a reality that exists simultaneously as an entangled universe. The question that arose was the possibility of employing a non-judgmental aesthetics that defers choice in order to remain in the state of ambiguity—not indefinitely, but so as to analyze the various, equiprobable paths. Ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility, I argued, is not a way out of subjectivity, but rather an admission that individual and collective representations of reality are the sum of all that is. And furthermore, that those representations are not outside the scope of interrogation.

After arguing for my definition of ambiguity, I then took steps to confine or articulate the boundaries of equiprobability. How do I choose, in other words, between one reality or encyclopedia and another? In order to answer this question, I examined Eco's use of Peirce's Firstness, Dynamic Object, and lines of resistance, as well as his essay "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language."[583] I argued that any interpretation assumes a *that-which-is-to-be-interpreted*. There is something that induces me to produce signs. There is a thing, and I cannot know it outside the potentialities of my encyclopedia, which exist coextensively with other constructions of reality. I cannot know it, but it is there, pushing back, and instigating my interpretations of it.

Chapter Three continued by elucidating Eco's contractual realism, which is a negotiation (a word that arises in Part II as well) between the encyclopedia and the material world. If there is the Dynamical Object on one side and the encyclopedia on the other, then it is I who sits between, mutually interpreting and entangling the two, but always arriving back at that which started my inferential walk. When the poet arrives, however, her job is to reveal or redirect my attention to Peircean Firstness as if it were not mediated by Thirdness. She desires to crawl backwards "to persuade us to reckon with being," even if, ultimately, being as Firstness cannot be known.[584] This, ultimately, led to a surplus of interpretation, which, utilizing Winkler's contemporary ambiguity theory, would point towards a poetic ambiguity that is both produced and strategic. The

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[583] Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language," in *The Role of the Reader*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 90–104.

[584] Ibid, 34.

poets—aesthetes of ambiguity—continually invite me into the task of recognizing the constructions I make of the world and the way in which I embody them "as if" they were reality. Given this unmasking, new potentialities arise for creating the world anew from the matter at hand—a world not *ex nihilo* but palimpsestuous.

I concluded Chapter Three's section on Eco and Peirce but introducing the concept of the "line of resistance," which is that which is *already given*.[585] This "already given" is neither completed nor finished, but it is a pure Limit or a pure No. Imagine pouring water over the surface of a coarse piece of wood. The water falls into the cracks and must, without exception, flow through the crags that are already given. "Wood," the water might say, "change the trajectory of the crack that I am currently flowing through." To which the wood can only say, "No." This is the *line of resistance* to which even an aesthetics of ambiguity must account for or be responsible to.

Connecting Peirce, Eco, and Plate, I wrote that a materially oriented religious aesthetic that takes ambiguity seriously would not only side with Plate in his desire to eschew Beauty, Truth, and God, but also it would approach the material realm as qualified by Peirce and Eco. The objects that I touch, taste, see, smell, and hear are Dynamical Objects known through representamens, Immediate Objects, and interpretants. What my senses engage is a line of resistance, an already given, that— through ambiguity—has the potential to violate, challenge, and produce further knowledge. And perhaps most importantly, ambiguity reminds me that I am accountable to a reality, even if that reality is a co-constructed project maintained and policed by the

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[585] Ibid., 54.

community in which I find myself. And yet, ambiguity, even then, has the potential to open, interrogate, and expand that very same community.

I then explored Eco's essay, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language." What Eco's essay showed was that aesthetic messages are generated through contradiction and, as such, result in a rethought embodiment of the cultural code. It showed how ambiguity works and, placing it in Winkler's frame, is both produced and strategic. Eco's Eden also revealed the process of ambiguity wherein form (as material) shapes the content (as idea), even as the content (cultural unit) shapes the form (expression). In this ever and ongoing aesthetic process of ambiguity, potentialities emerge that were previously outside the scope of the already given encyclopedia *and* material artifact. Connecting this both to Plate's skinscape and my coexistent incompatibility, I was able to argue that the plurivocality of this process defers aesthetic judgment in such a way that, standing in the intersection of aesthetic experience, many possibilities are seen, acknowledged, and exposed as judgments of choice.

In the end, I defined ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility, which violates, challenges, and produces further knowledge. It is accountable to *a reality*, but not irreducibly so, as it also has the potential for opening significations of the material world. And finally, ambiguity is strategically produced and employed through creative contradictions in the already given cultural encyclopedia. In fact, I can even say that ambiguous contradictions in the code not only transform and expand it, but also change the material world, not just my perceptions of it.

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Any aesthetic judgment of reality is a synchronic snapshot of that which is presented to me, which exists alongside and overlaps with an infinity of simultaneous snapshots. If *ambiguity as encounter* moves me into *ambiguity as state* (Plate's skinscape), then it is there that the possibility exists to interrogate, transform, or renew my aesthetic judgments, insofar as they are judgments of narratival or world construction. I cannot maintain the (non-judgmental) skinscape of coexistent incompatibility indefinitely, however, and so must, at some point, "collapse" the state, choose, and travel a path. I traverse, analogously, one networked connection among many, though all are equally viable. Hopping from node to node, when I encounter ambiguity, I can stop, critique my position, and possibly alter my direction. In doing so, I have not only rearranged the network, but also the node in which I exist.

In Chapter Four, I followed the life of Captain Simone Simonini, the protagonist of *The Prague Cemetery*,[586] and showed the ways in which narratives are both constructed and embodied, and the role of ambiguity in such narratives. I argued that *The Prague Cemetery*, read through ambiguity, is one instance wherein I could see the construction, destruction, and liminality of provisional knowledge, because it not only revealed the narrativization of reality but also represented, "the proof that fiction and reality can function together and that any fiction, once recorded, is able to create its own reality."[587]

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[586] Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, trans. Richard Dixon (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

[587] Anca Andriescu Garcia, "Inventing the Enemy. When Propaganda Becomes History," *Philologica* 5, no. 1 (January 2013): 65; and Capozzi, "Revisiting History," 625.

After summarizing the plot, I turned my attention to three pericopes of Simonini's young life, in order to show the ways in which his cultural units were constructed, arranged, and embodied. The cultural units in question—shaped by his mother, grandfather, and father—were <<Woman>>, <<Jew>>, and <<Jesuit>>, all of which were stored in his encyclopedia and retrieved later in life to help him formulate *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Manipulating the populace, similar to the way in which he was manipulated by his family, Simonini wielded his own form of poetic power. He was able to shape the cultural encyclopedia out of the deplorable local encyclopedia that he had learned. In this way, <<Women>> were seductresses, <<Jews>> were sinister, and <<Jesuits>> were hypocritical pedophiles all contributing to the universal plot to overtake the world.

And where was Simonini? He was outside of the encyclopedia pulling the strings of history, or so he thought. What he failed to realize was that his encyclopedia, too, was constructed, organized, and maneuvered in such a way that his narrative was already written. And it was that failure—his failure of self-reflection—that led Simonini to overlook his encounter with ambiguity and his confrontation with choice. Outside of Turin's ghetto, Simonini confronted a young Jewish woman. She was striking. His encyclopedia was challenged, and presented him with an opportunity for rearrangement. But the Turin episode quickly devolved, Simonini rejected ambiguity, and the rest was history.

What the Turin episode showed is that even someone like Simonini can be confronted with ambiguity and either choose to accept or reject it. When a confrontation

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with a line of resistance happens, when an already given encyclopedia is confronted with that which is ambiguous, then my already arranged, as-if narrative has the potential to be unmasked as provisional. It is in that moment, in that space of ambiguity, that the possibility for choosing differently arises. I can traverse alternative paths. I can construct my encyclopedia otherwise. I can, through abduction, negotiate a new narrative that will, until I stumble upon another line of resistance, remain provisional.

Simonini not only encounters ambiguity, I argued, but is also ambiguous himself, to me, the reader. As I confronted Simonini, I had to make my own choices, my own acceptance or rejection of Simonini's effort to ratify the universal encyclopedia. Viewing him as ambiguous, I pieced together my own cultural units, arrangements, and aesthetic judgments in regard to that which I consider outside the boundary of appropriate human culture. But, as Eco suggested, approaching Simonini as an ambiguous event allowed me to understand my own fundamentalism better.[588]

If religious aesthetics, as I conceived of it, allowed me to peel back the layers of an embodied, as-if narrative and its encounter with the world of things, then it was also an exercise in understanding. This understanding was not a stamp of approval, however. It was a negotiation in the ambiguous, cultural world of encyclopedias. Simonini's choice was abhorrent, but a choice nevertheless. And it was this choice, and my willingness to condemn it, that revealed the judgmental side of ambiguity.

I ended Chapter Four then, by posing the question: How is it that I could choose one narrative? What allowed me to call one encyclopedic arrangement abhorrent over

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[588] Umberto Eco, *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Mariner, 2008), 244.

against another, equiprobable arrangement? I found that it was because of my reliance on my own arranged, as-if narrative and the community of interpreters in which I found myself. To put it differently, I argued that there is no standard of judgment that stands outside of all encyclopedias, and that accountability and responsibility are rooted in the choices of ratification.

In Chapter Five, I tackled narrativizing theories. This allowed me to examine concepts that I had referred to throughout this work but had not yet made explicit. Among them were Fact, self-reflexivity, choice, provisionality, negotiation, and ratification. I did this by analyzing two of Eco's works: *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* and *Inventing the Enemy*.[589] I argued that *all* knowledge is organized, limited, and idiosyncratic, and once confronted by ambiguity, provisional.

One question I answered, which doubled as a helpful summary of the process of ambiguity, was what is the difference between theory and narrative? The former arranges the latter in an ongoing process but overlap in that ordering and embodiment is never a two-way street with a separating median. The process of ambiguity is an entangled, overlying network that is dynamic, connected, and simultaneous. I intuit, order, and narrativize in a tangled jumble of simultaneity. And it is that very simultaneity that allows me to not only account for ambiguity in "real time" but also to recognize my judgments as provisional.

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[589] Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy: And Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Mariner, 2011).

It was my argument that this process mirrors the way in which religious aesthetics should seek to understand the role of embodied narratives in the lives of human practitioners. If Eco's novel is the matter to his theory as encyclopedia, then I conjectured that his theories and narratives shuttle back and forth in a way similar to the entangled simultaneity of the semiotic and material worlds. I argued, finally, that ambiguity exposes the way in which knowledge and realities are constructed and arranged, in so far as the event of ambiguity leads to a state of ambiguity (better understood together as the *process* of ambiguity) in which I can analyze potentialities—or, to put it differently, how a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.

The key to my section on *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* was that Simonini should be situated in the larger argument of that work. We all, Eco argues, map fictions onto reality. Simonini is no different than you or I in that regard. The question is how does one judge between one fictional map and another? For Eco, and an aesthetics of ambiguity, the answer was that narratival analysis enables me to understand the mechanisms by which fictions shape life, which constitutes a form of therapy against the sleep of reason that generates monsters.[590] I suggested that if I could understand how encyclopedias are arranged and embodied, then I might also be able to participate in the correction or revealing of the dominant, oppressive, or ill-conceived narratives that shape a shared reality. Ambiguity is always self-reflexive, however, and so every analysis is also a questioning of the self and the rules by which I judge, embody, and analyze. This

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[590] Eco, *Six Walks*, 138.

allowed me to introduce Eco's work on translation and negotiations, and the way in which community's ratify knowledge, new or otherwise, into their encyclopedias.

My final section on *Inventing the Enemy*, asked the question: What happens once the data has been collected and reported, the theory has been narrativized, and the final story has been told? It was my argument that "Inventing the Enemy" is analogous to the ways in which narratival arrangements of cultural encyclopedias are embodied in the world of things. And by examining it, I better understood the full process of intuition, cognition, and embodiment, which is continuous, fluid, and dynamic. In an ever-continuing aesthetic process then, I encounter, I arrange, I negotiate, I narrativize, and I embody, even as any of those steps might usurp its place and begin the process anew from a new perspectival location.

"Inventing the Enemy," in other words, exemplified the process of ambiguity, in that enemy creation is a manipulation of the encyclopedia in order to construct difference and foreignness in the world of things.[591] Thinking back to Part I, I could say that the enemy, to a given cultural encyclopedia, is high in information or surprise and, hence, ambiguity. An enemy will often, if not always, call into question the encyclopedia of those confronting it.

Ambiguity's call for self-reflexivity then, necessarily implied both provisionality and negotiation. When I confront the other as ambiguous, I am able to reflect upon my own encyclopedia and cultural units <<difference>>, <<foreign>>, or <<enemy>>. In doing so, I recognize that knowledge, cultural or scientific, is provisional, which then

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[591] Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*, 3.

allows me to negotiate a new cultural unit with different interpretants. Confronting that which is different instigates the aesthetic process of ambiguity then that results in either a reorganization of the cultural encyclopedia or the rejection of ambiguity as a form of epistemological growth.

Through *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* and *Inventing the Enemy*, I was able to summarize not only my interpretation of Simone Simonini, but also my conception of an aesthetics of ambiguity. Between the encyclopedia, ratification, choice, and Fact with a capital "F," I suggested both the importance of provisionality and the limits of intuition. Through these criteria I was able to judge Simonini's encyclopedic and embodied arrangement. But as I encountered Simonini as despicable, I self-reflexively recognized him as ambiguous. I noticed, too, that I maintained a provisional encyclopedia that is in flux, provisional, and riddled with its own failings.

THE COMPOSER

VI

"This," Gina pointed to her MacBook, "is garbage. I gave you a direct order, from Patrick no less, to write a piece that was accessible. That zipped with conspiracy. I wanted Dan Brown, and instead I got Edward Abernathy and whatever the hell this is." She took a deep breath. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

I slumped in my chair.

"Do you know how many clicks we got, Ed? Do you?"

"I'm optimistic."

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"Seven hundred and thirty two, Ed. Seven hundred. That's it. How am I supposed to justify this crap to corporate?"

"Don't. Look," I shifted in my seat, "I just got caught up in Martynov's world. It was entirely my fault. I'll take the blame. I'll go to Patrick and—"

"Oh, no you won't, Ed. Because you no longer have a job. As of today, I'm revoking your credentials. You went too far this time. *The Telescope* needed a pick up, and you made it a laughing stock. 'Antipode.' 'From which.' Did you forget everything—"

The door swung open. Patrick walked in, graceful as ever. He sat on the edge of Gina's desk, hands in his Westmancott pockets. "Well," he started, "that was an interesting read."

I looked to Gina, a chum amongst whales.

"Patrick," she smiled, "so nice of you to join us. I was just telling—"

"Here's the thing, Ed. I agree with you. With all of it. Martynov was a man ahead of his time. And, quite frankly, one from which we have much to learn. But clicks matter. And do you know why?"

"Advertisers."

"That's right. I don't give damn about our readers or their intellectual stimulation. If they want that, they can read Diletsky. But us, *The Telescope*, we're not in the business of curious excursuses. We have a standard and an expectation to which we must conform. And if we can't do that, then we fail, Ed. You fail."

He had a point. I had mistaken my audience. Ambiguity was a thing I couldn't afford. There was a formula for this kind of thing, and I had forgotten it. Journalism 101.

I stood. "I'll see myself out."

At the door, rising to an unexpected level of stupidity, I turned. "But here's the thing, Patrick, Martynov instigated a discourse that proceeded him. He wanted to get people talking, to offer up their own composition. He wanted his audience to complete his work, to provide their own meaning. He desired to invent a thing with no beginning, to situate others in the already."

I stepped further into the room before continuing.

"He offered his audience an alternate vision—one that they participated in crafting—one that they could choose over against the prevailing winds of the day. Don't you see? How could I write of Martynov and not emulate him?"

Silence filled the room.

Patrick rose off his corner perch. Glancing at Gina, he then looked at me. "There's no reason for you to lose your job over this, Ed. Not if you don't want to. I'll give you one more chance. Rewrite the piece, given the parameters we've set for you, and submit it by the end of the week. You're a writer, after all. Follow directions, and get it done."

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I left the office, hopped on the "Q," and walked the final three blocks to the library. I loved the city. The anonymity of it.

> The sounds of construction swirled around me as I ascended the steps. I found a table in a remote corner of an empty, echoing hall.
>
> I pulled out my laptop.
>
> The cursor blinked, toying with my anxiety. I couldn't afford any wasted time. I had a deadline to meet.
>
> I closed my eyes, something I often did when writing, and stroked the keys.
>
> *The cover up was easy,* I wrote. *It took the Tsar little effort to wave his ringed hand and banish a man to Siberia, condemning him to death. The man was Zuravel Ostrava Martynov, a man you've never heard of. He was innocent of his accused crimes, but what did that matter to those in power? Martynov had played a dangerous game—and lost.*

Wit and Humor in an Aesthetics of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is many things. And while it would be easy to assume that ambiguity is pregnant with matters both serious and grave—the ground of meaning, choice and responsibility, or even coexistent incompatibility—it is poorer if understood in only those terms. When I confront Simonini as ambiguous, and I run through the process of self-reflexivity, I reveal my own epistemological provisionality. My need for negotiation and ratification. But this does little for Simonini or those hell-bent on a destructive and dogmatic certainty. It does little, in fact, for that liberal scholar who is equally entrenched in her position. Ambiguity cannot force self-reflexivity any more than it can require a healthy awareness of one's own provisionality.

But what ambiguity can do, especially Winkler's strategic and produced variety,

is reveal the codes that dominate any ideology. It can accomplish this through wit,

humor, and even an epistemological willingness to hold ontologies lightly. Ambiguity as

playful—nowhere better explicated than in Eco's essay, "On Truth. A Fiction."[592]—

connects to narrativizing theories through Brian McHale's work on postmodernity. For

him and Thomas Pavel, ontologies are theoretical descriptions of universes.[593] "An

ontology is a description," McHale writes, "of *a* universe, not of *the* universe, that is, it

may describe *any* universe, potentially a *plurality* of universes."[594] If I can say that

McHale's "description" is my "ordering of the encyclopedia" that is a "narrative," then I

can also claim that my narratives are ontologies—descriptions of the universe that

ambiguity problematizes, confronts, and humorously calls into question.

This move towards narrative as ontology is unpacked by McHale in his later work

Constructing Postmodernism. In the absence of "grounding, narrative becomes a means

of building foundations, since storytelling contains its own self-legitimization."[595] This is,

of course, similar to what I meant by "injected narratives" in *Sigurd's Lament: An*

Alliterative Epic.[596] "We are no longer confident," McHale writes, "that we can build

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[592] Umberto Eco, Marco Santambrogio, and Patrizia Violi, eds. *Meaning and Mental Representations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 41–60.

[593] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 27 and Thomas Pavel, "Tragedy and the sacred: notes towards a semantic characterization of a fictional genre," *Poetics* 10:2–3 (1981), 234.

[594] McHale, 27.

[595] Farronato, 103.

[596] Benjamin John Peters, *Sigurd's Lament: An Alliterative Epic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 43–52.

intellectual structures upward from firm epistemological and ontological foundation."[597]

And so instead of theory discussing narratives, narratives discuss theory.[598] While there

may be a "world" underlying my disparate versions of it, that world is finally

inaccessible, and all I have are versions. "Narrative," McHale continues, "recommends

itself as a means of building foundations by constructing constructions because

storytelling . . . bears within it its own (provisional) self-grounding, its own (local,

limited) self-legitimation."[599]

If ambiguity does anything then, it most definitely seeks to reveal the

narrativizing theories that stem from any given culture's encyclopedia, narratives that are

all too often taken as "real," dogmatic, or certain. Ambiguity as humor or wit can, in

other words, be used to expose the self-legitimations of cultural narratives. Poets who

utilize ambiguity in this way, Eco writes, suggest that humanity "needs to encounter

being with gaiety (and hopefully with science too), to question it, test its resistances,

grasp its openings and its hints, which are never too explicit."[600]

"Gaiety" here is an important word. How many religious studies or philosophy

classes have you sat through that were bursting at the seams with gravity, weight, and

seriousness? I imagine that if you are reading this book, then you are more than familiar

with that sober, academic scene. But in the face of such heaviness—ontology,

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[597] Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

[598] Farronato, 103.

[599] McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 5.

[600] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 56.

epistemology, ethics, or "the other"—Eco suggests that I tread with a light and cheerful

heart. And, in fact, as his protagonist William of Baskerville suggests: "Perhaps the

mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth

laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the

truth."*601*

I can think of no better way to sum up ambiguity and its ability to unmask those

narrativizing theories and self-legitimations that I so desperately embody as the natural

order of things. Laugh at truth, approach Being with gaiety, and remember that

knowledge is provisional.

Italo Calvino, a contemporary of Eco, wrote much the same in his Charles Eliot

Norton Lectures, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*,[602] which, as fate would have it, is

mine. In his essay on "Lightness,"[603] he suggests that

> Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like
> Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the
> irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a
> different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition
> and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like
> dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future . . . In the boundless
> universe of literature there are always new avenues to be explored, both very
> recent and very ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world.
> And when literature fails to assure me that I'm not merely chasing dreams, I look
> to science to sustain my visions in which all heaviness dissolves.[604]

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[601] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 491.

[602] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage, 1993).

[603] Italo Calvino, "Lightness," in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage, 1993), 3–30.

[604] Ibid., 8–9.

In Calvino's conception, ambiguity is dexterous. It is nimble, quick, and hungry to

discover fresh methods of cognition and verification.

He continues, relying on the imagery of Giovanni Boccaccio's character, Guido,

who, "so very light . . . vaulted over" a tomb, which was so large:[605]

> If I had to choose an auspicious sign for the approach of the new millennium, I
> would choose this: the sudden nimble leap of the poet/philosopher who lifts
> himself against the weight of the world, proving that its heaviness contains the
> secret of lightness, while what many believe to be the life force of the times—
> loud and aggressive, roaring and rumbling—belongs to the realm of death, like a
> graveyard of rusted automobiles.[606]

Can ambiguity do all of this? Can it be a philosophical aesthetic that laughs at

truth, approaches Being with gaiety, and is light, nimble, and fresh? Can philosophers be

poets and poets, philosophers? Cristina Farronato[607] and I would, of course, answer

"yes," and point to Eco as a preeminent example. "If we wanted to find a unifying

theme," Farronato writes, "to illuminate Eco's writings and personality, we would have

to think of 'wit.'"[608] Eco, for his part, would point to both Joyce and Borges.

The key for me, however, is that laughter defeats certainty. "Either you are

Rabelais," Farronato continues, "or you are Descartes. Either one accepts Order and

laughs from within it with the intention of making it explode, or one pretends to reject it

so as to restore it in different forms."[609] And yet, the restoration of certainty in different

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[605] Ibid., 14.

[606] Ibid.

[607] Cristina Farronato, "A Theory of Medieval Laughter: The Comic, Humour, and Wit," in *Eco's Chaosmos: From the Middle Ages to Postmodernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 123–39.

[608] Ibid., 123.

[609] Ibid., 128.

forms is academia's *modus operandi*. Anecdotal, perhaps, but I once had a Philosophy of

Fiction professor spend an entire semester trying to convince his students (not necessarily

me) to swap out their perceived conservatism for his anarchic atheism. And while I

agreed with some of his positions, it was clear to me that he was playing Descartes to my

desire for Rabelais. "Trust me," he could have said, "my narratival certainty is better than

'theirs.' So why not swap 'theirs' out for mine and see what happens?" But what was

desperately missing from this scene was the self-reflexive provisionality that ambiguity

can bring to any situation. The ability to laugh—through wit or irony—at all ordering that

would ask us to swap one certainty for the other without any kind of critical assessment

or awareness of the provisionality of knowledge.

The comic then is a form of ambiguity in that it "rises from the violation of a

rule," but it does so in such a way that it confronts the Simonini's of the world. For it

violates a rule "among those who have absorbed the rule that they also presume it is

inviolable."[610] And while much more can be said about humor's connection to ambiguity,

this is the key. Gaiety breaks lose my hold on certainty and reminds me, and all of us,

that narrativizing theories are provisional. If I can laugh at my own truth, then perhaps I

can facilitate the laughter of others. For the language game of wit "is not there for its own

sake but involves a cultural critique."[611]

If ambiguity as wit takes aim at culture, then, to conclude this section, it does so

to remind me of provisionality. That my ideas, beliefs, and, yes, even embodiment might

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[610] Ibid., 132.

[611] Ibid., 137.

be false. "Belief in gods, of whatever description," Eco once wrote, "has motivated human history, thus if it were argued that all myths, all revelations of every religion, are nothing but lies, one could only conclude that for millennia we have lived under the domain of the false."[612] If this is true, then "how is it possible that so much of our history has been controlled by false ideas?"[613] How is it possible, he later asks, that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—a proven fake—has continued to inflame fanatics across the globe?

It is possible because we all map fictions onto reality. We all live out of narrativized theories waiting to be expanded by ambiguity. But we, yes we, should be wary. "The fact that a big part of our history has been so biased should make us alert and ready to call into question the very tales we believe true, because the criterion of the wisdom of the community is based on a constant awareness of the fallibility of our learning."[614] Beneath ambiguity's large umbrella then, it is wit, lightness, and gaiety—a feathered leap over a stern tomb—that "help us maintain a skeptical distance from the series of delusions constantly offered to humankind."[615]

Conclusion

There are many examples of literary witticisms that help their readers maintain a skeptical distance. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is probably one of the most recognizable in

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[612] Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (New York: Mariner, 1999), 2.

[613] Farronato, 138.

[614] Eco, *Serendipities*, 20 and Farronato, 138.

[615] Farronato, 139.

the United States.[616] I would also add as illustrative examples Gabriel Garcia Marquez'

One Hundred Years of Solitude, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and the more

recent *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid.[617] While all three novelists tackle serious issues—

historical repetition, India's partition, or the crisis of the refugee—all three approach their

respective topics in such a way that the issue is seen in a new light, from a slanted angle.

And yet, the books are riddled with gaiety, wit, and lightness. Who can forget Marquez'

flying carpet[618] or Saleem Sinai's nicknames[619] or even Saeed's laughter at Nadia's open

hand?[620] And if I have accomplished anything in this chapter, then I have shown how

Eco's gaiety, McHale's narratival ontology, and Calvino's lightness all wrap around my

understanding of ambiguity as coexistent incompatibility and buoy it.

  After a full summary of chapters one through five, I argued that Eco's emphasis

on wit and gaiety are necessary components to a fuller understanding of ambiguity.

Because, when coexistent incompatibility is approached through the clarifying lens of

laughter, it not only takes aim at culture but also conjures provisionality out of the

encyclopedia's thick and heavy air. Ambiguity as wit or lightness or laughter is a

constant reminder to dogmatists (of which we are all included) that history is a series of

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[616] Joseph Heller and Christopher Buckley, *Catch-22: 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

[617] Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West: A Novel* (New York: Riverhead, 2017), Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), and Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2006).

[618] Márquez, 21–2.

[619] Rushdie, 117.

[620] Hamid, 83.

delusions about which we should remain skeptical. This chapter not only summarized my argument that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality, but it also furthered it. Ambiguity is many things then, and not least among them is the comic, that violation of the rule.

I began this chapter with an epigraph taken from *The Name of the Rose*. Make truth laugh, it said. But that was not the end of the conversation. "Where is all my wisdom?" William of Baskerville continued. "I behaved, stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe." Eco's Watson, Adso, later responded to William:

> But how can a necessary being exist totally polluted with the possible? What difference is there, then, between God and primogenial chaos? Isn't affirming God's absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom with regard to His own choices tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?

And to conclude this chapter, I will leave you with William's response: "How could a learned man go on communicating his learning if he answered yes to your question?"[621]

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[621] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 288.

PART II: CONCLUSION

In Chapter Four, I employed my theory of ambiguity as outlined in Part I and answered the question: How does one construct or encounter an encyclopedia, twist it into a narrative, and then embody it? The answer to this question was given by a close analysis of *The Prague Cemetery's* chapter, "In My Grandfather's Day." It was there that I showed how Simonini constructed his cultural units, arranged them into a valid narrative, and then embodied that narrative in the world of things. I argued that ambiguity reveals, highlights, and brings my attention to the provisionality or the as-if-ness of the narratives that I take for granted. It is also that space in which I can analyze my own provisional assumptions and begin to account for the potentiality of other ways of seeing and doing. I also suggested that the task of religious aesthetics is to peel back the layers of an already given cultural encyclopedia to reveal, analyze, and understand the as if narratives that humanity embodies.

In this way, I claimed that Simonini's ambiguity functioned within the literary world of *The Prague Cemetery* when he encountered the fiery gaze of the other, but that he also represented ambiguity for a certain kind of reader—namely, me, a male, Western, and liberal academic. Simonini's repugnance forced me to ask myself why I discounted him, which led to the question: how do I choose or judge between competing, though equiprobable narratives? I answered this question through the notions of choice,

communal ratification, and responsibility, which all highlighted the provisionality of knowledge.

In Chapter Five, I analyzed the way in which fictions map onto reality. I did this by situating Eco's essay, "Fictional Protocols" in the larger argument of his work *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. I suggested that by examining the theory behind *The Prague Cemetery*, I might more fully understand the ways in which an encounter with ambiguity can possibly lead to a reorganization of a cultural encyclopedia. In the second section of the chapter, I read two of Eco's essays that helped me to answer the question: If fiction and reality blend together in equiprobable realities but it is still possible to judge between competing narratives, then why does something like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* still exist? To answer to this question, I discussed provisionality, negotiation, and Fact with a capital "F." *The Protocols* still exists because humans think knowledge is certain, refuse to negotiate in regards to their cultural units, and oftentimes eschew lines of resistance for far reaching interpretants.

I ended the chapter by suggesting that judgment is possible within an aesthetics of ambiguity, but it cannot be forced. We are all responsible for and accountable to the choices that we make when moving through the process of ambiguity. In this way, ratification is typically towards a more general encyclopedia, but local encyclopedias can and do exist that refuse to negotiate and ratify into a more universal arrangement.

In Chapter Six, I provided a full summary of chapters one through five before arguing that Eco's emphasis on wit and gaiety are necessary components to a fuller understanding of ambiguity. I suggested that when coexistent incompatibility is

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approached through the clarifying lens of laughter, it not only takes aim at culture but also conjures provisionality out of the encyclopedia's thick and heavy air. Ambiguity as wit or lightness or laughter is a constant reminder to dogmatists (of which we are all included) that history is a series of delusions about which we should remain skeptical. In the end, this chapter not only summarized my argument that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality, but it also furthered it. Ambiguity is many things then, and not least among them is the comic, that violation of the rule.

Concluding the main part of this work then, I have argued the thesis that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality. You have no doubt noticed, however, the strange interjections within each chapter, as well as the two excursuses. For a full conclusion and analysis of the various parts of this work, I would direct your attention to the final chapter titled, "Conclusion." It is there that I will not only tie together the loose end of this work, but also briefly discuss the role of ambiguity in academic works.

CONCLUSION

"When you're around Athene what you think about is new ways of thinking about fascinating bits of knowledge you happen to have, and how you might be able to fit them together to make exciting new knowledge . . . The goddess inclined her head. 'This is an experiment, and this is the best time and place for that experiment. Nothing mortal can last. At best it can leave legends that can bear fruit in later ages."
—Jo Walton, *The Just City*[622]

In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall

sets out to argue that fiction subtly shapes our beliefs, behaviors, and ethics and that brain

circuits force narrative structure on the chaos of life.[623] In doing so, he touches on

religion or sacred stories.[624] "If you want a message to burrow into a human mind," he

suggests, "work it into a story."[625] This has much in common, of course, with Walter M.

Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* or Thomas Sebok's "Atomic Priesthood."[626]

"Religion," as Gottschall articulates it, "is the ultimate expression of story's domination

over our minds."[627]

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[622] Jo Walton, *The Just City* (New York: TOR, 2014), 13 and 45.

[623] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Marines, 2012), xvii.

[624] Ibid., 118.

[625] Ibid.

[626] Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (New York: Bantam, 1972) and cf. Scott Beauchamp, "How to Send a Message 1,000 Years to the Future," *The Atlantic*, Feburary 24, 2015, accessed on September 26th, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/02/how-to-send-a-message-1000-years-to-the-future/38 5720/.

[627] Ibid., 119.

Not willing to take this for granted, however, Gottschall dives into the science behind story, seeking to discover what makes the human mind tick. One of the key points of Gottschall's work is that he continually connects story and its mind-shaping ability to the way in which narrative gets embodied in the world. This amounts to running the power of story through the gauntlet of evolution. Why do humans still employ story if it is nothing more than escapism? Certainly, Gottschall claims, evolution would have weeded it out unless, that is, story is actually useful and has some explanatory purpose. Within this reasoning, story and religion cohabitate because religion, and tangentially story, provides society multiple benefits.[628] It defines a group as a group. It coordinates behavior within a group. And it provides a powerful incentive system. If there is a downside to all of this, however, then it is that religions generally cause people to behave more decently toward members of the group "while vigorously asserting the group's interests against competitors . . . religion draws coreligionist together, *and* it drives those of different faiths apart."[629]

Perhaps, throughout this text, I have unintentionally assumed Gottschall's position. I cannot embody multiple stories at the same time. Yes, I can be an academic, a secularist, a church goer (sometimes), a father, and a husband. And, certainly, these claims or obligations can have competing ends. But often, in any given moment, I must choose one at the expense of the other. Identity, in so far as it is shaped by narrativizing theories, is a zero-sum game because it continually articulates coexistent incompatibility

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[628] Ibid., 122.

[629] Ibid.

without a nod towards ambiguity's provisionality. Identity leads to, in other words, the "breakdown of modern representative democracy into irreconcilable claims of 'identity politics.'"[630] And, for me, the question is how does one navigate between one irreconcilable claim over against the other? How does one choose?

I have not, however, been talking about these kinds of identity stories throughout this book. I have been more interested in the implicit narratives of culture. What arrangements of the cultural encyclopedia lead to the embodiment of white nationalism? What narrativizing theory leads to the embodiment of a liberal, social-justice fighter? Are these embodiments trapped within their own horizon? Are cultural narratives infinitely at odds? Is it possible to invert the age-old desire of aesthetics? If aesthetics cannot open the potentiality of the other through its ambiguity—I cannot force someone to read *Things Fall Apart* like I did[631]—then can it self-reflexively inform me when confronting an embodiment shaped so differently from my own?

Gottschall's book is a good reminder that we are all shaped by stories, that these stories are often in competition, and that art does not always liberate. In his chapter, "Ink People Change the World,"[632] he recounts the biography of Adolf Hitler and his love for Teutonic mythology and its transformation into Richard Wagner's music and operas. It

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[630] Carl Raschke, *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 13.

[631] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

[632] Ibid., 139–55.

was after seeing *Rienzi*, Gottschall writes, that Hitler became the Führer.[633] In this way

then:

> The ink people of [mythologies and] scripture have a real, live presence in our world. They shape our behaviors and our customs, and in so doing, they transform societies and histories . . . Fiction does mold our minds. Story . . . teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behavior, perhaps even our personalities. Research shows that story is constantly nibbling and kneading us, shaping our minds without our knowledge or consent. The more deeply we are cast under story's spell, the more potent its influence.[634]

If the fictions that we map onto the world are at odds, then I have asked again and again,

what is one to do? How do individuals, communities, religions, and even nation states

arbitrate one against the other? My answer, of course, is ambiguity and the role that it

plays in, self-reflexively, revealing the provisionality of any *one* narrativizing theory.

I argued, in summary, that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes

both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality. I approached this

directly through six academic chapters and tangentially through two excursuses and a

short story. Now, however, I must tie together any remaining loose ends by integrating

my academic chapters with my "spare parts." In doing so, I argue for ambiguity's role

within a materially oriented religious aesthetics, as well as within the oft touted but little

respected world of interdisciplinary studies.

Early on, I defined ambiguity as a coexistent incompatibility, which highlighted

the proliferation of meaning by holding multiple interpretations in tension, and religious

aesthetics as the provisional exploration into the commitments and narratives that humans

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[633] Ibid., 142–3.

[634] Ibid., 144 and 148.

subjunctively embody. I situated my definition in the contemporary work of Susanne Winkler before clarifying it through a comparison with Umberto Eco's own theory of ambiguity. At equal points a violation of cultural codes, a challenge to cultural encyclopedias, and a production of further knowledge, I claimed that ambiguity is a space wherein one can defer judgment to more fully acknowledge the plurivocality of a given percept.

Connecting my understanding of ambiguity to S. Brent Plate, I then suggested that a material religious aesthetic reveals and examines the religious commitments and narratives that mutually exist as polyvocal percepts. Religious aesthetics not only examines the material phenomena of any given religious community, practice, or ritual, but also the narrativizing theories that allow any individual or community to choose one vocality over another. Ambiguity is continually proposing the question of judgment and how any community chooses one encyclopedic arrangement over another equiprobable arrangement.

Probing this notion of choice, I concluded Part I by looking at Eco's relationship to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of Firstness. I claimed that ambiguity is accountable to a reality, but not irreducibly so, and is strategically produced and employed through creative contradiction in the already given cultural encyclopedia. This resulted in an expansion of Plate's material religious aesthetic in that ambiguity—as encounter, state, and process—reveals mutually existing, overlapping, and entangled universes. It is within ambiguity then that the possibility exists to interrogate, transform, or renew aesthetic judgments, insofar as they are judgments of narratival or world construction.

I further explored my understanding of ambiguity in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. It was in this first of two excursuses that I showed, through Le Guin's protagonist, Shevek, the way in which religious aesthetics can peel back the layers of a given cultural embodiment to understand the ordering that lies behind it. I suggested that my encounter with the text also represented ambiguity and the possibility for me to rethink my own encyclopedia in a way that revealed its provisionality.

In Part II of this work, I argued that ambiguity reveals, highlights, and brings my attention to the provisionality or the as-if-ness of the narratives that I take for granted. It is also that space in which I can analyze my own provisional assumptions and begin to account for the potentiality of other ways of seeing and doing. I also suggested that the task of religious aesthetics is to peel back the layers of an already given cultural encyclopedia to reveal, analyze, and understand the as if narratives that humanity embodies.

I showed this through a close analysis of *The Prague Cemetery's* chapter, "In My Grandfather's Day." It was there that I showed how Simonini constructed his cultural units, arranged them into a valid narrative, and then embodied that narrative in the world of things. Simonini's repugnance forced me to ask myself why I discounted him, which led to the question: how do I choose or judge between competing, though equiprobable narratives? I answered this question through the notions of choice, communal ratification, and responsibility, which all highlighted the provisionality of knowledge.

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I then analyzed the way in which fictions map onto reality. I did this by situating Eco's essay, "Fictional Protocols" in the larger argument of his work *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. I suggested that by examining the theory behind *The Prague Cemetery*, I might more fully understand the ways in which an encounter with ambiguity can possibly lead to a reorganization of a cultural encyclopedia.

I followed this by reading two of Eco's essays that helped me to articulate provisionality, negotiation, and Fact with a capital "F." Unpalatable narrativizing theories still exist, I argued, because humans act as if knowledge is certain, refuse to negotiate regarding their cultural units, and oftentimes eschew lines of resistance for far reaching interpretants. I suggested that judgment is possible within an aesthetics of ambiguity, but it cannot be forced. We are all responsible for and accountable to the choices that we make when moving through the process of ambiguity.

I ended Part II by arguing that Eco's emphasis on wit and gaiety are necessary components to a fuller understanding of ambiguity. I claimed that when coexistent incompatibility is approached through the clarifying lens of laughter, it not only takes aim at culture but also conjures provisionality out of the encyclopedia's thick and heavy air. Ambiguity as wit or lightness or laughter is a constant reminder to dogmatists (of which we are all included) that history is a series of delusions about which we should remain skeptical.

I further explored my understanding of narrativizing theories in Emmanuel Carrère's *The Kingdom*. It was in this second of two excursuses that I showed the role of creative nonfiction in an aesthetics of ambiguity and academic interdisciplinarity. I

explored the way in which Carrère's "I" entangled with the "I" of the historian, which in turn overlapped with the "I" of the reader. I ended by suggesting (or perhaps confessing) that we all set out to objectively recount data, but end up doing little more than telling a story wherein the academic embodies the "I" of the protagonist. An important reminder of provisionality, I claimed, because it allowed me to hold to the one, curious truth of interdisciplinarity—the truth of not knowing.

By all accounts, my book should be over. I have argued. I have digressed. And I have summarized. And yet, there is more that remains. Injected into each academic chapter was one section out of the six that comprise the short story, "The Composer," which tells of Edward Abernathy's research into the events of Zuravel Ostrava Martynov's infamous burning. While I will not comment on the story, I will—as best I can—justify its place within a book that sought nothing more than to articulate an aesthetic theory of ambiguity. To quote Edward: "How could I write of Martynov and not emulate him?"

If ambiguity is that which violates, questions, and challenges to expose the provisionality of any given narrativizing theory, then how could I not play with the expectations—encyclopedic arrangement—that is the monograph? The success or failure of that opening into ambiguity is ultimately up to you, the reader, and the connections that you make across the various parts of this work.

As Martynov desired, so too I.

Martynov instigated a discourse that proceeded him. He wanted to get people talking, to offer up their own composition. He wanted his audience to complete his work, to provide their own meaning. He desired to invent a thing with no beginning, to situate others in the already.

Perhaps I failed. Perhaps I showed rather than told how I think religious studies, as an interdisciplinary discourse, should conduct its business. Perhaps, I am nothing more than a dilettante, writing fiction over against an involved and careful study. Or perhaps, like the epigraph suggests, this is just an experiment that cannot last. I cannot say one way or the other. But I hope to have showed, in many ways and voices, that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality. Other than that . . . I don't know.

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